

# Programme responses to address the ultra poor from an NGO perspective

*Addressing the ultra poor is an important task of all development actors. However, it is important to analyse who should play which role in order to tackle the problem in an efficient and sustainable manner. For an NGO like Welthungerhilfe addressing the problems of the rural and urban very poor (now called the ultra poor) is part of its mission. Nevertheless, the problem goes far beyond the capacities of a private Non-Governmental Organisation.*

*“We, Heads of State and Government [...] reaffirm our commitment to eradicate poverty and promote sustained economic growth, sustainable development and global prosperity for all. We strongly reiterate our determination to ensure the timely and full realization of the Millennium Development Goals” (2005 World Summit Outcome, United Nations, 16 September 2005; published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), June 2006)*

Structured upon these words, the Millennium Development Declaration was already adopted by the United Nations and by more than 180 heads of state from around the world in September 2000. MDG 1 requests to cut by half the number of persons affected by poverty and hunger, explicitly focusing extreme poverty and hunger, requesting. But, observing the current manifestation of the growing food crisis in the developing countries, the objective to eradicate

hunger by half by 2015 seems to be utopia.

Considering the growing number of people affected by poverty in developing countries, there is growing concern about the urgency to address the needs of the so-called ultra poor more effectively.

According to the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) the ultra poor are those people who live from less than half a dollar a day. They

live mainly in rural areas, are located furthest from roads, markets, etc. and are less likely to be educated. According to the IFPRI study, the major share of the 162 million ultra poor live in sub-Saharan Africa.

*Most of the ultra poor still have a potential for self-help activities if their capacities are well understood and developed by assistance providers.*



Photo: Welthungerhilfe

---

## Mathias Mogge

Head Quality Management  
Mathias.Mogge@welthungerhilfe.de

## Hubertus Rüffer

Emergency Coordinator  
Hubertus.Rueffer@welthungerhilfe.de  
Welthungerhilfe  
Bonn, Germany

The study identified three main poverty traps:

- the inability of poor households to invest in the education of their children,
- limited access to credit for those with few assets, and
- the lack of productive labour among the hungry.

(Ahmed et al.: *The world's most deprived, Characteristics and Causes of Extreme Poverty and Hunger*, IFPRI, 2007)

---

## *Self-help approach and ultra poor*

---

It is important to differ between ultra poor families who are poor but who have family members still able to work and still disposing of productive assets (viable households) and those who do not or no longer have a workforce or productive assets (non-viable), i.e. elderly persons or HIV&AIDS-affected households where the breadwinners have died (Schubert, 2004: *The pilot social cash transfer scheme Kalomo District-Zambia*). This difference is crucial when thinking about programme responses to address the ultra poor.

In order to identify specific programme responses, it may be useful to gain a better understanding of the causes of being ultra poor. From the experience of Welthungerhilfe one may distinguish three categories of the ultra poor:

**A.** People who are ultra poor as a result of a disaster, a crisis or an emergency situation, i.e. people have become very poor because of sudden external shocks. They have suddenly lost resources on which they used to rely on as income source. They are used to a life of relative stability. Members of this group have attended schools in the past and have a high potential and will to recover. They know a better life and want it back. They have a significant self-help potential. While in a short initial period, resources

are provided for free in order to stabilise livelihoods, at a later stage, productive inputs, e.g. seed capital, assets etc., have a considerable impact. This group is often the target group of development-oriented programmes.

**B.** Ultra poor who were marginalised in the course of social and economic decline. Memories of better times exist, and there is a relatively educated workforce in the family. However, there are gaps in the education of children, a lack of access to resources, etc. This group has a potential to recover. But the risk to fall into permanent ultra poverty is high here, too. Welthungerhilfe considers these persons as the main target group in protracted emergency situations. Projects are designed to combine the provision of productive inputs with capacity building and training. Programme responses in this case may focus on education for children, school feeding programmes, income generation for adults and informal vocational training.

**C.** Ultra poor who have been marginalised for generations and who never possessed productive assets. People in this group live in a traditional social and economic environment which makes it difficult to change their situation quickly. Families where the breadwinners have died (HIV/AIDS-affected) are a special case in this regard. Here, the adults are too old to work, and the children are too young. Often this group has a very limited capacity to participate in self-help approaches. Overcoming traditional rules and customs is a challenge, as is overcoming a certain "social lethargy". It is necessary to assist this group with resources that ensure their survival (food, clean water, shelter, etc.) and develop employment schemes, cash transfer or social safety nets. Basically, the most important preconditions for the success of projects focused

on these people is to establish self-governing structures which respond to their specific needs and knowledge. Capacity building and training should be adapted to their environment and build up an understanding that the situation can be changed by these ultra poor themselves.

