

Strengthening **PEOPLE-DRIVEN CHANGE PROCESSES** in Asia

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MISEREOR
● IHR HILFSWERK



FOREWORD

MISEREOR is guided by the Catholic Church's Preferential Option for the Poor and the principles of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation that have always underpinned our work. We consider development as processes of social change, which are initiated and driven by marginalised people living in poverty. These people might be poor regarding material resources but they are neither helpless nor ignorant – on the contrary. What they need is a chance to move ahead, to control their life. Therefore, the term in use among MISEREOR and its partner organisations in Asia – people-led development processes – refers to people-driven and community-owned change processes.

Likewise, the ‘project work’ of MISEREOR partner organizations ideally seeks to contribute to social change and transformation towards a more just and sustainable future and greater political participation of the poor and marginalised sectors of society. It is our common goal to support people at grassroots level in determining their present and future life and asserting the life they want to lead based on their vision of living well and living together.

As a donor agency believing in partnership, for our part, we need to carefully accompany these processes and provide constructive leeway for flexible, process-oriented and longer-term support to grassroots initiatives and NGOs supporting the people in the field wherever needed. At the same time, MISEREOR seeks an open dialogue with our partners that permits criticism from both sides and the sharing of experience. Observing how poor and disadvantaged population groups have succeeded in improving their material and socio-political situation, in standing up for their rights and even in influencing political decision-makers and policy in their environment has helped us time and again to overcome setbacks. The contacts to people in partner countries, often going back many years, have also been a great source of strength for us. MISEREOR too is part of a learning process and moving ahead.

Dr Ulrich FűBer
Head of Asia Department, MISEREOR



FOREWORD

In today's world, capital and growth have become the basis for development. This growth has occurred at the expense of our labour and our knowledge, leading to alienation from our territories. This development has moulded us into unquestioning, obedient slaves, looking always to leave our communities, work for someone else and forget the sovereignty of being Adivasi.

In this context of growing structural injustice, violence and industrialisation of food systems, it becomes ever-so important for us young people to sharpen our skills for facilitating critical emancipatory dialogue within our communities. Through a continuous process of reflection action reflection we begin to critically analyse and question, identify the forces that challenge us, and devise strategies for change. We have to be at the centre of deciding our future. This is what we mean by 'people-led', and we consider solidarity NGOs to be co-strugglers in the process.

S Abhai Reddy

Konda Reddi Adivasi Youth Leader, Adivasi Aikya Vedika¹

¹ Indigenous people's movement in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, India

The field of change – an introduction

Founded by the German Bishops' Conference in 1958 as a campaign against hunger and disease in the world, MISEREOR has developed into an agency that supports partner organisations in Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific in their work for transformation towards a more just and sustainable future and greater political participation of marginalised people. MISEREOR's faith-based development work is guided by the option to consider development as processes of change that are initiated and driven by the people themselves. Comprehensive human development is not possible without the participation of all, including marginalised people. The call for justice and the preferential option for the dis-

possessed are guiding principles of Christian social ethics. MISEREOR's role is to support people's endeavours to define objectives and strategies and shape their change processes in a self-determined way.

This document is an outcome of the ongoing learning process of MISEREOR and selected partner organisations in Asia working in rural areas,² and their partner communities, on how to support such change processes through work that is aligned with people, their realities and their aspirations, rather than with donor compliance and the 'project business'. It is based on experiences of many projects that are implemented with good will, but not necessarily the best of results, as there are instances when projects

have imposed development models and solutions to externally assessed problems and deficits of poor and marginalised communities and even destroyed local initiative and self-esteem. Such projects often tend to create dependency and not sustainability, paying lip service with terms donors like to hear, such as 'participation', 'empowerment', and 'gender', powerful concepts that become professional jargon instead of guiding principles of practice.

Among the different roles a German change agency can play in its own country and the countries of the 'Global South', this document has a special focus on the donor aspect of financing projects, and in this area MISEREOR feels responsibility and accountability on different levels. MISEREOR is accountable to its own donors – German donors and the German government – having to ensure that money is invested 'in people' and meaningful sustainable processes with a genuine impact on people's lives.

“Changes cannot be prescribed from outside. MISEREOR therefore believes in supporting initiatives driven and owned by the poor and the disadvantaged. This is because in MISEREOR's experience, it is they themselves who possess the strength to improve their lives sustainably. We support them in their efforts in accordance with the principle of help toward self-help.”

MISEREOR: With Righteous Anger and Tenderness at the Side of the Poor, p. 3.

“MISEREOR's work (...) aims to help enable the poor to harness their potential for their own development and that of their fellow human beings, and channel it into the political development processes of their societies. (...) Poor people can and must become agents of their own history. This includes both participating in social and political processes, and sharing in the goods and opportunities by a society.”

MISEREOR: 'Participation in the work of MISEREOR – a discussion paper', 2008, p.8

² Even if the reflection process has mainly involved 'rural' partner organisations, we assume that the aspects highlighted in this document will be meaningful in different contexts and sectors.



MISEREOR also feels accountable to the **margin-alised people** who are at the centre of MISEREOR's work. All development work financed through projects is to fully support their local change processes, responding to their needs and interests. Funds are intended to support local initiatives that empower rather than direct, that catalyse processes rather than finance pre-planned activities to which local people have to adapt. Last but not least, MISEREOR feels accountable to its partner organisations in the Global South, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and church-based social action centres,³ as it adheres to the principle of partnership with mutual respect and reliability.

For MISEREOR, with its head office in Germany, and the consequent distance to local partner communities in terms of space and culture, partner organisations have a very important role to play. They act as intermediaries helping to bridge the distance between the donor agency with its ideas and administrative requirements on the one hand, and local groups with their own challenges and aspirations on the other, mainly marginalised people who need all their energy and ideas for their life struggles, and are therefore not able or willing to invest time in the administration of projects and budgets along international standards. The MISEREOR partner organisations are enablers and communicators in all directions, often squeezed between local aspirations and ever-growing administrative demands from donors. How can organisations best respond to the different

“(…), when people’s participation is considered as a token in development projects and people get involved merely for participation incentives or the promise of benefits, their involvement lasts only as long as the project’s or staff’s presence. Unfortunately, it seems that a ‘project mentality’ becomes predominant as development organisations get concerned with spending their budgets in the provided time, and focus on the delivery of their goods and services to get desired short-term results. Contributory factors and social processes are overlooked – resulting in even more dependence and the creation of a ‘project mentality’.”

