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 co-operating 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.

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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**

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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 solu-tions needs to be challenged in favour of a new local, national and global solidarity, interac-tion as equals and alternative perspectives on know-ing, learning, and transform-ing 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 condition-ing 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 exper-tise and is very much informed by people's attitudes, mind-set and personal views. To develop the necessary solid understanding of people's realities, rela-tionships, 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.

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

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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: Mertineit/MISEREOR

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

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14 For further reading, please refer to AIZ leadership toolbox – leadership for global responsibility, GIZ, 2013

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