

Separating the Wheat From the Chaff – How to Identify Qualitatively Good Service Organisations?

by Iris Paulus¹

Parallel to democratisation processes of recent years, local development organisations have multiplied tremendously in developing countries. In Cameroon the organisational landscape has also changed in the last 15 years. Until the beginning of the 90s, only government authorities were responsible for services in the rural sector. This began to change with the economic crisis and the resulting structural adjustment programmes that were adopted. Since then the government has been withdrawing more and more as a player in the provision of goods and services in the rural sector and its place is being taken by non-governmental organisations. As a result of the new legislation allowing freedom of association, a growing freeze on recruitment in the public sector and the increasing interest of donor organisations in cooperating with non-governmental organisations, the latter² have sprung up like mushrooms in Cameroon during the 90s. Civil society was to participate more in democratic processes and thus, growing attention was paid to non-governmental organisations by international donors. These are withdrawing more and more from implementing project and programme measures and are handing over their execution to local implementation organisations.

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² Included are profit-oriented consulting firms, non-profit-oriented non-governmental organisations as well as farmer self-help groups that are active in various sectors. The overall view is unclear and new organisations are continually being formed.

³ The results of the study can be read in Paulus et al. 2003: Réorientation des prestations de services en milieu rural. Schriftenreihe des Seminars für Ländliche Entwicklung, p. 209.

Commission

With an estimated number of at least 5'000 non-governmental organisations in Cameroon, the problem arises of how to separate the wheat from the chaff, and with whom and how many organisations one should work. In addition, there is the question of the type of support the individual organisations need within the framework of cooperation.

To find an answer to these questions, three projects, namely, "Projet d'Appui au Développement Communautaire", financed by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and two GTZ-supported (German Agency for Technical Development) projects, "Promotion des Groupements de Producteurs Agricoles" (PGPA) and "Réorientation de la Stratégie Phytosanitaire" (RSP), commissioned a study by the Centre for Advanced Training in Rural Development (Seminar für Ländliche Entwicklung – SLE)³.

Up to now, in most cases local implementation organisations were selected by chance, mostly independent of the required competence. In concrete terms this meant working together with those organisations that were first found, that were already known, or were the most "visible". The study was to assist in defining selection criteria and propose a more open and transparent selection procedure, thus enabling the projects to identify appropriate implementation organisations. A database to process and manage selection findings and experiences made with the cooperation processes was to be set up in support of the selection and monitoring procedure.

The **Centre for Advanced Training in Rural Development (SLE)** at the Agricultural and Horticultural Faculty of the Humboldt University in Berlin is supported by the Federal Ministry for Agricultural Cooperation and Development and the Senate of Berlin.

For 42 years the faculty has been offering a one-year post-graduate course and annually trains up to 20 graduates from various subject areas as specialists in international cooperation. During the course of the year, methods used in planning, team work, team management and organisational development are taught. In addition, focus is placed on the fight against HIV/AIDS and civil conflict prevention. As "learning by doing" is a fundamental principle of SLE, projects in developing countries form the core of the course. Under the leadership of experienced consultants, groups of 4-5 participants from different subject areas implement the findings of studies or workshops as commissioned by national and international organisations. In 2003, five groups realised simultaneous projects on behalf of BMZ, IFAD and GTZ in Mongolia, South Africa, Cameroon and South Caucasus. During 2004 projects will be implemented in India, Madagascar, Mali and Mozambique on behalf of German Agro Action, GTZ and KfW. Additional information and summaries can be found on the homepage of SLE: www.berlinerseminar.de

Methodology

The following methodological procedure was chosen:

1. Exploring the historical and political background

Based on available literature and discussions with experts in Germany and Cameroon, the history of the origins of NGOs in Cameroon and the present political context were recorded. In this way the results of the organisational analysis described below could be better classified. It became clear that there was little insider knowledge available on NGOs, yet the number and types of organisations were enormous.