Elisabeth Cruzada, PLD consultant, 2016

³ In the following both are referred to as ‘NGOs’.

needs – facilitating local processes on the one hand, and planning, designing and monitoring projects as vehicles for funding, on the other, without compromising the participatory and empowering potential of such processes?

The document takes a deeper look at the roles and responsibilities MISEREOR, the partner organisations and the marginalised communities could play in transformation processes. It looks at the 'how' of project-related change processes and particularly highlights the crucial role NGOs take in this relationship.



Photo: Lopez/PAN AP

The 'how' is directly related to the kind of change needed to overcome the – often location-specific – current conditions of injustice and marginalisation. The document emerged from a continuous dialogue and learning process, embedded in political analyses of the root causes of marginalisation, the premises of human rights and Christian ethics on social justice, and a dialogue process framing the paradigm shift needed to create a future that provides equal chances for a life in dignity, peace, participation and well-being for all. As these are subject to diverse dialogue processes and publications, this document only touches on some of the frames and concepts and refers the reader to other sources for further reading.⁴ This document specifically aims to create awareness about how donors and partner organisations can better serve the interests and needs of marginalised people for real empowerment and sovereignty. It is, therefore, meant for

- 1 MISEREOR colleagues from different departments and with different roles:** to support them with refining their own conceptual clarity about their work as agents of change, and their strategies for best supporting local change processes from a distance; furthermore, to be of help for a fruitful dialogue with partner organisations and local groups

⁴ Links to further reflections, position and discussion papers and books and processes are provided throughout the text.

2 MISEREOR partner organisations:

to invite them to join a continuing joint reflection process on their project practice and their own roles as change makers, and their approaches to local change processes, which could lead to a strengthening of their roles as facilitators and of their local partners' ownership and commitment

3 Other interested people from donor organisations and NGOs who share the same values and interests in change processes:

to provide ideas and insights in MISEREOR-initiated reflection processes on project work supportive to transformation processes, and to invite them to comment and contribute experiences to make this document and the related dialogue processes richer and deeper.

With this conceptual framework, Strengthening People-driven Change Processes in Asia, we do not pretend to have invented a new concept, approach or methodology. We rather acknowledge the existing concepts and tools and we would like to explore how these could be used and applied in order to effectively create the change we all, and the marginalised communities in particular, would like to see. With this in mind, we would like to invite the reader to approach this document with empathy and an open mind and become part of a generative process from which a new understanding of 'development work' can emerge, and to share written comments and reflections, and links to documents (e.g. policy and discussion paper, interesting studies, articles) for further reading.⁵



Photo: Cruzada

⁵ Please send your contributions to PLDP@misereor.de



Photos: Setara (1), Harms/AMSEREOR (1)

Sowing change – the context

There is a long history of development initiatives that support local change processes with the aim of overcoming poverty and marginalisation. However, their impact is not very convincing, as communities in most parts of the world seem to face growing threats and challenges that destroy many seeds of hope emerging from their life struggles. While the **economies** of most of the world's countries are growing, and with them the consumption of a growing middle class, worldwide nearly 800 million people are under-nourished.⁶ Quite the opposite: the gap between the economically poor and rich is getting wider all the time. A high carbon, growth oriented development model, with its impact on the commodification of common goods and services and exploitation of natural resources, is still the current paradigm, although environmental problems and human-made climate change indicate strongly that constant growth is an unsustainable strategy. Growing individualisation and consumerism indicate profound societal changes and less social cohesion, and **political participation**, where it is not restricted by undemocratic governments, is often spurned by discouraged citizens who leave politics to a political class that is self-referential and is not able or willing to engage in profound transformation.

In the rural context, for example, the multiple global crises translate into the devastating effects of climate change on people's lives, agriculture and livelihoods;



6 See "The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2015", www.fao.org

the painstaking struggle for land and forest rights that is torpedoed by the greed for land of big companies and elites who grab land wherever they can; the growing control of the multinational food industry over seeds and production patterns that leads to dependency and weakens farming communities' resilience; the growing consumerism and individualism that destroy visions of a good life in rural settings, to name only a few. These mega-trends are all contributing to the crises in rural areas, and especially in the farming sector as the main source of livelihood for the majority of the rural people.

At the same time, rural communities are developing sovereign and sustainable initiatives, e.g. for sustainable agriculture and food systems, for the claim and defence of their entitlements and rights as citizens, and for their control over land and other resources, providing alternatives to the destructive trends mentioned above. Such alternatives can flourish if people are able to make the best use of their potential in solidarity and mutual support, as rights holders and committed change makers, using their full creativity and innovativeness and their traditional wisdom, sometimes in their specific roles as women, indigenous people, or young people. If groups of marginalised people start believing in their self-efficacy, they might be able to turn many of the above-mentioned crises into 'crisitunities' – opportunities that emerge out of crises.

Such experiences at community level offer valuable clues about the factors and drivers of change – locally initiated, people driven and community owned. These may well correspond with transformation processes in other sectors and spheres of life. People take the initiative to transform their existing situations when they feel the strong need for change. The energy of 'something important to me, my family or community is at stake' fuels the change process. A crucial element for transformation is the trust and belief on the part of individuals and groups that change is possible and that they are capable of (pro)actively bringing about and shaping the change, either on their own or with strong allies if broader injustice issues are addressed. This trust and belief often does not exist when people are facing day-to-day marginalisation and oppression, as is the case for women in patriarchal conditions or indigenous people **considered to be backward** in so-called 'modern' societies. Often a deeply engrained 'culture of silence'⁷ has evolved, in which people are unable to reflect critically upon their world – they become fatalistic and oppressed.

