



Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

EVALUATION REPORTS 048

Empowerment: The German Churches' Programmes for the Participation of the Poor Synthesis Report

Summary Version of the Evaluation



Preface

This study is the result of a cluster evaluation commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and carried out jointly by the BMZ and the Protestant Church's and Catholic Church's Central Agencies.¹ It analyses and assesses projects geared toward one of the goals laid down in the German government's Programme of Action 2015, namely "Ensuring the Participation of the Poor – Strengthening Good Governance." The focus was on evaluating projects that concentrate on advocacy for the poor and disadvantaged and that help to ensure their participation in processes such as decentralisation and assist with such processes. In particular, the cluster evaluation looked at the following questions:

- With regard to the efforts of a variety of organisations to make the interests of the poor heard, which factors in the general environment and which responses from governmental and traditional decision-makers are conducive and which are detrimental?
- To what extent are the Central Agencies' partners succeeding in increasing the voice of the poor and broadening their options?
- In that connection, what is the role of networking, alliance-building and cooperation between the various actors at the various levels?
- In what ways are the poor, their representatives, and advocacy organisations working together and interacting?

The present synthesis study was carried out by Oliver Karkoschka and completed in February 2009. The opinion expressed in this study is that of the independent external evaluator and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the BMZ. At the end of this summary, readers can find the BMZ's comments.

This report and all case studies that were part of the cluster evaluation are also available online at <http://www.bmz.de/en/service/infothek/evaluation/BMZEvaluationberichte/index.html>. The full versions (in German or French) can be ordered from the BMZ Evaluation and Audit Division.

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¹ The two large German Churches' Central Agencies are special units created for development cooperation activities that are operated by church partners in developing countries and sponsored by the German government. The Central Agencies are affiliated with the two Churches' respective development agencies.

Summary

1. Background

Between 2002 and 2008, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development together with the Protestant and Catholic Central Agencies for development (EZE and KZE) carried out a cluster evaluation. A total of seven of the Central Agencies' projects were evaluated under the aspect of "Ensuring the Participation of the Poor – Strengthening Good Governance":

- Bibosi Development Institute, Bolivia, 2002
- Rural Empowerment through Agrarian Asset Development (READ), Project Development Institute (PDI), Philippines, 2003
- Diocesan development programmes operated by the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) of the Catholic Diocese of Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria, 2004
- Training, information and advocacy work on agrarian reform and rural development undertaken by the NGO Fundación TIERRA (FT), Bolivia, 2007
- Rural Development Support Program (ASDP) operated by the organisation Kaisahan, Philippines, 2007
- Production and broadcasting of educational programmes by Radio Maendeleo (RM), DR Congo, 2008
- Church activities for economic, social and cultural development, democracy and decentralisation in Katanga Province, Service d'appui au développement régional intégré (SADRI), DR Congo, 2008

One of the evaluation's purposes was to identify ways, if any, in which efforts to empower the poor and their organisations may help to provide bottom-up support to societal processes for poverty reduction that are taking place at a variety of levels (local, regional, national). The present report provides a synthesis of the evaluation's findings and presents conclusions and recommendations. The target audience of the cluster evaluation is mainly the BMZ and the Central Agencies, which are responsible for decisions about the allocation of support, as well as the partner organisations in charge of programme delivery on the ground.

All individual evaluations examined the projects in question on the basis of six key questions using a participatory approach. However, the level of participation and the number of people participating varied. In all cases, the staff of the organisation in question, intermediaries, target groups and external experts were included in the evaluations, but in different roles. All evaluations used qualitative study methods and a mix of semi-structured and open interviews with the various participants (individual and group interviews).

2. Key findings and conclusions

Framework conditions

Stable democratic institutions and the rule of law were found to be significant factors determining the success of empowerment projects. However, another relevant factor was the period over which people had already had opportunities for participation and the period over which civil society organisations had gathered experience. The studies found that if there are laws determining the options for public participation in decision-making mechanisms, empowerment projects can use

these laws as a starting point for their interventions.

