For decades, the indigenous peoples of Bolivia have lived in conditions of abject poverty, unable to exercise their rights as humans and citizens. EMPODER was launched in 1999 to empower indigenous populations and small-scale farmers (“camponesos”) and to help them fight for their rights. The story of EMPODER illustrates how the political decisions behind project ownership can threaten a project’s essence.

In the south-eastern region of Bolivia, in the department of Chiquisica, 800 indigenous Guarani families live on privately owned plantations. In Casa Alta, one of 70 such plantations in the region, the families live in ramshackle shacks in conditions of near-slavery. They have not only lost their land but also, over generations, become indebted to landowners.

Under these circumstances, adults and children alike have little choice but to sell their labour. Enclosed in so-called “captive communities”, they are prohibited from leaving or working elsewhere. Landlocked in shacks, they work non-stop for meagre wages. In such “captive communities”, vast areas of land are privately owned plantations. In Casa Alta, one of 70 such plantations in the region, the families live in ramshackle shacks in conditions of near-slavery. They have not only lost their land but also, over generations, become indebted to landowners. Under these circumstances, adults and children alike have little choice but to sell their labour. Enclosed in so-called “captive communities”, they are prohibited from leaving or working elsewhere. Landlocked in shacks, they work non-stop for meagre wages.

The story of gradual ownership has become president of Bolivia the grassroots owner- ship of the EMPODER project has struck a chord within central government. The Ministry of Justice quickly saw the added value of this project as well as its media im- pact. It took note of the violations against the indigenous populations and later condemned them. It stated its re- solve to eradicate slavery in Bolivia in the 21st century.

Numerous cooperation agencies suddenly came out of the woodwork with offers to fund the project. Two years earlier, SDC was the only donor ready to support the project. Finally, the ownership that the SDC had long de- sired became a reality.

Ownership – a tool in the hands of politicians

Unfortunately, the brand of ownership that emerged was quite different from the one we had expected.

The government intended to set up an entirely new par- tisan structure. All work done by EMPODER thus far was discarded because the government claims that projects that were supported before its time are colonising, neo- liberal and unequal. Having always refused to affiliate herself with any political movements, Miriam Campos was in danger of being excluded from her own project, depriving it of its heart and soul.

Moral of the story

But even though the project goes on, this example show that both ownership and non-ownership of a project are based on political decisions. Both can be used in contra- diction to the original intentions. While project ownership is an objective that donors should strive for, it is important that the process be in line with the real needs of the ben- eficiaries, rather than with those of the decision makers. Only such a bottom-up approach prevents a project from losing its essence. In other words: the ownership process should be lean and gradual.

Worldwide visibility

From the very beginning, the SDC believed in the project. The project, which quickly expanded, has achieved con- crete results for indigenous peoples and campesinos living in the high plateaus, in the Amazon region and in the Bolivian Chaco. The project has set precedents that may eventually benefit thousands of people like Don Germán.

Documentaries depicting the living conditions of the Guarani, Tacna and other communities have been broad- cast in Bolivia, at the United Nations as well as in several Western countries. And yet, despite unravelling efforts on SDC’s part, the former Bolivian governments have never been willing to anchor this project in an institutional struc- ture and provide it with the necessary resources.

While previous governments did not want to risk losing their wealthy landowner support base, since Eva Morales has been willing to anchor this project in an institutional struc- ture and provide it with the necessary resources. While previous governments did not want to risk losing their wealthy landowner support base, since Eva Morales

EMPODER and the rights of indigenous Bolivians: A story of gradual ownership

The Human Face of Harmonisation: A Personal Story

Aman Jochhe, a programme specialist in the Kath- mandu Cooperation Office of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) since 2002, used powers of conviction, professional expertise and interpersonal skills during his three-month second- ment to the Nepalese Ministry of Local Develop- ment to assist in the development of a nationally significant rural infrastructure rehabilitation and re- construction plan. Here he describes his personal experience with harmonisation and local ownership in development cooperation.
"Leave this to me," the DG said. And right to his word, he was somehow able to do just that. By then, the Ministry of Finance had also agreed to this concept.

But I also faced difficulties in convincing the other donors. Not all of them concurred with this approach. We agreed that the best way to proceed was to go to the field for a reality check and visited a road corridor in a neighboring District Development Committee. It took us more than three hours of bumpy driving to reach the start of the alignment. There we were told that it would take us about two days to reach the other end. This was an eye opener. If it takes days to reach the other end of a district adjacent to the capital, what would the situation be in a remote district, where reaching district headquarters requires a few days travel? The enormity of the cost of covering the whole country with this kind of a project began to dawn on all of us.