“It is no coincidence that in many contexts, the poor are therefore not at all the agents of self-sustaining and self-reinforcing participatory processes. Due to the fact that their participation in societal and political decision-making processes is made more difficult or impossible, the interests of poor and marginalised sections of the population can more easily be forgotten or ignored. The system that produces and reproduces poverty is thus moved beyond the reach of change. Ultimately the denial of rights of participation leads to an exacerbation of poverty. The stigmatisation that goes hand in hand with poverty keeps a vicious circle in place: others do not ascribe potential for change to the poor, and the poor themselves usually lack the confidence to see that potential for themselves. Society in general and the poor themselves see this as confirming and reinforcing the status quo of their hopeless situation.”

'Participation in the work of MISEREOR, a discussion paper' 2008, p. 15

⁷ See Paulo Freire, 'Pedagogy of the oppressed', 2005



Photo: Mondry/MISEREOR

For such marginalised groups, experiences of self-organisation, self-efficacy and empowerment are therefore central factors in change processes, as they link knowledge to action.

The identification of oneself with others, solidarity and social cohesion play key roles in change processes. Full commitment and ownership by a small group of people and the interaction within and outside the group carry further action, cooperation and alliances for change. They prepare the ground for exercising political participation and influence by provoking a critical number of people. Sometimes it is enough for a nucleus of a few committed people to already initiate profound transformation if their vision and action resonate with others.⁸

Transformation processes thrive when the change is both visible and concrete in nature and is directed towards longer-term strategic goals. Conversely, externally initiated and implemented development initiatives, for example NGO- or donor-driven development programmes that focus on people's basic needs only, are less transformative, possibly less sustainable and thus more likely to come to naught when programmes and projects phase out.⁹

“People cannot be pushed to change as if they were pieces on a chess board. Indeed, applying external pressure for change is more likely to provoke resistance or further passivity. (...) ‘People don’t resist change. They resist being changed.’ (...) There are a series of constraints, internal and external, which hold us back, and that when lowered will enable the flux, releasing potential movement, driven from within. The dam wall breaks, and so change happens. What are these constraints? Sometimes they are external conditions, lack of resources, a difficult law, oppression. Sometimes it comes from inner blockages, like fear, self-doubt or hatred.”

The Barefoot Guide 4. Exploring the Real Work of Social Change. Working with Questions 1: ‘What is social change and resistance to change?’. 2015, p. 23.

⁸ Mahatma Gandhi’s strategies of organising farmers in non-cooperation and non-violent protests soon resonated with larger groups of people and won increasing public support, which ultimately paved the way for uniting India in the struggle for independence.

⁹ See MISEREOR Information Document ‘Supporting the autonomy of poor target groups – Suggestions for work in projects’, Laue, 2015



Photo: Pohl/MISEREOR

Seedlings of change – the MISEREOR journey

Since its inception, MISEREOR has engaged in continuous reflection processes on how to effectively support the above-mentioned change processes, which should be driven and owned by the marginalised communities. Participation of the marginalised groups in economic, social and political development is a core concern for MISEREOR, based on full participation in all project-related processes.¹⁰ However, with a large number of partner organisations and projects, and increasing administrative

¹⁰ 'Participation in the work of MISEREOR – a discussion paper', 2008, p. 7

MASIPAG –

an example that makes a difference

“As a farmer-led network of about 600 people’s organisations, several NGOs and scientists, MISEREOR’s partner organisation Magsasaka at Siyentipiko para sa Pag-unlad ng Agrikultura (MASIPAG) works towards the sustainable use and management of biodiversity through farmers’ control of genetic and biological resources, agricultural production and associated knowledge. ‘Farmer empowerment is one of the core principles of MASIPAG (...) and is therefore the essence of its programmes, processes and structures. Guided by a farmer-led’ or ‘bottom-up’ approach, its work puts farmers’ needs, priorities and aspirations at the centre, and implies an underlying respect for farmers’ diverse knowledge and capacities. What started as a small breeding programme is now a nationwide movement and an example being followed in many other countries. It is based on the firm belief in farmers’ potential to overcome cultural and social biases and to transform themselves into dynamic agents of development, capable of mobilising and transforming their communities and engaging directly with political and social institutions.”

Elizabeth Cruzada: ‘Sustaining participation and scaling up farmer empowerment’. In: ‘Strengthening people-led development. A joint effort of local communities, NGOs and donors to redefine participation’, 2010, p. 44.

PLD redefined NGO and community relationship

“The various experiences and perspectives emerging from the practice of people-led development (PLD) necessitated and contributed to the critique of the framework of ‘Animation’ which served as the development philosophy of Caritas India for several decades. Intensive and sincere organisational reflections on the relationship between NGO and community generated a transformative realisation for Caritas India and her partners. There was consensus that ‘Animation’ shouldn’t be understood and practised as a process of ‘giving life’ to an uninformed, resourceless and passive community. Instead, Animation was to become a process of facilitating the empowerment of communities that are naturally resourceful, capable and dynamic. The conviction that communities are resourceful and knowledgeable brought about a change in the interaction and relationship between communities and NGOs. Communities realised that their relationship with NGOs was empowering them only when NGOs worked with them on an ‘exchange and sharing’ basis and not on a ‘give-and-take’ basis. When a community’s wisdom and resources were respected and solutions identified within the community, the process of community empowerment became truly people-driven and people-owned.”

M.K. Saju,
PLD advisor and Zonal Manager of Caritas India

requirements, MISEREOR officers are experiencing increasing time pressure and less space for communication with partner organisations. At the same time, project visits and evaluation reports show that many projects are rather NGO-driven than community-controlled, therefore not really leading to the transformative processes with the people at the centre, which MISEREOR would like to support.

How can effective dialogue and mutual understanding arise when one relies mainly on [written reports](#), proposals, a few evaluation reports, even fewer visits to the partner organisations, and again less time with the marginalised communities themselves? How can MISEREOR staff dive deeper into real dialogue and reflection processes on approaches and values with its partner organisations, when time is limited and, moreover, written exchange is not the preferred option for effective communication in most partner countries? How can we develop a completely different kind of communication and interaction that takes cultural differences into account?

In order to find solutions for this communication gap, colleagues in MISEREOR's Asia Department started working with [Emmanuel Yap](#), a community organiser and facilitator, who formerly coordinated the farmer-led network MASIPAG, a MISEREOR reference partner organisation in the Philippines. In the context of a MISEREOR consultancy, he initiated intensive reflection processes with selected MISEREOR partner organisations working in rural development.