However, there is often great discrepancy between formal legal frameworks and their actual application. Clientelism and elites' firmly entrenched local power networks are the main impediments to participation. Local elites' power contrasts with the perceived or real powerlessness of the poor, who have barely any access to information, meaning that they are neither aware of their rights nor of ways in which they could assert these rights unless they receive specific advice and support in that regard. A sense of hopelessness and the lack of prospects of successfully asserting their rights further increase the poor's passiveness.

There were two typical history patterns characterizing most of the partner organisations conducting the projects that were evaluated. Either they were church-based organisations that had evolved on the basis of a certain ethical and religious worldview, or they were independent non-governmental organisations that had been formed in response to specific political situations. In most of the cases, it was mainly the initiative of the advocacy organisations that had led to the establishment of poor people's self-help or grassroots organisations. Some of the organisations had a clear political goal from the start. Typically, their members had personally experienced injustice and were struggling with circumstances that rendered them powerless. Another group of organisations had started out with the primary goal of improving their own members' living conditions. The evaluations showed that organisations with political goals are more stable and thus also more resilient to strategies pursued by large landowners or politicians.

Results

All projects resulted in increased political involvement on the part of the poor and their organisations, especially at the local level – typically in the drafting of local development plans or in implementing agrarian reform. In Bolivia and in the Philippines, grassroots organisations succeeded in placing their own representatives on elected local government bodies. This resulted in better opportunities for the poor to influence and monitor decision-making and in improved government transparency.

At the national level, the partner organisations tried to influence policymaking by raising specific policy proposals or engaging in advocacy with regard to, in particular, agrarian reform implementation and human rights. As a result, conducive implementation regulations were adopted for agrarian reform in the Philippines, closing loopholes that had frequently been used by landowners and thus contributing to improved implementation of the reform in the interest of the landless. Another organisation took up local instances of injustice, brought them to court and achieved rulings that served as precedents for many other instances of land conversion within the framework of agrarian reform. These achievements, as well as others, were the result of various studies and the organisations' presence at information meetings.

In almost all cases, the organisations providing the support succeeded, through their empowerment interventions, in giving the poor and their organisations greater influence in their capacity as citizens. The material improvements achieved ranged from financial support for women's groups to infrastructure development, agricultural support, education work all the way to the establishment of an office where the local government provided legal advice. In the Philippines, not only did the organisations conducting the projects succeed in achieving the transfer of

almost 5,000 hectares of land to the landless, they also managed to ensure that the new implementation principles adopted at the national level actually translated into concrete action as agrarian reform was implemented at the local level. By contrast, in Congo for instance it has not yet been possible to achieve such results, due to the general environment, which continues to be very unfavourable.

Only in a few instances were administrative and political institutions found to have begun changing their attitudes, most notably in the Philippines. There, civil society organisations find that in response to their work and, not least, to the pressure they are putting on government bodies, they are confronted with resistance, in other words, they are being ignored, obstructed and manipulated. There are even instances in which certain parties, especially large landowners, use physical and emotional violence, for example by destroying the crops of inconvenient activists or by subjecting their family members to difficulties, harassment and threats.

The strategies through which the partner and grassroots organisations studied in the evaluation responded to such resistance from decision-makers and elites are part of overall empowerment strategies: dialogue and negotiations as well as peaceful conflict management. The organisations try to assert their rights or turn to the media or the police. Several organisations reported that they worked with perseverance for several years to pursue their interests and enforce their rights.

The reach of the projects varied a great deal. In one case in Bolivia, stakeholders succeeded in replicating local empowerment processes at the regional and national levels. In the Philippines, the activities related to agrarian reform had an impact beyond the projects' actual areas of intervention. This was less so the case for activities related to participation in local development plans.

In the latter area, impacts were largely restricted to the communities involved, just like in the Bolivia projects.

One major result achieved by the projects was the emergence of a new social and political actor, that is, the organised poor. Their confidence was boosted, and they developed a new concept of their own role, in which they were active players in decision-making processes, rather than the victims of other people's decisions. This is particularly important for women – not only because for them this change was all the bigger, but also because improvements in their social perception entail an enhanced social status. These results were mainly achieved by actions on the part of the poor themselves and their grassroots organisations. The Central Agencies' partners helped the poor to better organise and build networks, which enabled them to make their voice heard vis-à-vis government units and within society.