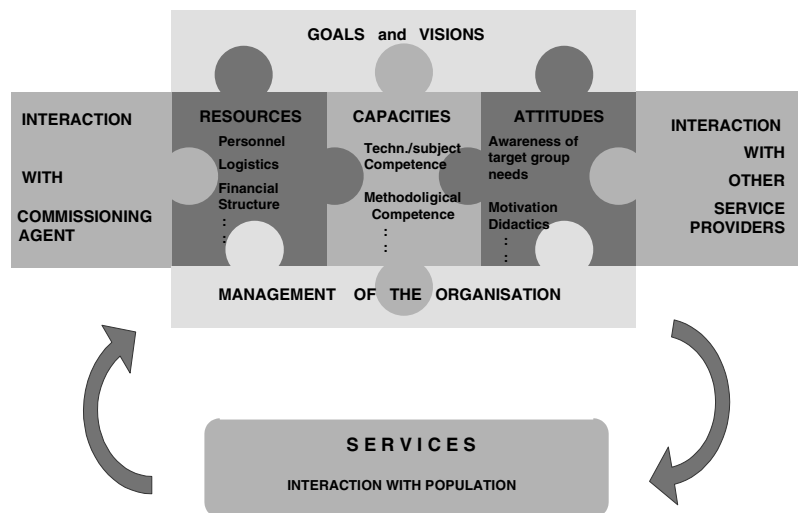
2. Commissioning agents' success criteria for cooperation

For the commissioning agents the most significant success criteria for working together with an implementing organisation is its effectiveness and the good quality of its results. Added to these are criteria such as thematic proximity of the implementing organisation to the goals of the commissioning agents as well as willingness for dialogue. A model for the assessment of an organisation before cooperation should thus be designed.

3. Developing a model for analysis

For the commissioning agents, the quality of services was the most important success criterion for cooperating with an organisation. It was thus aimed to develop a model with which to identify the factors influencing the quality of the services. Neither an organisation's size nor its degree of fame are guarantees for good quality. Many criteria and influencing factors play a role. The developed analysis model should therefore as far as possible take into account the complexity of an organisation. The model illustrated below indicates how individual elements of an "organisational puzzle" are interlinked and thus form a complex impact structure. A differentiation is made between internal and external factors. Internal factors are found in the organisational structure, management and processes, while external factors rather concern the organisation's communication with the outside world.

Illustration 1: Factors influencing the performance ability of a service organisation



Each individual element of the model influences the quality of the service in one way or another. **Goals and visions** influence the selection of intervention areas as well as the range of available services offered by an organisation. The more precisely they are defined, the more goal-oriented the organisation can strategically approach the realisation of its objectives, in this way attempting to attain good quality. Closely interwoven with these are the organisation's **resources**, be they logistical means, financial structure or staff. For instance, for the implementation of a wide range of objectives, extensive financial means, a large staff and adequate, functional and well-administered logistics are essential.

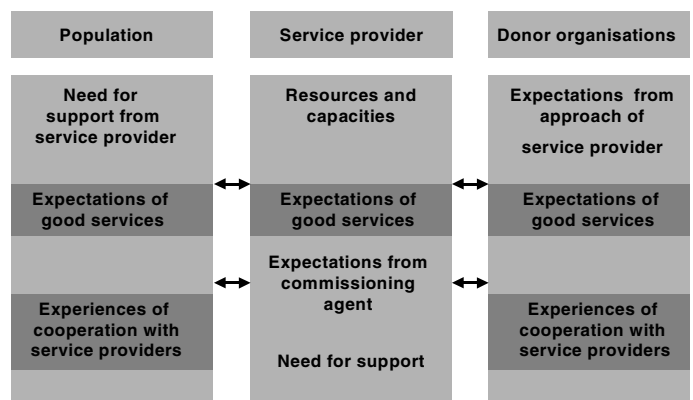
Not only the number of employees, but also their **capacities** and **attitudes** determine the quality of the services. The higher the level of the staff's subject and methodological knowledge and capabilities, and the more these are linked to an empathic and participative fundamental attitude, the greater is the chance of attaining a performance of high quality. The final internal influencing factor on quality is the **management** of the organisation itself, particularly staff and financial management. The internal organisational culture that constantly advances organisational development as such, also plays a role here in, for example, decision-making and the institutional exchange of experiences.

The internal influencing factors are complemented by the **interaction with other players**, that is, with commissioning agents, other service organisations and the communities. A good understanding of the requirements of both the commissioning agents and the beneficiary population, and of their relationship, enables activities that are directed according to the needs of the population. Interaction with other service providers is often necessary to compensate a shortfall in finances or a lack in techniques, thus attaining a synergistic effect. In such cases not only should individual interactions be assessed, but also the way in which these experiences can evoke a learning effect in practical applications. This effect can in its turn prompt a change in individual influencing factors; for example, in financial allocations or didactic approaches.