The initial results emerged quickly and were astonishing: it was very clear that while all of MISEREOR's partner organisations intended to

support participatory processes, they at the same time compromised people's leadership and ownership as they got caught up in the bondage of project business – writing proposals and reports in line with donor requirements, budgeting and financial management, impact monitoring and evaluations.

It was helpful for partner organisations to realise how much they invited people to participate in their (NGO) projects instead of supporting people's processes. For the staff it was eye-opening to realise that they had often failed to notice people's own initiative and innovations and their rich experience and competence, but instead believed in their own, sometimes wrong assumptions about people's problems and solutions. With this attitude, they mainly acted as 'doers' and 'teachers' and were not well equipped to facilitate the full commitment and ownership of the people they came to support.

During the phase of open dialogue among NGO staff and their local partner groups and leaders conducted in the spirit of trust, a new type of cooperation

emerged, and activities immediately changed from NGO-driven to people-focused ones. In pilot processes, exchange platforms, and peer learning of like-minded NGO staff, they developed new role models for NGO staff, and also for community leaders. They also learned how to listen to and learn from marginalised people, who at the same time learn to value their own knowledge and skills again. With the first local initiatives, people's confidence and agency increased dramatically, especially that of women and indigenous people.

The reflection process spread to more than 30 MISEREOR partner organisations and networks in seven countries in Asia, and even to Kenya, Africa. The processes were closely accompanied by MISEREOR officers, who observed growing self-confidence and ownership of local groups during project visits. They encouraged partner organisations to write about these changes in their reports and to develop a different kind of project proposal that better reveals actual aspirations and intentions of marginalised people. Throughout the years, MISEREOR and partner organisations talked about 'farmer-led' or 'people-led' approaches and finally agreed that they wanted to [strengthen people-led development \(PLD\) processes](#), aware that this term also does not fully reflect all of the relevant aspects of the reflection processes.

The changes associated with the reflection process are not limited to local communities and MISEREOR partner organisations. MISEREOR officers are much better equipped to identify NGO-driven proposals and have developed their criteria for PLD-supporting projects. They invest time in communication and they organise, whenever possible, exchange processes and mutual learning among partner organisations. They also started [PLD consultancy processes](#) with other resource persons, e.g. in East Indonesia with the help of MASIPAG and Elisabeth Cruzada as the facilitator.

To respond to the process orientation of such locally driven work, MISEREOR staff endeavours to ensure a higher degree of flexibility in projects, in agreement with clear objectives and indicators and strict financial accountability. Strengthening of people-led processes is a guiding principle in the [Asia Orientation Framework](#), and contributes to MISEREOR's general discourse on the support for a marginalised person as the central actor in change and transformation.

Towards a definition of people-led development: a work in progress

“People-led development is a collective process by which people (poor and marginalised sectors) commit and act to make changes in their lives and communities (and societies) to meet their needs and to address the conditions and causes of their disadvantage and marginalisation.”

Elisabeth Cruzada, PLD facilitator, 2015

“PLD has been about communities reflecting on their conditions of oppression, identifying the forces that oppress them and evolving strategies for change, and in turn be changed (transformed). In doing so, communities draw on both their knowledge and knowledge of the reality around them. People like myself are co-learners and co-strugglers, and participate in the dialogue and action. Dialogue, discussion, reflection, action, has been key.”

Sagari Ramdas, PLD facilitator, 2015

“People-led development is a creative, self-initiated, self-organised process within which people work individually and collectively with their own Indigenous knowledge, local resources and local cultures to bring about change in their families, communities and the world promoting peaceful, diverse and sustainable futures.”

Sarah Wright 'We dance with what we have – people-led development in action', 2013, p. 6



Photo: Cruzada

Recent [evaluation processes of PLD-supporting projects](#) have proven their potential for transformative and inclusive empowerment processes, and have also identified a few challenges. Partner organisations had difficulty conceptualising and eventually documenting the changes in attitude and approach, and, therefore, sharing with other NGOs and even new staff was not fully effective. In many cases, NGOs were unable to institutionalise PLD reflections that would ensure they would impact not only on parts of the work, but also on the organisation's culture, processes and decision-making, induction of new staff and communication with other donors in order to allow PLD mainstreaming and not mere piecemeal adoption of certain PLD criteria.

With these findings, the PLD consultancy work in Asia was re-oriented towards the support for concept building, documentation and capacity building. Accepting that the approach of a community of practice among few resource persons was limited, the idea of a regional learning and exchange platform was born. The Regional Learning and Exchange Platform for Facilitating Change Processes towards Food Sovereignty places PLD reflection processes into the context of food sovereignty and rural grassroots movements. The platform is designed as a dynamic learning process that will offer new perspectives on knowing and learning, drawing from MISEREOR partner organisations' experiences of strengthening and reflecting on PLD processes in rural Asia. It offers the space for collective learning in order to enhance development practitioners' and organisations' capacities, values and skills to further support grassroots initiatives and regional movement-building.

Preparing the field for change – the actors involved

For agencies engaged in project work with local communities, the basic prerequisite and central principle of an empowering, transformative and systemic approach is the notion of [development](#) as transformative processes driven and owned by people and their communities – as active agents in a complex system. To support transformation, it is important to facilitate in a way that enables transformative energies to emerge from people’s interaction and linkages, through reflection, dialogue and joint learning, and build on their existing capacities, local knowledge and potential. Supporting partner communities in developing a collective vision of the best possible future can guide people’s struggle for more social justice and self-determination.

People’s empowerment and power play

In this regard, it is crucial to acknowledge that rural communities characterised as ‘marginalised’ are complex and heterogeneous systems that feature diverse local resources and potentials, a richness of knowledge, experiences and ideas, local expertise, inventiveness, creativity, manifold forms of resilience, such as social cohesion and solidarity, biological and cultural diversity. They also feature many different needs and interests of particular persons or groups, with underlying power and gender relations. Vested interests of powerful people in communities are important forces that maintain or even reinforce current injustice and marginalisation on the economic, socio-cultural and political level. As emerging change processes threaten these structures, they could eventually lead to [conflicts and further injustice](#), too often even endangering the lives and livelihoods of committed change makers.

