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WHAT WE LEAVE BEHIND

Findings from the After Departure Visits in Lesotho, Cameroon and the Philippines

Helvetas phased out its long-term development programmes in a number of countries. This was taken as an opportunity to draw lessons regarding partnership, ownership and sustainability questions from an ex post perspective. So called After Departure Visits were conducted in Lesotho, Cameroon and the Philippines to listen to the former partners' views on the past collaboration with Helvetas and on where they stand in relation to the past project activities.

The visits themselves were very much welcomed by the former partners and the findings show that the past collaboration with Helvetas was highly appreciated. Helvetas could leave many valuable things behind in form of capacity built and infrastructure. However, all the partners still face various challenges and there are considerable gaps Helvetas left behind. These gaps are more serious on the side of the former governmental partners.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In the past years Helvetas phased out its long-term development programmes in a number of countries in order to concentrate its geographical spread. The streamlining process aimed at strengthening the engagement in fewer partner countries and thus to achieve a higher impact.

The departure from some partner countries was taken as an opportunity to learn more about what happens after Helvetas left and how this is linked to the way Helvetas supported and worked with its former partners. The lessons learnt shall be used to further enhance the sustainability of on-going and future projects.

Three so called After Departure Visits (ADV) were conducted: In Lesotho (April, 2007), in Cameroon (June, 2009) and in the Philippines (September, 2009). During these visits a number of interviews were done with former partners (and selected other stakeholders) in order to collect their perceptions on the past collaboration with Helvetas and on where they stand in relation to the past project activities. At the end of each ADV, a workshop was conducted to feed back the results to the interviewees and to further deepen some of the aspects that came up during the interviews.

The following box gives an overview of the projects the ADV focussed on in the three countries:

LESOTHO

- Capacity building and financial assistance to the Department of Rural Water Supply (1978–2005).
- Promotion of innovative natural resource management (1997–2005). The activities were handed over to the national NGO Serumula that was established by former Helvetas staff.

CAMEROON

- Capacity building and financial support to councils in the North West Province (2004–2006).
- Support to rural water supplies in the South West and North West Province (1964–2005).

PHILIPPINES

- Promotion of sustainable agriculture and coastal resource management (1981–2001) through local NGOs.

The visits were very much welcomed by the former partners. It was well understood that the ADV is not for Helvetas to reconsider coming back. Nevertheless there were some hopes expressed that Helvetas may re-assume its engagement. One interviewee stated that Helvetas' approach to continuously improve what it does is reflected by the fact that it returns for executing an ADV.

FINDINGS ABOUT THE HELVETAS

PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

In general the collaboration with Helvetas was highly appreciated by the former partners interviewed in all three countries.

The capacity building and the institutional development carried out by Helvetas was found most meaningful. To the former partners Helvetas was more than just a donor that only gave money. In Cameroon the fact that the Helvetas capacity building always went together with financial assistance was highlighted. The former partners mentioned that it was not capacity building for nothing but enabled them to implement projects. The combination of capacity building and financial assistance was also appreciated in Lesotho and the Philippines.

The working spirit of Helvetas that moved things was perceived very positively. The physical presence of Helvetas in the countries was highly appreciated. Helvetas was found accessible, transparent and open. The partners could directly exchange with Helvetas also about problems and how to solve them. They also liked the unbureaucratic attitude of Helvetas. The collaboration was often described as a two-way dialogue that gave the partners the possibility to bring themselves in and to negotiate. The personal contacts and the relationship orientation of the collaboration with Helvetas were also important for the partners, which appreciated the mutual trust.

Another key point in all the three countries was the fact that Helvetas facilitated exchange platforms bringing together the different stakeholders. Helvetas stands for the promotion of learning in the eyes of the partners.

In all three countries it was highlighted that Helvetas understood the grass root realities as the Helvetas staff was often present in the field. This together with all the above mentioned points made Helvetas special and unique.

In general the presence of international experts was appreciated in all three countries. In Lesotho and in Cameroon their guiding role was mentioned positively. The fact that expatriates are usually more unbiased and have a higher degree of independence from national networks and obligations was seen as an added value. However, it was also clear for the former partners that expatriates are only necessary where there is not sufficient local capacity and that they should not do things that could be done by national experts or institutions.

There were only a few and specific negative points mentioned by single interviewees about the past collaboration with Helvetas. In Lesotho and Cameroon for example it was mentioned that with every new Programme Director of Helvetas the strategic orientation of the programme changed, which caused discontinuity and confusion.

In Cameroon and also to certain extent, in Lesotho the partnership with Helvetas was often referred to as a «father-child» relationship that in principle should last for a life time. With this, the former partner appealed to the responsibility of Helvetas to go on with its support. This shows that the socio-cultural context plays a role in how the partners give meaning to partnership.

«We grew together on a path we never walked before» CERD, Philippines

«Helvetas was a political orphan, independent and outside the political network. Helvetas helped communities to take up real issues.»
Bread for the World, Philippines

«Helvetas' support was not only financial. It was the spirit and the vision behind that moved things.»
Former Mayor of Jakiri, Cameroon

«Helvetas contributed to make people independent and responsible and did not micromanage them.»
Head of Department of Rural Water Supply, Lesotho

FINDINGS ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY

In all three countries, the former partners mentioned that they still benefit from the past projects of Helvetas. However, they still face challenges. The gap that Helvetas leaves behind is considerable in Cameroon and Lesotho where Helvetas worked with government partners. Challenges are less felt in the Philippines by the NGO partners. In all three countries the former partners miss the kind of collaboration they had with Helvetas.

WHAT HELVETAS LEFT BEHIND

The most important thing that Helvetas left behind in the eyes of the former partners is the capacity built in the individuals who could benefit from the trainings, seminars or exchange visits promoted and supported by Helvetas. In Cameroon some interviewees mentioned that the most important element Helvetas left behind are capable service providers and that the concept of public-private partnership introduced by Helvetas is still in place.

