

Building wells in Kenya:
Many promising development
projects fail through lack
of ownership. Often no one
takes responsibility once
the aid workers have left.



Ownership for a better place

Thomas Loster

Where aid and development projects are concerned, success and failure go hand in hand. Although success depends on a great many factors, projects are almost certain to fail if the ownership element is lacking, or has not been clarified.

Day after day, hundreds of aid and development projects start and finish throughout the world. We have long been accustomed to appeals for donations not only when natural catastrophe strikes but also when aid organisations routinely solicit funding for projects and development work. Business informatics specialist Till Behnke's Betterplace.org has devised a new approach in this area. His platform offers social initiatives worldwide a chance to raise donations by presenting themselves on the internet. Projects range from desks for a school in Golukati, Ghana, to restoration work at Wallwitzburg Castle in Dessau, Germany.

Whilst many donation-backed projects achieve notable success, others may fail miserably due to a lack of follow-up, one example involving the sinking of wells in arid parts of Africa. Experience shows that, once the aid workers have departed, enthusiasm wanes; the wells dry up and fill with sand because no one takes responsibility for them. The German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), which regularly evaluates its development projects, has a success rate of over 70%. The GTZ says that the crucial factors are planning expertise, the ability to influence the situation, and capacity development, i.e. training partner organisations. If, on the other hand, the target group has not been sufficiently involved in the project and the partner does not accept responsibility, the ownership element is absent and the project is doomed to failure.

Last year, the Munich Re Foundation learnt a number of valuable ownership lessons from its projects in Africa. Despite helping to successfully establish the second River Save warning system in Mozambique, we were forced to abandon plans to extend our fog nets project in Eritrea. The political situation and ownership issues put paid to our efforts. This was all the more regrettable because the technology worked perfectly, enabling hundreds of litres of drinking water to be harvested daily from fog.

In Eritrea, the authorities were the weak link in the essential ownership chain. The political and economic situation had deteriorated dramatically from 2007 on, making it impossible to travel, obtain supplies, and appoint local experts unhindered. A further blow came when staff employed by our project partners were arrested. The project was finally brought to a halt by the sudden disappearance of a headmaster who played a key role in it. We take cold comfort from knowing we were not the only ones facing such problems. Other organisations, including the highly experienced GTZ, were forced to close their offices in Eritrea.

The events in Eritrea show the importance of ownership at all levels. Everyone involved in the project must be aware of and fully behind the objectives during the various stages of the work. The vertical ownership chain in the Eritrean example consists of the pupils, parents, school, community, mayor, district government, water authority, and national government.

The failure of just one link in that chain jeopardises the whole project and can also have repercussions for the horizontal group comprising, for example, young people connected with the pupils or the school.

It takes a lot of effort to ensure ownership. Firstly, you have to promote awareness, and maintain it through training and practice drills. Secondly, you have to formulate disruption scenarios, and make corresponding contingency plans. For instance, in the case of the Mozambican flood-warning system: how will people react if the river does not flood for a period of several years? What will happen to the warning committees once project initiators and sponsors have departed? And what if a key person suddenly leaves the project?

GTZ figures show how important it is to keep track of ownership. After all, even the best-laid projects, for all their time lines, milestones, optimum monitoring and evaluation, are of little avail if the local population does not truly identify with the programme. Till Behnke's vision of a better place will not become reality unless this is taken sufficiently into account.



Thomas Loster is Chairman of the Munich Re Foundation. He has been dealing with climate change and its effects for the past 20 years.

Who gives what?

Monetary aid donated by governments and major NGOs (US\$ bn)



Source: OECD

দুর্যোগ ঝুঁকি হ্রাসে শিশুদের অংশগ্রহণ প্রকল্প
(Children's Participation in Disaster Risk Reduction Project)
বাস্তবায়নে : পি ও প্যান বাংলাদেশ হাতিবান্দা প্রোগ্রাম ইউনিট
অর্থায়নে : ডিপেকো (DIPECHO)



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