Depending on the local context, (indigenous) culture and tradition can be a resource or a source of conflict. Often cementing current structures of power and marginalisation, with adverse effects on women and youth, the revival of local knowledge and governance could also strengthen resilience and self-esteem – if



Photo: PAN AP

it builds on solidarity and supportive leadership, based on a deep and caring relation to nature, and provides alternatives to the current oppressive system. Examples include indigenous or traditional knowledge in agriculture, which could serve as a foundation for diversified, resilient livelihoods, or governance structures that (traditionally) handle the commons in a democratic, inclusive and sustainable way.

Whether or not injustice and marginalisation can be transformed depends on who leads and controls the change process and how strong the back-holding forces are. Disempowered, marginalised and oppressed groups should be at the centre of transformation, as they have a most vital interest in change happening, but need allies and support from other sectors of society, such as reliable political leaders and elites, interested media people and researchers, responsible consumers and youth groups.¹¹

Don't walk alone – organising, networking and movement building

For people who are marginalised and oppressed, collective action through self-organisation and alliance building are the most important strategies for gaining power and enforcing their demands for the respect, protection and fulfilment of their rights. This can work out well if the people concerned have full commitment to and ownership of the organising process. For external change agents, the common practice of 'organising people' within project frameworks may bear the consequences of creating parallel structures to already existing, organically-grown structures, and eventually undermine these.

The importance of collective action goes beyond power, as people's collective experience is another critical element in change processes. Examples show that experiencing similarities, common ground, mutuality and response of others, whether it be the identification with a group or with people from other contexts, is often ground-breaking and triggers more commitment and engagement. Collectively initiated activities among groups and community-based organisations become an active expression of solidarity and may catalyse more change. When community groups capitalise on their existing knowledge while exchanging experiences and cooperating with others in networks or people-to-people exchanges, creativity and energy can be activated. This can lead to experiencing new forms of self-efficacy and self-empowerment.

¹¹ German sociologist Harald Welzer in his book *Selbst denken* (2016) suggests that a social movement can only be successful if it integrates people from the different social classes in a society, even if these do not have a genuine interest in the utmost concern of the initiators of the movement.

“If women in a community are stuck, seemingly passive, and unable to break out of dependence and subservience to their husbands or fathers, it is not because they are internally passive as a natural state, but because their will and capacity to change is held back by external customs or by internalised fear or lack of confidence. If they can be supported to remove or lower these constraints they may be able to change themselves and their power relationship to the world.”

The Barefoot Guide 4. Exploring the Real Work of Social Change. Working with Questions 1: 'What is social change and resistance to change?'. 2015, p. 23

“Since time immemorial people have learnt from each other, informally sharing stories and wisdom, trading innovations and recipes, teaching each other techniques and technologies, neighbour to neighbour, farmer to farmer, parent to child. This kind of horizontal learning has always been a powerful motor of social change. One of the most important discoveries is that if we want to work together, to collaborate, we should begin this by learning together, horizontally. Horizontal learning builds trust, helps people to learn each other's way of seeing the world and helps everyone to see what contribution they can bring. By so doing this can lay strong foundations for working together.”

The Barefoot Guide 4. Exploring the Real Work of Social Change. Working with Questions 3: 'What is Horizontal Learning and How Can it Contribute to Social Change?'. 2015, p. 56

An important building block in strengthening people-driven change processes is, therefore, the support for and (re)invigoration of community-based groups and organisations. Depending on the specific local context and people's motivation, needs and [strategic interests](#), different options for self-organising will emerge and may need strengthening. There are contexts where formally organised structures provide benefit or protection to individuals, and there are also instances where loose movements prove to be the most adequate form of self-organisation, as 'scapegoats' cannot be easily identified and backlash or charges can therefore not be directed towards particular individuals.

Support from the 'outside' – change facilitators' ride on the knife's edge

A challenge for dedicated outsiders who are determined to help strengthen local change processes is 'hidden discourse': people's survival strategies, initiatives, and their community-specific dynamics mostly manifest themselves away from outsiders' sight; they tackle their individual and collective challenges with the help of family and community-based support systems on a day-to-day basis – alongside but also despite development projects. They have experienced life-long disregard of their concerns, interests and aspirations. Often communities play their role in the 'project business' by displaying an attitude of being needy and powerless to get at least a bit of support for basic needs that the expert or donor might have to offer.

For NGO staff supporting local or regional transformation processes it is therefore crucial to look behind this discourse and understand the real concerns and aspirations of marginalised communities, recognising 'change' as a process that goes beyond the specific limitations of a project or sector, as much as understanding that transformation processes at community level must go beyond people's obvious basic needs at local or individual level, such as food security, shelter, and income. Significant and sustainable changes are not attained if only short-term needs are addressed while other factors of poverty perpetuate people's dis-



Photo: Food Sovereignty Alliance

advantage and marginalisation. Change facilitators need to develop a broad understanding of the complexity of change processes that encompass the institutional and structural, tackle the very causes and forces of the repressive system and thus address communities' long-term strategic interests. An outside person can facilitate change when (s)he has been able to create a relationship of mutual trust, understanding and appreciation, and is able to enhance people's confidence in their ability to contribute to [change/transformation](#), however limited it may initially be.


In order to nurture the above-mentioned 'transformative energy', change facilitators will have to develop their own authentic style of supporting continuous reflection-action-reflection processes. They will have to develop the intuition for the right balance between strengthening local resources and providing new [impulses, ideas and linkages](#).

NGO staff who approach marginalised people as 'experts' and the belief that they are needy and lack power, knowledge and will, are most likely to choose the strategy of 'providing' – solutions, assets, knowledge, and money. This will in most cases transmit a reinforcing message to those experiencing marginalisation that change is not possible.

Supporting transformation processes as co-struggler

For this, roles and responsibilities of accompanying NGOs (and donors for that matter) go far beyond project implementation, knowledge transfer and donor compliance.