4. The triangulation principle

As subjective interpretations cannot be completely avoided in the analysis according to the model, a mixed team was established. Three men from different regions in Cameroon and with different professional background joined a team of five German women from various subject areas. This procedure allowed the team to combine gender specific as well as culturally endogenous and exogenous views. So as not to depend only on the analysis of a few organisations, the perspectives of different players were incorporated. The service providers' perspective was completed by the viewpoint of communities and donors, in order to gain the most realistic idea of the organisations' capabilities. In this way it was tested, for instance, if the range of services provided by the organisations corresponds to actual needs, or to the assumed needs, of the population. In addition, the data collection from donor organisations helped in checking and verifying the impression gained from discussions with the organisations.

Illustration 2: Perspectives of different players



5. Data Collection and analysis

30 different service providers were selected, ranging from consulting firms, through non-governmental organisations with social objectives, to farmer self-help groups. The data collection was done in two provinces.

The initial contacts with the selected organisations were made during the course of two workshops. The project was presented and a platform provided for first discussions.

Based on the analysis model, an interview guide for semi-structured interviews was designed. Each interview lasting 1-1.5 hours was conducted by two team members in the premises of the respective organisation. In order to avoid a subjective procedure and the development of a predictable assessment pattern by a sub-team, the composition of the interview team was changed daily.

The organisations were accompanied in their work in the villages on a random basis. This was only possible to a limited extent, however, as every visit took up at least two days of the team members' time. During these trips, the team members could observe the staff at work and at the same time had the opportunity of holding conversations with the target community about their perceptions of the said organisations. In addition, random samples were used to select more villages in which the population was questioned about their expectations from local service providers. These village trips provided a differentiated view of the work of the various organisations.

To complement the data collected from the organisations and in the villages, a formal questionnaire was sent to donor organisations in order to evaluate the references of the concerned organisations.

6. Passing on the results

The written results of the analysis were handed over individually to the respective examined organisations. The commissioning agents have access to the analysis in the form of a database that includes the results from all the organisations covered thus far. The strengths and weaknesses of each organisation are appraised and recommendations given on support in specific areas.

The experiences made by the team during data collection led them to recommend to the commissioning agents, due to time and staff limitations, to initially use a formalised tendering system. In special cases, the commissioning agents could integrate elements of the discussion guide in the tender invitation.

Assessment and prospects

Time is a key factor in comprehending local organisations. As mentioned above, observing the practical

approaches of an organisation is the best way in which to get to know the organisations and their way of working and of assessing the quality of their services. This, however, demands much time and expenditure on personnel, which the commissioning agents can hardly afford, given small staffs in projects and programmes and the very large numbers of service providers. The feedback from the examined organisations on the guided interview was very positive. After the discussions and the subsequent analysis, the sub-teams could form a sound opinion of the involved organisations. A final opinion, however, could only be formed on field trips. Were one to calculate the entire expenditure of time for this, one would have to reckon with six working days per organisation. Given the volume of requests with the donor organisations, an intensive pre-assessment is not possible. In addition, there is the risk that the concerned organisation selects a "token village" which is not representative of the quality of their services.

Consequently, in order to separate the wheat from the chaff and enable a critical-constructive cooperation between donors and local development organisations, the only recourse is to a public tender invitation in which criteria such as, for example, evidence of attained successes, are required. Many of the elements analysed by the SLE team were incorporated in a monitoring procedure. Thus the quality of services can be supervised while working together, and the individual organisations' needs for assistance identified and recorded in the database.

The risk of selecting an organisation that does not fully meet the required standard of services, however, still remains with the donors. While working together, they do, nevertheless, have the opportunity of gathering experiences during discussions and field visits and of building up a relationship of mutual trust, which should enable them to approach each other in a constructive manner. The price for this is a time-consuming system, which can, however, be justified

- in the short-term by the methodological and subject matter weaknesses of the service providers;
- and in the medium- to long-term by an improvement of rural living conditions and the contribution to a more stable and diversified organisational landscape in Cameroon.