Sustainability

In many instances, however, the sustainability of these achievements is still in jeopardy. For instance, full participation of the poor in development planning cannot be said to have been achieved if there are no effective monitoring mechanisms (which is often the case) or if grassroots organisations lack the capacity to play a monitoring role. Moreover, their interests often tend to focus on specific support projects and material benefits and less on institutionalising and securing participatory mechanisms. Where a certain level of participation has been achieved, it can be called into question again if the political environment at the national or local level changes.

In the context of agrarian reform in Bolivia and the Philippines, it became evident that access to land and land ownership for smallholders is by no means a guarantee for sustainable rural development. As the new landowners require credit and

need to market their products, there is a risk that they may become dependent on local elites again – not on large landowners but on local traders and lenders.

On a general note, it became evident that it is not sufficient just to look at the material allocation of resources. Rather, attention must also be given to the capacity of the poor to influence the mechanisms determining decision-making about allocations. This is about power and institutionalised participation. Attention needs to be given in that connection to the processes, structures and power patterns that make the poor even poorer and the rich even richer.

Results were most sustainable within the target groups, especially with regard to their capabilities, as well as changes in their attitude (for example, enhanced confidence).

The role played by the Central Agencies' partner organisations as they worked with grassroots organisations varied. Typically, cooperation was based on a planning process in which grassroots organisations were at least consulted or, in some instances, participated directly. At a later point, the advocacy organisations assumed that role. So far, the partner organisations have in some cases failed to help the grassroots organisations become independent from them. In some instances, they did not have strategies in place to make that happen.

Factors determining success and influence

Empowerment efforts need to address a multitude of aspects. First of all, target groups need to learn about their rights and about ways in which they can assert them. Alliances with other non-governmental players at a variety of levels play an important role in that regard. Such alliances give target groups access to information and to the experience gained by other stakeholders. The larger number of people involved can help bring about

a visible increase in organisations' influence. Alliances also provide support in conflicts, a sense of connectedness, confidence, hope, and motivation.

Another crucial aspect is cooperation with government entities at all levels, as it is usually they who determine the actual scope for political participation. It has been found that a critical and constructive dialogue with government entities is helpful. So is the strategy of formulating one's own position in clear terms and communicating it firmly but respectfully.

3. Recommendations

General issues

Empowerment and bottom-up support for social processes geared toward poverty reduction give rise to conflict because they change the power balance. The organisations conducting the projects should be prepared for that and devise appropriate nonviolent strategies for dealing with resistance and obstruction.

As they plan and implement empowerment projects, the advocacy organisations and the Central Agencies should ensure that the projects are not only geared toward reallocation processes but also (even if only in the long term) toward changing mechanisms and power structures.

If advocacy organisations are to be credible and successful supporters of poor people's empowerment, they need to view themselves as political players and need to be able to develop well-informed views. Special attention should be given to ensuring that such organisations are not affiliated with any political parties, so as to prevent the political manipulation of their cooperation with grassroots organisations. The advocacy organisations also need to possess a minimum of recognised credibility, which can only be earned through expertise.

It has been found that the operation of empowerment projects requires an attitude on the part of advocacy organisations that is clearly distinct from charitable intentions, assistentialism and paternalism, so that the advocacy organisation is able to work toward the grassroots organisations' independence right from the beginning.

Empowerment programmes take place in a context of dynamic change in social patterns and should themselves help to foster change. Advocacy organisations should monitor their experience as well as changes in the project environment as frequently as possible so as to use related findings as a basis for adapting their intervention strategies. They should involve the grassroots organisations and other cooperation partners in this effort.

Preparation and planning of empowerment projects

In their dialogue with advocacy organisations, the Central Agencies should ensure that project design is geared toward practical issues, rights, and potential areas for poor people's participation, thus making sure that the project is "down to earth." This requires analysing legal opportunities for participation. The use of such opportunities should result in tangible benefits for the poor.