Furthermore, the current global crisis with its ecological, economic, political and social divides affects not only marginalised parts of societies in the Global South, but – at least in the medium and long term – all people as individuals around the world. This gives rise to the need to join forces to challenge the structures that block empowerment, self-reliance and self-determination within and outside communities, including forces of poverty and discrimination, lack of opportunities and self-efficacy.¹²



“The PLD process within the NGO structure where I had been working for several years threw up important questions about the agency and role of an NGO and the agency and roles of communities organising to advance a vision for Food Sovereignty and Social Justice. Apart from the self-assertion it triggered amongst communities of producers connected to the production of food (small farmers/ pastoralists/ adivasis/ dalit farmers), it pushed me (a veterinary scientist who had co-founded and was heading an NGO) to reflect deeply on who I was in this movement. I began to identify myself as a co-struggler/co-learner/ or co-producer within this movement, seeing myself as strategising actions, as an equal with other communities. I felt strongly the need to immerse myself in this location and not outside of it.”

Sagari Ramdas,
member of the Food Sovereignty Alliance, India

¹² For further reading: [U-Lab 'Transforming business, society and self'](#)

Change facilitators working with NGOs and donor organisations can serve people-driven change processes as facilitators and catalysers and accompany communities during the phases of their transformation processes. To this end, the widespread paradigm of teaching, explaining and providing solutions needs to be challenged in favour of a new local, national and global solidarity, interaction as equals and alternative perspectives on knowing, learning, and transforming self and others. People assisting and accompanying local change processes are no longer distant experts but become co-learners, **co-strugglers** and allies for change, in solidarity with community-driven movements. Positioning oneself as a co-learner requires a great deal of unlearning of cultural conditioning because it challenges dominant and subordinate role sets of 'knowledge holders' and 'knowledge recipients' and the un-equal power relationships they comprise, and thus acts towards more dynamic relationships.



To join this movement of solidarity, we may need to start from our own systems and working ethics, addressing the asymmetrical and imbalanced relationships between institutions and communities, reflect about our own cultural conditioning and corresponding perceptions of 'the poor', and scrutinise the implicit messages we carry along, communicate, and perpetuate.

Mind-set, attitudes and skills of change facilitators

The role of NGO staff as change facilitators can be central – and it is not an easy task. Facilitators' competence goes beyond analytical skills and technical expertise and is very much informed by people's attitudes, mind-set and personal views. To develop the necessary solid understanding of people's realities, relationships, values and visions, change facilitators listen to people's ideas, hopes and aspirations, fears and grievances, and ask the right questions to draw these out. Facilitators gain or impart skills to comprehend social and political contexts.



Photo: Hams/MISEREOR

They are **empathic listeners** – with open minds, hearts and will – and good communicators, able to invite people to open up and help create spaces for reflection, generative dialogue and exchange. Curiosity and the readiness for surprises can help change facilitators identify local innovations and solutions that sometimes already exist in a community, but are perhaps not commonly recognised if the innovators are marginalised in their own communities.

Practical participatory methods for (group) facilitation and village planning as developed by creative facilitators can be helpful tools for accompanying and positively shaping community-based processes, e.g. **Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)** and **gender toolboxes** or the **Barefoot Guides**,¹³ to name only a few. They support facilitators' efforts to obtain active and equitable contributions from all group members, especially from those members who normally do not speak up in front of others. By creating inclusive spaces for all people – especially those who are usually not given or permitted a voice because of their gender, their ethnicity, their caste, their social status or their age, opportunities are generated for people to come together to articulate and discuss their individual and collective visions, values and world views, and expand the range of choices and strategic actions they can make through joint analysis, sharing of experiences and experiential learning. Consequently, norms and **power relations** within the groups or communities can be challenged.

“I am a Bangladeshi agriculturist specialised in rice breeding. For a long time, I was involved with NGOs in technical extension services. Eleven years ago, I had the opportunity to be part of a MISEREOR-assisted project where PLD reflection was facilitated. From someone who used to see himself as an agriculture expert teaching farmers, I have become a community facilitator, learning, as much as sharing my knowledge with the farmers, and accompanying them in strengthening and scaling up their own initiatives and ability to solve their diverse agricultural challenges.”

Sirajul Haque,
former agricultural technician with
Caritas Bangladesh, Independent PLD Facilitator

¹³ The Barefoot Guides share stories, good practices, analyses, approaches and resources of interesting social change practice from around the globe. Each of the Barefoot Guides is written under a specific key theme by a collective of practitioner writers and social change leaders. The guides are freely downloadable and available in several languages.

Certain tools can help foster the sharing of reflections connected to the participants' inner knowledge that does not emerge easily in discussions focusing on intellectual reflection, but may be represented in feelings, inner pictures and symbols. They can provide a means of self-expression and understanding for people who are not trained in critical analyses and conclusions, bridging cultural communication gaps between people and facilitators.

However, facilitators should be aware that tools are not used for the sake of completing charts or drawing pictures, but rather for the generative dialogue and innovative solutions they can catalyse.

Celebrating local resources – opportunities and traps

Starting from people's diverse resources, whether they are assets, knowledge or practice, provides a solid foundation for change, as it provides self-confidence and the experience of self-efficacy, which are the prerequisite for overcoming the feeling that one is powerless, helpless, unable, uneducated, backward, or disregarded. It is, therefore, a simple but powerful tool for empowerment and boosting confidence to start a process of re-appreciation of local knowledge, skills and practices, especially according value to women's innovativeness or indigenous knowledge as effective answers to current challenges. If the attention is trained on the opportunities and strengths of the past and the present, each marginalised group can start re-thinking and interpreting their own life stories and gain confidence in re-imagining the future.

As a next step, an exchange with and exposure to others, whether individuals or groups, in the next village or another country, can boost the change process as dialogue with others who are in a similar and at the same time different situation sometimes deepens self-confidence and nurtures new ideas to be trialled and adapted.

For some NGOs, the positive experience with empowerment through local knowledge becomes an end in itself, and they content themselves with identifying and celebrating knowledge and innovations, e.g. the collection and protec-



Photo: Meritnet/MISEREDOR



Photo: DIJUAL

tion of local seeds. This, however, has an inherent trap in that the external change facilitators somehow control the process and do not pay attention to the communities' important challenges. Coming back to the reflection-action-reflection process, local knowledge can be valued as an entry point for the change process which unfolds on its way.

