

The Excessive Accountability to Donors and Donor Organisations Can Push NGOs to Make Fatal Errors

by Christine Etienne¹

In BN 2/2002 some important factors which are decisive for the quality of work in rehabilitation and development programmes have been analysed. It has been shown that the accountability of NGOs towards donors rather than towards the beneficiaries is a key issue. Here now, some examples are given how the pressure for efficiency in a culturally different context perverts the objectives of NGO work. For, what seems to be simple and evident in the documents, is highly complex in reality. Sustainable solutions and changes need a rather high investment of time (which in general we do not have!) and a lower investment of capital.

Observation

Let me begin by presenting an observation. In the last years when visiting or evaluating emergency- rehabilitation- or development programmes, I made repeatedly the same observation:

The enormous competition among NGOs to get funds on the one side and the donor's expectation for immediate results on the other side are the main reasons why NGOs feel under pressure to spend the procured money rapidly. As described in BN 2/2002 in "quality and accountability", NGOs are practically forced to be accountable to the donor first, and to a much lesser degree to the beneficiary. The first commandment in NGO work is therefore to satisfy the expectations and the impatience of the donor. This is the main reason

why visible, short time results get most attention and the long term coherence, the interrelation with other aspects and institutions and the sustainability of the action is put aside. Professionalism is sacrificed to western efficiency thinking which promises – thanks to an important contribution of funds – a rapid solution for any problem.

Three projects which were submitted for approval to a donor institution may illustrate the validity of the hypothesis. The examples are self-explanatory.

1. Intensive agriculture for small farmers in Central America

Immediately after the hurricane Mitch, a Swiss NGO presented a project permitting several hundred small farmers to restart and improve agricultural production. In order to have a significant increase in crops and to promote income generation, the local NGO took over a programme elaborated and proposed by the national university suited for a modern farm system with fertile and irrigable soils. It required intensive production with a high input of fertilizer and pesticides. The project area, however, was distant from the markets, had absolutely marginal production conditions, and the project was neither technically nor culturally adapted to the place and its adverse climate, continuously afflicted by droughts. Notwithstanding, the Swiss NGO supported the demand and sought financing for a very costly short time programme giving considerable quantities of fertilizer and pesticides for free to farmers who never had worked with that kind of inputs before and who most probably would never be able to buy them again.

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2. Intervention after a hurricane

In Honduras, another Swiss NGO proposed an emergency project for hundreds of farm families that should be implemented by an allegedly well known and capable local NGO. Their first measure consisted in inflating the staff from 54 persons to 137. Unnecessary to say that most of the staff was completely inexperienced and therefore it was very unlikely that the NGO would ever reach the set objectives.

3. Goats and buffalo cows as a means for poverty alleviation

In Gujarat, India the reconstruction of the houses, which were destroyed by an earthquake in January 2001 should be accompanied by a two year livelihood programme for the poorest of the poor, most of them landless people. In one village it was planned to distribute to 150 families either a small herd of goats or a buffalo cow for milk production. The idea looks simple and attractive to an amateur. Unfortunately it is neither compatible with the local socio-cultural reality nor feasible from a technical point of view, as shall be described later.

The three examples have several points in common:

1. They focus on the emergency situation and pretend to create long term perspectives through attractive but very superficially reflected solutions.
2. They aim at immediate results and they don't consider even the most elementary middle and long term consequences.
3. They reflect western thinking: the belief of being able to solve generation old problems in other cultures in a very short time and just by being efficient, where even long term development programmes do not always succeed.
4. A best case scenario is developed and full success taken for granted in an adverse context.
5. They create expectations which can't be fulfilled and thus create frustrations.
6. They rely on heavy capital investment in a short time.

Conceptual poverty

All three programmes suffer from a "conceptual poverty". Surprisingly, the common sense and the long-time experience about the risks in this kind of programme are lacking. It is easy to distribute materials, inputs and animals, but far more difficult to implement a sustainable livelihood programme. Let's now look at a worst case scenario of how things could turn out in the Gujarat example.

Goats and buffalo cows as a means for poverty alleviation

At first sight it seems to be an attractive idea to alleviate poverty in a village by giving a buffalo cow to more than a hundred families and goats to fifty more. According to the plan each cow will produce 10 litres of milk a day during six months, eat whatever they find and get an additional fodder ration bought with money from the milk sold. What's so wrong with this simple and attractive solution?

Wishful thinking replaces real facts and technical feasibility

A buffalo cow eats a lot and even more when she is supposed to produce milk. In that area cows cannot be fed without fodder production and this is possible with irrigation only. A well kept buffalo cow may produce 5 – 6 kgs of milk a day and very exceptionally up to ten litres as promised. The poor families, however, don't have access to land, let alone to irrigated land, and they don't have any purchasing power for buying fodder!

Income generation through milk production is a highly pretentious objective. Agricultural expert and India specialist Ueli Scheuermeier from LBL states that, whenever development co-operation tried to generate income through dairy cows in India, it has been successful only thanks to heavy investment in time and efforts. He also mentions a similar example where small farmers in Nepal were given goats by an NGO. After a certain time they were supposed to return an offspring, unless the goat died for some reason. It was absolutely incredible how fast the population of "leopards" increased in the district immediately after the distribution of the goats!

Socially not compatible

The project proposal itself states: “ the rich and powerful elite in the village are not interested to change the prevailing social equilibrium”. Within Gujarat society it would require a very careful step by step procedure to try to change roles. Conflicts are likely to flare up quickly, and only a long term development programme might have chances to empower the poor families sufficiently for being able to defend their rights.

Programmed catastrophe

Instead of the planned best case scenario, a worst case scenario is likely to happen. Sooner or later the hungry buffalo cows will be caught grazing in the fields of the rich people. Those, of course, will withhold the animals and release them only against cash the poor don't have. Thus the cows remain in the hands of the rich and the poor will not only be poor again but moreover feel deceived and frustrated. Or, a traditional moneylender will give a credit to the poor and take the cow or goats as a security, already knowing that the animals will be his since the poor will never be able to repay the credit...

Troublesome questions and a simple answer

Why then are NGOs so ingenuous and present projects which don't make any sense at all? Why do they in spite of their long time own experience and against their better judgement fail to take into account that changes need a lot of time? How can they become blind to well known obstacles for change in a culturally different context? Why do they give way to situational constraints such as the accountability to the donor, who of course is not aware of the complexity of rehabilitation work?

Is it because they depend on donation? Are donors really so short-sighted? Don't they know that rapid action is necessary only at the moments of aid for survival, and that any further action needs careful planning and preparation, the participation of the involved people, clear rules and good monitoring. It needs a long term investment in time and in money instead of a short time heavy capital injection.

Personally I still believe that donors are open to consider and to accept convincing arguments. Nevertheless I suspect that some fund raising institutions, emergency aid and development agencies ignore the importance or lack the necessary goodwill to invest in transparent information campaigns. Donors are not only emotional people donating generously and open heartedly when being confronted to a catastrophe. They are interested and intelligent enough to understand constraints when they are informed about them.

I am convinced that any institution engaged in humanitarian aid and development work must either make an effort by informing the public or their valuable work will increasingly result in actions which create frustration and dependencies and will finally damage the NGO's credibility.