From a perspective of an International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO) like Welthungerhilfe focusing on a self-help approach, there are clearly limitations to addressing ultra poor who are unable to be productive. A self-help approach requires:

- a suitable political and economic environment (individual initiative and the acceptance of responsibility must be permitted and even desired)
  - availability of resources (success requires a minimum level of labour, funds and means of production)
  - skills and knowledge (not only technical expertise, but also an understanding of rights and obligations, as well as the ability to express interests and assert oneself in society) and
  - awareness and motivation (self esteem, respect, status and dignity)
- (Benad and Post: *Helping people to help themselves*, D+C 1/2008)

Nevertheless, ultra poor have to participate in programming Linking Relief, Rehabilitation, and Development (LRRD). At least the people affected by poverty due to disasters and economic decline have a potential for self-help activities if their capacities are well understood and developed by assistance providers. Protracted ultra poor need a special approach in order to improve their skills and knowledge, but they require the support of a suitable political and economic environment as well. As projects in countries with structural poverty are mainly development oriented with a strong self-help component, they lack the instruments to fight

the structural and underlying causes of hunger. Often, they cannot address those ultra poor who no longer have a working capacity. Those projects mainly address people who have access to land, who possess assets, and who have a certain level of education. Nevertheless, there are strategies and approaches to change the life of the ultra poor, in particular those described in A and B, who still have the potential to work and the potential to regain assets.

---

### *Responses of INGOs*

---

It is essential for a humanitarian organisation to respond to people who are in a desperate situation facing a humanitarian crisis such as in Pakistan after the 2005 earthquake, in Myanmar recently or elsewhere. Food aid, food for work, cash for work or cash transfer and voucher interventions can be responses that help people to recover or to survive. It is important to prevent people from selling their productive assets.

In situations of protracted crisis, such as in Darfur, INGOs, together with multilateral organisations and local NGOs, assist the destitute population by handing out food rations for a rather long period. It is crucial to identify all vulnerable groups (including the ultra poor) in order to save lives and restore individual autonomy. Ultra poor often rely on purchasing food on the market because they have no access to land to produce food.

NGOs can contribute to the development of suitable instruments such as the Community Therapeutic Care (CTC) approach of Welthungerhilfe Alliance Partner Concern Worldwide. By applying the CTC approach, Concern Worldwide has made substantial progress in treating malnourished people, in particular children. They reach 80 percent of malnourished people compared to conventional feeding centres who reach only 10–20 percent of malnourished people in a given area. Other important instruments are

### **Swamp rice rehabilitation in the Reintegration and Recovery Programme in South-East Liberia**

---

Welthungerhilfe started its programme in Liberia in 2004 after the departure of former Dictator Charles Taylor. The first response was to provide emergency aid to the very poor and needy by food aid, school feeding programmes, etc. Basically, 100 percent of the population benefited from general food distributions.



*Photo: Welthungerhilfe*

In the following phase, reconstruction of basic infrastructure began to re-establish the economic basis for the population, including the poorest section of society. These measures were accompanied by cash for work activities and distribution of seeds, tools and other basic household items. The measures were targeted to those who returned to their villages to restore their households.

With the support of the KfW Entwicklungsbank (KfW), Welthungerhilfe today promotes self-help initiatives in South Eastern Liberia. The situation of landless farmers has been specifically addressed. In cases where farmers had no land, Welthungerhilfe facilitated a process whereby these farmers were assisted in getting a piece of land for cultivation from the paramount chiefs and/or the Ministry of Agriculture. Welthungerhilfe requested evidence of land ownership or at least access to land before assistance was provided.

school feeding programmes or food vouchers. INGOs can play a vital role in developing instruments further in particular with national partners such as national NGOs, local administration or government institutions.

---

### *From relief to development*

---

As stated above, LRRD is one concept which, if duly introduced, may assist ultra poor in order to overcome their

problems. The programme approach in Liberia is one example (see Box).

