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

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

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

Under these circumstances, adults and children alike have little choice but to sell their labour. Enclosed in so-called "captive communities", they are prohibited from building schools and permanent homes because the land they live on belongs to the landowner. Paid in kind, and easily oppressed, the Guarani work to pay off their alleged "debts". Like other **campesinos** and indigenous populations of Bolivia, these families are caught in a spiral of dependency and poverty.

Thanks to the EMPODER project and the advocacy work done by its coordinator, Miriam Campos, the rights of these forgotten workers are being recognised and defended. For ten years, Campos has been crisscrossing Bolivia to lend her voice to the voiceless poor. As the case of Germán Cruz, a Guarani father, illustrates, EMPODER has been successful. In November 2006, Don Germán received his first wages from the landlord for whom he has worked all his life. He was happy to be able to buy a mattress for his family to sleep on.

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

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

While previous governments did not want to risk losing their wealthy landowner support base, since Evo Morales

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

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

Ownership – a tool in the hands of politicians
Unfortunately, the brand of ownership that emerged was quite different from the one we had expected.

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

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

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The Human Face of Harmonisation: A Personal Story

Aman Jonchhe, a programme specialist in the Kathmandu Cooperation Office of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) since 2002, used powers of conviction, professional expertise and interpersonal skills during his three-month secondment to the Nepalese Ministry of Local Development to assist in the development of a nationally significant rural infrastructure rehabilitation and reconstruction plan. Here he describes his personal experience with harmonisation and local ownership in development cooperation.

By Aman Jonchhe, Programme Specialist
It was the second week of April when I reported to the Ministry of Local Development (MoLD) to begin a three-month secondment to the Government of Nepal. Together with a team of consultants from the Asia Development Bank (ADB), I was to assist the MoLD in formulating a very ambitious and very important rural infrastructure project with the financial support of the ADB and the technical expertise of the SDC. In a country where a quarter of the population lives more than four hours' walk from the nearest road and where rural infrastructure has been ravaged by years of armed conflict, this project was of national and historic importance. Although deeply honoured, I also was aware of the challenge to design a project which would bring all the major development partners together within a narrow time frame.

The mood in the ministry was euphoric. Out of the US$700 million identified as an estimated need for the three-year interim plan, more than US$300 million was being pledged by ADB in partnership with other donor agencies. The government was expected to contribute US$100 million from its own resources. The aim: the reconstruction and rehabilitation of rural infrastructure to restore and enhance much-needed services to the rural people who suffered most during Nepal's 11-year armed conflict which ended with the signing of a peace agreement between the government and Maoist forces on 21 November 2006.

The peace accord marked the beginning of an important stage in Nepal's socio-economic development. The new and transitional political environment also meant that a

new approach to planning was necessary. Consequently, the government decided to formulate a development plan for the period 2008–2010 before a new political order is established under a new constitution framed by the elected representatives to the constituent assembly.

According to the government's own priorities, this three-year plan had to deliver tangible benefits and quickly, especially to the rural people who constitute the bulk of the poor and disadvantaged population. This request for technical assistance reflected the enormous trust that the Nepalese government bestowed upon SDC as a reliable partner that is willing to assist the government in the realisation of its own development agenda. It also posed a challenge: a nationally significant project had to be designed that would bring all major development partners together in a short period of time.

At the start of my secondment, the government partners had organised a meeting with authorities from all the 75 districts to collect their demands. In its optimism and enthusiasm, the MoLD wanted to design a "perfect" project that would meet all the infrastructure needs of the country. This was my biggest challenge: to inject some rationale into their thinking and propose a workable design process.

I began to preach for an "implementable" project that would address some of the fundamental issues, rather than attempt to design the "most perfect ever" project. Fortunately for me, some of the authorities in the Ministry, including the director general (DG), were convinced by this approach and supported it. "Rather than having an utopian project that is impossible to implement, let's have something simple but meaningful," the DG said.

My argument for the need to focus geographically and sectorally implied that the programme would neither cover all of Nepal's 4000 village development committees (VDCs) nor would it involve building every type of infrastructure that exists under the Sun. Instead, the programme should focus only on rural transport and water supply. According to a survey, these are the two top priorities for local governments. Convincing the National Planning Commission of this point of view was the most difficult thing to do.

"Leave this to me," the DG said. And right to his word, he was somehow able to do just that. By then, the Ministry of Finance had also agreed to this concept.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

An hour later, the time had come to close the meeting. However, Mr Baglo remained firmly entrenched in his position. But just when a new name for the programme --

"Swiss support for stronger local **governance** in the department of Borgou" -- had finally been found, a power outage plunged the room into darkness.

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

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

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

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