The change to be brought about by empowerment activities relates to many groups of actors, and project delivery is influenced by a multitude of stakeholders, whose behaviour cannot be predicted. So it is essential that as part of project preparation, an actor analysis be carried out. As a minimum, it should look at interests, scope for action, and alliances. It should address power and the sources of power in as explicit a manner as possible. And clear project goals should be defined in a joint effort, including a focus on poverty and gender.

Essential elements of empowerment strategies

Empowerment activities need to consist of a combination of the following services:

1. Provision of knowledge and information
2. Interventions to help the poor better organise and to strengthen their associations
3. Support for capacity development processes
4. Interventions to foster grassroots organisations' networks and independence

Advocacy organisations should support grassroots organisations in making use of existing, legally established opportunities for political participation, especially at the local level. The (local) media should be included in networking efforts with a view to providing information to the public, creating pressure and developing awareness.

Empowerment strategies require flexible action and a clear framework for the specific interventions. Advocacy organisations should develop an explicit strategy vis-à-vis government entities, differentiating between the local, regional and national levels. Dialogue-based forms of cooperation have proven successful with a view to strengthening pro-reform forces in governmental organisations and parliaments and making use of their influence.

Recommendations addressed to the Central Agencies

The Central Agencies should make active use of their influence vis-à-vis partner organisations to share their experience and good practice as the partners design and implement empowerment projects. In particular, they should encourage their partner organisations to give thought to the following issues:

1. Describe the project's goal in terms of change
2. Give attention to gender issues
3. Actor analysis
4. In the course of analysing the situation, give attention to power structures
5. Project strategy development

Moreover, the Central Agencies should require their partners to monitor impacts on a regular basis, with a view to ensuring that experience gained in the course of project implementation is put to use as quickly as possible. As empowerment processes cannot be planned in absolute detail and require longer involvement than three-year project support, the Central Agencies should examine whether they are able to enter into long-term agreements with their partners, even if such agreements cannot be binding. In such agreements, a framework can be laid down for joint activities that includes longer-term goals. This can make mutual expectations more transparent, serve as important guidance for the individual project phases (which are shorter than the said framework), and help to formulate the milestones for change (project goals) in clearer and more realistic terms. Such longer-term agreements could also provide a basis for dialogue about values and visions, which would give the two sides' cooperation a stronger basis.

The Central Agencies should design their project agreements in such a way as to give their partners maximum flexibility with regard to the selection

and implementation of interventions, so as to live up to the concept of empowerment. Together with the BMZ, the Central Agencies should examine whether the current financing mechanism can be adapted to these needs.

The Central Agencies should be very actively involved in advocacy processes (including joint advocacy) to make the views and interests of the poor heard in the international debate and to bring as much positive influence as possible to bear on the general environment in which empowerment projects are taking place, as that environment is an important determinant of their success.

Recommendations addressed to the BMZ

It is important for the BMZ to continue its cooperation with the Central Agencies, which is characterised by mutual confidence and reliability. In view of the essential importance of the general environment for the success of empowerment efforts, the BMZ should use its policy dialogue with partner governments to encourage the latter to broaden the opportunities for the poor and their representatives to take part in decision-making, or at the very least to ensure that legally established openings for such participation be available in practice at all levels.

The BMZ should thus examine whether, and to what extent, the findings of this cluster evaluation are relevant for government development cooperation, too. In particular, the cluster evaluation showed that civil society players have a significant role to play in democratisation processes.

BMZ's comments

The vast majority of the conclusions and recommendations addressed to partner organisations, the Central Agencies and the BMZ make good sense and provide a concise overview of relevant aspects. They do not, however, produce any fundamentally new or innovative insights. Generally, the proposals raised (such as bearing in mind practical questions and strategic goals right from the beginning as activities are planned, conducting a thorough actor analysis at the outset, analysing power patterns and, in particular, allowing sufficient flexibility in the course of project implementation) should be followed.

However, the BMZ does not feel that there is a need to adapt the procedures for supporting the Churches' development projects, as the Central Agencies have already been given far-reaching autonomy as regards the selection and design of projects and their cooperation with partners, and as there is already sufficient scope for necessary adjustments in the course of project implementation.

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