Rather than dwelling on the 'celebration' of local resources, however, change facilitators can infuse the narrative that everything has to emerge from the community people's own resources. While it is important for the marginalised people as key actors in local transformation to fully control the process, they should be very aware of their rights as citizens and of the injustice that has marginalised them in the economic processes. They have the right to receive support, and when communities are conscious of their situation, their **own resources** and opportunities and the challenges, they will be in the position to demand and fight for rights and entitlements, and will make the best use of ideas and support from external sources. In this context, change facilitators have to be clear and conscious of what they can bring into the process. It makes a difference whether NGOs provide inputs, subsidies and solutions or whether local communities, after serious reflection, decide whether and how outside support such as exposure and exchange with other communities, technologies and training, financial support, e.g. through government programmes, could be appropriate and helpful.

NGOs – vehicles for or drivers of change

A central aspect of strengthening people-driven change processes is the holistic back-up role of NGOs. NGOs not only provide an institutional home for change facilitators; as institutional partners, they also help their local partner groups and communities link with other co-strugglers and even government organisations. They enable the flow of funds from national and international sources to communities by building up accountability and effective management systems. NGOs constitute a nexus to donors and can thus help mobilise funds for transformation processes.

As credible learning institutions, NGOs remain open to undergoing internal reflection and realignment (transformation) and challenge their own practices: Do we still support our partner communities' processes, or are we slowly becoming trapped by the 'project business', implementing our own projects and inviting people to participate? Do we foster participation by providing facilities – training, credit, subsidies, seed funds...? Who is in the driver's seat and who decides on the road to take – the NGO or the partner communities? In the end, internal mechanisms including hierarchies, communication patterns, decision-making processes, and planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME) mechanisms might need realignment. This may include delegating more authority to field levels and fostering collective learning within local partner organisations. After all, the firm commitment to transformation not only for marginalised communities but also for the NGO could initiate an institutional change process with far-reaching changes, calling for democratic leaders who abandon 'power over' and nurture 'power to'.¹⁴

Donor agencies – partnership and money basket

The same reflection applies to non-governmental donor agencies and may even be more critical, as most of them have a two-fold mission – they support partner organisations' work in their respective countries in the Global South through funding, and they have a role in advocacy and information in their home countries, often carried out in joint campaigns with their partner organisations. These two different roles require very different set-ups and mechanisms.

Political and information-related work allows for an equal relation among partners. Funding, even with the idea of partnership, implies a power imbalance and encompasses an asymmetrical fabric of relationships, inherent hierarchies and dependencies, of local communities vis-à-vis local and national non-governmental organisations – and even more of local and national organisations vis-à-vis donor agencies. If these power imbalances remain unaddressed, development projects have the potential to reinforce rather than challenge power structures, repressive orders, and social/economic exclusion.

In many countries, donor agencies are accorded credibility and political weight for their proximity to marginalised communities, for the assumption of being grounded in actual 'grassroots' work, one of

“Monitoring and evaluation can be generative exercises providing a forum for communities to push their agenda and for all players to reflect upon and acknowledge change processes.

Planning can allow for the envisioning of new, flexible pathways for change and encourage both hope and vision as well as providing an opportunity for communities and NGOs to work together to self-generate ideas for change. How to design a PME that fulfils these possibilities, and that will be radically flexible in line with a people-led development approach, is an ongoing challenge, and MISEREOR's continuing in-house reflection on this point is important. (...) Not only do processes need to be radically flexible, but this flexibility needs to be adequately understood by implementing NGOs who are trained in, and used to, older forms of monitoring and evaluation. (...) MISEREOR can and does make demands about NGO structure and practice, particularly in terms of planning and reporting, and is in the position to withhold funding. Acknowledging, and trying to rebalance, this power dynamic is important to reflection processes.”

Sarah Wright: 'We dance with what we have – People-led development in action', 2013

¹⁴ For further reading, please refer to [AIZ leadership toolbox – leadership for global responsibility](#), GIZ, 2013



Photo: Hams/MISEREOR

MISEREOR's guiding principles. This implies the responsibility to make best use of the power funds provide to accompany and co-struggle with the marginalised communities.

Chance and challenge – the dilemma of project funding

Like their NGO partners, donor agency staff have an intermediary role to play in order to bring together rather different expectations and requirements. On the one hand, they are to provide support for people-driven change processes through NGOs, and this requires process orientation and flexible funding guidelines, allowing an accompaniment of communities that is open-ended, truly based on people's needs and also at their specific pace. On the other hand, they have to qualify their partner organisations to meet the high administrative requirements posed by their back donors. They have to find ways to enable partner organisations to come up with project proposals with clearly defined **objectives** and indicators, and reporting that allows evaluating projects along the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria of OECD countries regarding relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability, and all without compromising the dynamics of people-owned change processes. Developing mandatory PME as a tool for local reflection processes may be the solution for combining the different requirements.

In conclusion, it is quite clear that if all actors involved in transformation processes, be they communities and their leaders, NGOs and their change facilitators, donor agencies and their agents of change, as co-strugglers, believe in their efficacy and creatively develop new ways of interaction, a new **kind of 'development project'** can emerge that leads the way out of the 'project business trap' and contributes to the change we want to see.

BARCIK

The Bangladesh Resource Centre for Indigenous Knowledge (BARCIK) promotes the significance of local and indigenous knowledge in community-based empowerment and change processes. In 2015, BARCIK and the grassroots communities it works with developed a **change monitoring system**, in which different sources of change, steps and milestones within ongoing community-based change processes are documented by both communities and BARCIK. In BARCIK's experience, participatory planning, as well as monitoring and evaluation turn into actual processes of empowerment if ownership of change stays with local communities at all times.

Based on the outcomes of a reflection process supported by Carola Block, freelance consultant, and MISEREOR

Catalysing change or reinforcing structures?

The document highlights certain 'pressure points' for strengthening people-driven change processes and critically reflects upon challenges and 'traps' in the prevalent project business. Breaking it down to simplified and provocative 'do's and don'ts', the following tables provide a short summary and invite the reader to re-think 'development practice' and co-create avenues for transformative joint action.