The infrastructure constructed with Helvetas support was another aspect that was often mentioned positively. According to the interviews most of the water systems built are still functioning and in use. It was however difficult to get quantitative data during the interviews regarding the functioning of the infrastructure left behind.

Many former partners said that they still use the tools, manuals and the documentation from Helvetas. There is also a number of donors and projects that took over ele-

ments of the Helvetas approach and that make use of the Helvetas tools and documents.

In the Philippines there are many project activities that are still carried on by the former NGO partners like the promotion of improved farming methods or the organisation of various trainings as e.g. on gender. There is a success story of a herbal plant enterprise that Helvetas helped to initiate with seed money. The herbal business turned into a main source of income for the local NGO PCART to sustain its activities.

In Lesotho the strategy of the Department of Rural Water Supply and the After Care Policy that were developed with the support of Helvetas were endorsed in the meantime by the respective ministries.

«The spirit of Helvetas is still in Serumula.»
Director of Serumula, Lesotho

«Helvetas made me to be confident about myself with regards to development.»
Former Mayor of Bali, Cameroon

«The capacity built will stay in you forever even if you don't work for the organisation anymore. Capacity built in people is the great legacy of Helvetas.»
IDEAS, Philippines

GAPS AND CHALLENGES

In all three countries the capacity building that does not take place anymore was seen as the biggest gap after Helvetas' departure. The former partners do not only miss trainings but also the physical presence of an organisation like Helvetas to discuss problems and to get advice. In Cameroon they regret that the capacity building they still receive by other organisations does not produce concrete results in the field as it is not accompanied by the necessary financial assistance.

Another considerable gap is the fact that exchange platforms or exchange visits do not take place anymore due to the lack of funds or organisational capacities. Often learning events do not get the necessary priority anymore within the former government partner institutions. In Cameroon it was found as important to have somebody independent from outside like Helvetas to invite the different stakeholders to the exchange platforms. According to the interviewees, it is difficult for a local actor to take initiative as it is often not welcomed by others due to personal or political reasons.

Again in Cameroon considerable capacity built got lost in the councils as many mayors and councillors were not re-elected in the elections that took place after Helvetas left. In the Department of Rural Water Supply in Leso-

tho a lot of the old staff that was trained during Helvetas presence is still there which is quite remarkable and very unusual for a government department. However, many of them will soon retire and the new staff did not get any or the same level of trainings.

In all three countries nobody fully replaced Helvetas in the field of capacity building. Regarding the financial assistance Helvetas could be replaced more or less in Lesotho and in the Philippines. This is not the case in Cameroon where in most of the partner councils Helvetas left a big financial gap too. This is also felt by many but not all of the service providers. Most of them struggle with financial problems and some smaller contractors even got bankrupt.

In all three countries poverty and inequalities are still a reality. In the Philippines the former partners compared the development issues at the time when Helvetas left with the ones of today. The exercise showed that the situation regarding land tenure, illegal fishing or mining, corruption and peace and order got even worse. In Lesotho and in Cameroon the picture looks similar.

«We don't have the energy we used to have.»
Asset Manager of the Department of Rural Water Supply, Lesotho

«The learning process has stopped.»
Mayor of Urban Khumbo, Cameroon

CONCLUSIONS

The way Helvetas worked with its former partners was highly appreciated by them and described as unique. This shows the importance of the relationship orientation in a partnership characterised by dialogue and mutual respect and trust. The quality of the partnership approach can therefore be seen as a value in itself and one can say that the capacity building done by Helvetas influenced the thinking of many former partners on a professional and personal level.

From the specific cases covered by the three ADV we can say that the collaboration with NGO yielded more sustainable results than the collaboration with the governmental partners. The former NGO partners in the Philippines still play an important role in supporting farmers and fisher folk in sustainable resource management and in advocating against illegal land and resource exploitation. They have a strong ownership for these issues

and due to Helvetas' past capacity building they feel self-confident in advocating them.

The former government partners on the other side do less continue the previous projects. Their functioning is vulnerable to government bureaucracy and there is much political pressure on them. One interviewee in Cameroon said that the over-politicisation of development issues is the main problem. The approaches and values of good governance introduced by Helvetas worked as long as Helvetas was there to facilitate, to protect from political pressure and to honour good governance in form of financial assistance. The Helvetas projects with their values and approaches could not change the government environment in which our government partners have to operate and from which they can not easily escape. This puts serious limits to the ownership they are able to take for good governance principles as promoted by the projects. Nevertheless, one council in Cameroon continued with good governance principles. The mayor of this council applied them on his own initiative already before Helvetas came.

All the former government and NGO partners (with PCART as one exception) are still dependent on external, traditional grant funding. Helvetas financial support was just replaced by the financial assistance of other donors. In the Philippines and in Cameroon the donor financing is on the decrease whereas in Lesotho at the time of the ADV at least one large new project was under way. Another challenge perceived by many interviewees related to the donor behaviour that changed in the recent years to a more top down approach with more and more complex and bureaucratic requirements regarding reporting and applying for funds.

It is true that many other donors and projects took over elements of the Helvetas approach. However, it also needs to be mentioned that this was not always the case. In Lesotho and in Cameroon some major donors were not aware of what Helvetas did in terms of organisational development within the Department of Rural Water Supply in Lesotho. As a consequence they did not make use of the documents and data left from the Helvetas time. This certainly shows also the limits of what can be expected from other donors and projects if we are not present anymore in the country.

«We still go on to push the agenda and to deliver services even though finances are never enough. This is an everlasting work with or without funds.»
Pangatabo, Philippines

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