Without neglecting the role of NGOs in this struggle against poverty, it goes without saying that the main responsibility in this area remains with the national governments. Programmes of the World Bank and other donors focus on the establishment of national social safety networks and social inclusion by the respective governments. Donors and their technical agencies

## Zusammenfassung

Hilfsprogramme für Menschen in extremer Armut gibt es auf vielen Ebenen. Die häufig kritisierten Millenniums-Entwicklungsziele haben zumindest dazu geführt, dass in zahlreichen Ländern Pläne und Strategien zur Armutsbekämpfung erarbeitet wurden. Gezielte Ansätze von NRO können so in einen größeren nationalen Rahmen integriert werden. Extrem armen Menschen, die arbeitsfähig sind, über ein Minimum an Eigentum verfügen und aktiv an Capacity-Building-Maßnahmen teilnehmen, kann mit Selbsthilfeprojekten geholfen werden. Die nationalen Armutsbekämpfungspläne können dazu beitragen, strukturell bedingte Armuts- und Hungerprobleme zu lösen, wenn die Fähigkeit zur Selbsthilfe der Armen erkannt und gefördert wird. Zwar können NRO einen wesentlichen Beitrag zur Entwicklung geeigneter Konzepte für Menschen

in extremer Armut leisten, jedoch liegt es letztlich in der Verantwortung der Regierenden, die notwendige Hilfe in Form sozialer Wohlfahrtskonzepte, von Renten- oder Ernährungsprogrammen bereitzustellen.

## Resumen

Las respuestas de los programas dirigidos a los ultra pobres se distribuyen en distintos niveles. Si bien han sido objeto de frecuentes críticas, la adopción de los Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio al menos ha traído consigo la formulación de Planes y Estrategias Nacionales de Reducción de la Pobreza en muchos países. Los enfoques específicos de las organizaciones no gubernamentales (ONG) pueden integrarse dentro de un marco nacional más amplio. Con ello se podría llegar a un progreso bastante sustancial a nivel de las bases, sin por ello disminuir la responsabilidad integral de

un gobierno nacional. Con un enfoque de autoayuda es posible proveer una asistencia sostenible a aquellos ultra pobres que están en capacidad de trabajar, que poseen un mínimo de activos y que participan activamente en un esfuerzo adecuado de desarrollo de capacidades. Las Estrategias Nacionales de Reducción de la Pobreza pueden contribuir a aliviar la pobreza estructural y el hambre si tienen en cuenta y promueven el potencial de autoayuda de las personas pobres. Si bien las ONG pueden prestar un aporte considerable al desarrollo de respuestas adecuadas frente a la ultra pobreza, la responsabilidad en última instancia recae en los gobiernos: son ellos quienes deben proveer la ayuda necesaria a través de esquemas de bienestar social, pensiones o programas de alimentos, a fin de ayudar a los ultra pobres a sobrevivir y/o a superar la trampa de la pobreza.

should support national governments with funding, technical advice and capacity building. Unfortunately, in those countries where we find the major share of ultra poor people, there are governments who often do not have the capacity or the will to carry out such programmes. Sometimes, social assistance programmes do not specifically target the ultra poor (with a low working capacity), or – if they do target them – they do not reach them.

The national safety net programme in Ethiopia is working fairly well but still faces many problems. Donors are encouraged to provide the technical knowhow to accompany such programmes in order to facilitate learning and improvement. The ODI review of the Ethiopia's Safety net programme (*Targeting Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme*, ODI, 2006) provides a good example. The Ethiopia case also shows that local administration, which ultimately has to implement such programmes, can easily be overstrained, with the result of low impact. INGOs cannot replace the responsibility of governments to care for their citizens, in particular

for those who have no option but to receive social welfare in order to survive. However, they can contribute to the development of adequate programme responses.

While drawing attention to the existing problems and responsibilities on the national government's side, NGOs do not shirk their own responsibilities in solving problems. But these activities cannot substitute government responsibilities. They can merely complement them at grass-root, community level.

Welthungerhilfe has adopted a concept of Community Interest Groups, where people sharing common interests, organise and introduce small projects, thus building up their awareness of being able to improve their living standards. Women gather and start to sew clothes for sale or form a co-operative to grow and sell poultry. Disabled and landless men jointly learn to process agricultural products to grow and market vegetables. Welthungerhilfe provides the initial technical inputs, training and capacity building with the aim that after some time, these groups start to act as inde-

pendent economic units with access to credits and funding.

## Responses of national NGOs

National NGOs are important mediators between INGOs and the governments. Hence co-operation between international NGO and national NGO serves as a linkage between national social networks and International assistance.

National NGOs can play a substantial role in pushing national governments to fulfil their duties vis-à-vis its population. Welthungerhilfe, among others, supported a platform of 20 Mozambican NGOs, the "G 20", to formulate a poverty report which was handed over to the government in 2005. The report aimed at outlining concrete actions to fight poverty in Mozambique and assess the measures undertaken by the government, civil society and international agencies to combat hunger and poverty. The findings of the poverty report were taken into serious consideration when formulating the government's second poverty reduction strategy plan.