For communities

How to feed transformation	How to maintain a status quo
Trust in your own capacity and the potential of your family and community to initiate change.	Believe that you are poor and powerless.
Build on available resources.	Let your shortcomings stand in your way.
Be creative, master your craft and try out new things.	Don't move, don't learn, don't fail.
Look for committed allies and unite on pressing issues.	Do it all by yourself, or don't do anything at all.
Strategise collective action for change.	Wait for help.
Decide in democratic processes whether external resources are needed and adapt them to your local needs and plans.	Take whatever you get, demand more.
Choose your allies carefully and be firm and frank with your NGO partner and the change facilitators.	Participate in NGO's projects and carry out NGO's activities.
Develop your own narrative and re-imagine your future.	Be fatalistic – believe that change is not possible.
...	

For NGOs

How to feed transformation	How to reinforce the current NGO system
Support locally driven processes.	Have people participate in your predefined projects.
Listen and look for the unexpected with an open heart and open mind.	Follow your inner voice of judgment, as you know what has to be done.
Provide space for dialogue and facilitate people's own analysis, plans, and solutions using creative facilitation tools.	Come with ready-made plans and solutions.
Acknowledge your own role and responsibility and become a co-struggler, co-learner, co-creator of change.	Avoid new insights and abstain from transferring learning to self and work.
Be part of the change process.	Observe from a distance.
Listen, listen, listen – and facilitate reflection-action-reflection.	Talk, teach, train.
Challenge power structures based on systems, politics, wealth, gender, age etc.	Work with leaders and the better off only, as this provides faster results.
Help access funds and services for people's priorities as a result of local reflections and decision-making.	Provide subsidies and expert advice for ready-made solutions – and in so doing, 'buy' people's participation.
Believe in people, their potential and skills.	Assume that poor people need your help.
Challenge donor regulations.	Please donors to get funds and maintain your structure.
Support communities building up the best structures for defending their strategic interest.	Organise local groups around your project activities.
...	

For donors

How to feed transformation	How to maintain the current system
Nurture a relation of trust and patience with your partner organisations and try to understand their perspectives.	Follow your inner voice of judgment, as you know the many shortcomings and vested interests of your NGO partners.
Develop your listening skills and intercultural competence.	Communicate and criticise as you are accustomed to doing – the others will have to get along with it.
Be aware of the power of controlling the funds and make the best use of this power for empowerment, learning from and with your partners.	Control the projects and processes, insert your ideas, and decide on priorities and policies, as you control the money.
Provide space and time for dialogue processes for everyone: among partner communities and their partner organisations, and among partner organisations and your own agency.	Look for projects with fast results and avoid tedious dialogue with the partner organisations.
Screen projects with PLD lenses and make sure that your partners are committed to supporting people-driven change processes.	Don't invest too much time in the details of project proposals, as your time is really limited.
Provide space for exchange and learning processes among your partner organisations for more effective support of transformation processes.	Train your partners in how to respond best to your requirements in alignment with the demands of your back-donors.
Engage your partner organisations in the reflection on people-led transformation processes and motivate change through sharing of this document, deep dialogue and innovative project funding.	Write letters and send policy guidelines and expect that this will initiate the change you want to see.
Create opportunities for deep reflection in your own agency.	You are the donors, the others will have to change.
Prioritise and use every opportunity for passing time with local communities and your partner organisations to develop a better sense of local processes and relations – and a better relation to 'the people in the centre'.	Unfortunately, you do not have time for field visits – office visits or meetings at your hotel must do.
...	


The emerging future – the change we want to see

In the past decades, 'development' has been the underlying concept for processes and activities towards a juster world where poverty would be alleviated and all people would be able to fulfil their basic needs. Development agency, development project, development aid, development indicators – in the context of injustice and marginalisation, which paradigm does the term 'development' promote? The participants in the intercultural research project *Development towards a Global Common Good* concluded that the 'world faces a number of serious political, economic and ecological challenges that demand concerted efforts to conduct profound analyses and implement the necessary changes. It is, however, unclear whether the concept of development is still adequate to guide these transformational efforts. For development, in the way it has been propagated for decades, may well be too closely linked to an economic model of expansive market fundamentalism which by itself is at the core of those global problems that are calling for in-depth transformations'.¹⁶

In search of an alternative term for the transformation needed to address the above-mentioned challenges, in contrast to the 'development agenda' of governments, international institutions and the corporate sector, civil society groups discuss concepts such as post development, 'degrowth', 'buen vivir', the 'Gross National Happiness Index', to name but a few. MISEREOR proposes the notion of a global common good as a central basis for all those approaches, having as their object the (human) being and acknowledging the human dignity of the person. 'Yet, one should not see the person as a mere interest-driven market participant (...), but rather as a social and inter-related individual that stands in connection with other living beings, including the non-human environment'.

And in line with the ideas developed in this text, we should critically ask who the people are who reflect on these concepts and approaches as a vision of and intention for the transformation that would lead to a better future for all. An increasing number of concerned people from countries around the world, many of them young activists, mainly from the middle class who have experience with negative impacts of economic growth and consumerism and who are in a position to make choices, are trying out new ways of living well. They are already creating a new narrative.

And how much trust do those creating this narrative have in visions for a better future of those who do not have their equal share of the common good today? How can aspirations and visions for a better life of those who are marginalised by the current system be included into this transformation and guide it? Will they be marginalised again, or would they equally contribute to constructing the emerging future?



“There was a general consent (...) that a 'common good' with global scope is a helpful concept to address both local and international challenges of globalisation. (...) such global common good cannot be a uniform model but needs to be defined in continuous participatory and plural processes by those concerned.”

Georg Stoll,
'Views from Civil Society Practitioners', from:
Global Common Good, IGP + MISEREOR, 2015

¹⁶ [Reflections on the Global Common Good](#), Institute for Social and Development Studies (IGP) and MISEREOR/ results of the intercultural research project, 2015. The dialogue project comprised a more academic pillar with six studies being executed (published in the book cited here) and a more practice-oriented pillar with six regional civil society dialogue fora held in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The main results of these dialogue fora are also part of the book cited here as a complement to the studies. The excerpts quoted on level B of this text were taken from the civil society dialogues

‘It is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must act together upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection.’

Paulo Freire

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