After that experience, designing an appropriate implementation plan and institutional arrangement was a straightforward task. Although it has gone through some modifications, the project is owned by the Government of Nepal. ADB, DFID, OPEC and SDC will collaborate in implementing it. It has become financially much smaller in volume, covering only half the districts it originally intended to cover and has toned down ambitions, perhaps for the better.

Government is engaging all the major donors in a serious discussion on aid effectiveness and harmonisation. Under the leadership of the Ministry of Local Development, meetings have already taken place, during which it was decided to prepare a letter of intent to enter into a Sector Wide Approach (SWAp) by year end, with an intention to formalise SWAp in the rural transport sector in three to four years time. The best practices from this experience can later be replicated in other rural infrastructure sectors.

I shall always cherish the moments I have spent as a team member shaping the design of this interesting project which was a lesson in ownership: local actors, in this case the Nepalese government define and determine the development agenda. Donors like the SDC can assist them in this process by providing the assistance of a technical advisor. There are always moments of despair and helplessness, but there always is a light at the end of the tunnel. You just have to hold on and persevere.

Implementation of the Paris Declaration

Ownership in Benin: “It is our programme and we shall take responsibility for it”

Marcell Baglo joined the Ministry of Decentralisation, Local Communities and Land Management (DGLAAT) just at the time when Benin took over the chairmanship of the National Committee on Decentralisation. The former Director of the Benin Environmental Agency was already well known to the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and soon became an important contact person for Benin’s development partners. This story demonstrates how local ownership can change the course of donor discussions.

Taking advantage of an official visit to Benin by the then-President of the Swiss Confederation, Ms Micheline Calmy-Rey, the SDC decided to sign an agreement with the Beninese government on various development support initiatives relating to health, the local economy and the local State. Negotiations for the agreement on the programme “Swiss support for a stronger local State in the department of Borgou” turned out to be quite arduous. Countless documents were sent back and forth and a large number of working meetings were held.

For the purpose of finalising the agreement, a meeting was convened in a vast room at the Beninese Ministry of Foreign Affairs the day before the President’s arrival. The Swiss party was represented by a team from the SDC’s Cooperation Office in Benin and the Beninese party comprised government officials, including Mr Baglo. A round-table discussion gave the Beninese party representatives the opportunity to comment, to make observations and ask questions. Based on their expressions, the Beninese representatives seemed convinced by the SDC team’s explanations regarding various aspects of the programme and the content of the agreement. Gradually everyone in the room began to relax.

It was at that moment that Mr Baglo, who had been listening attentively to the discussions, took the floor and exclaimed with the full force of his conviction: “We at the Ministry of Decentralisation, Local Communities and Land Management cannot accept the concept of a local STATE. If we did this, our mayors would start taking themselves for presidents of their communes.”

The Cooperation Office team realised with astonishment that the title of a programme was being called into question. A long discussion ensued. We tried to clarify the concept but Mr Baglo refused to budge on this point. He also strongly insisted on the role that the Ministry of Decentralisation, Local Communities and Land Management and his Directorate should play in the institutional anchoring of the programme.

An hour later, the time had come to close the meeting. However, Mr Baglo remained firmly entrenched in his position. But just when a new name for the programme -- "Swiss support for stronger local governance in the department of Borgou" -- had finally been found, a power outage plunged the room into darkness.

There we all were, sitting in the dark, and we still hadn’t discussed the programme’s institutional anchoring, on which Mr Baglo had so adamantly insisted. Everyone at the meeting turned on their cell phones, using the light screens to read the documents. What a symbol! It was pitch black, we had no electricity, and yet we still managed to introduce the revised terms of the agreement using the light cast by these modern devices. For that brief moment, the cell phones enabled us all to see clearly through the darkness and feel united.

The change from “local State” to “local governance” worked wonders. Mr Baglo’s call for a greater central government role in programme implementation was heeded.

A short while later, on the way back to the Cooperation Office, the SDC team was pleased to have finalised the agreement. But it was Mr Baglo who had stood at the heart of the discussions. Today he is the key person with regard to local government within the central administration in Cotonou. His energy, his ability to defend his standpoint and above all his ability to strike a balance between the recommendations of the partners and the context of his country are of enormous value.

Yvette Onibon Doubogan
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