

# Regional rural development needs people empowerment

Lessons learnt from India prove that people empowerment through self-help groups and target group orientation still matters for sustainable rural development. However, this is only true if economic, socio-cultural, political and environmental empowerment interlock. This article makes an argument for a grassroot-level and participative approach of people empowerment in regional rural development.

Since the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Paris Declaration were endorsed, the public discourse on development co-operation has changed. Result or impact based monitoring and evaluation have become keywords in development co-operation since the international commitment for the MDGs and the respective success indicators took root. Besides, the Paris Declaration has successfully propelled the question of aid effectiveness (and how to achieve it) much higher up on the political and public agenda. Subsequently, a multilayered debate on the right approach in development cooperation to achieve relevant results and sustainable impacts has occurred. Meanwhile, basically, two paradigms have emerged:

1. A prominent “programme-based” approach which emphasises macro-level interventions and focuses on the five commitments made in the Paris Declaration: ownership, alignment, harmonisation, result orientation and mutual accountability. Previously important concerns like target group orientation or people

empowerment have become less important. They are not even mentioned in the Declaration. Instead, direct budget support and sectoral programmes with advisory services at high administrative and political level have turned into key modes of delivery.

2. A “human rights based” empowerment approach which emphasises a more grassroot level and participative proceeding is on the defensive. People empowerment approaches stress emancipatory and self-help-oriented modes of delivery. People are placed at the centre of an intervention instead of policies. By using participatory tools, target groups are directly involved in all steps of project planning, implementation and monitoring. These projects also follow result-oriented

logical frameworks and strive for ownership and sustainability.

## ■ People empowerment as a key: an example from India

In regional rural development, people living in the target area should not become a passive object of external aid or governmental schemes. Beneficiaries should be actively involved

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*As a result of the irrigation,  
the average yearly  
agricultural production  
per household is 1,500 kg  
paddy, 60 kg wheat and  
25 kg vegetables.*

Photo: M. Holländer



in and empowered through their own development process. Such an attempt was made by a rural development project which was implemented by Karl Kübel Stiftung, Germany and Badlao Foundation, India, from 2003 to 2005. The project was conducted in a deprived region near Madhupur (Deoghar District, Jharkhand) with the support of the European Commission. The project aim was the sustainable improvement of social and economic living conditions in rural villages. In order to achieve this goal, two levels of intervention were realised.

1. Measures to improve agricultural output to enhance household incomes and food security through a lift-irrigation system for paddy, wheat and vegetable cultivation. In order to implement the project and to manage the lift-irrigation system, farmers have organised themselves in a "lift user group". Besides technical support for the construction of the irrigation facility, trainings on group management and maintenance were conducted.

As a result, 30 acres of dryland came under irrigation and cultivation. Supported by a sustainable land-water management system, agricultural productivity has increased by 40 percent, and farmers have overcome drought risks. Four years after the project expired, villagers themselves are still maintaining the technical infrastructure and the funds of the lift user group.

Vegetable cultivation has become a success story in particular. Vegetables are regularly consumed by children and mothers, which has significantly reduced malnutrition. Additional vegetables are offered for sale on the local market, which enhances household incomes.

2. A second focus was given to create confidence among rural women (mainly scheduled castes or Dal-

*50 rupees per hour has been taken from the farmers to operate and maintain the irrigation system. A fixed sum is regularly deposited in a revolving fund to secure the sustainability of the system.*

its) to attain self-reliance and build up their capacities to take better care of their own future economically and within society. Therefore, women savings and credit or self-help groups (SHGs) were formed and trained.

### ■ The villagers' view: lessons learnt

A field visit to assess the results of the intervention was conducted four years after the project expired. The following summarises lessons learnt as expressed by villagers in focus group discussions, in the course of a transect walk and in a survey conducted by the Badlao Foundation.

According to the villagers, empowerment efforts alone create hardly any demand. For the poor, concrete improvement of their livelihood situation is required to trigger their interest and participation. Human rights or advocacy measures alone do not matter much. On the other side, develop-



Photo: M. Holländer

ment projects without "help for self-help"-elements are hardly sustainable. There are many examples of government rural development schemes in the same region which have failed. When asked, villagers explain the failure of government schemes with two reasons: 1) the lack of community involvement and ownership and 2) the lack of capacity building and empowerment.

### Voices of the villagers

#### Mr. Jagganath Mahato (member of the lift user group):

*The lift user group meets on a regular basis. So far, when conflicts occurred, the group members have always been able to solve them. The responsibility of operating and managing the lift irrigation lies primarily with the operator. Also the operational cost collection from the farmers and the book keeping is done by the operator. He submits his report in each meeting of the lift user group and deposits the money in the group account. 50 rupees per hour has been taken from the farmers for operating and maintenance. So far, 12,000 rupees (200 EUR) has been deposited in the revolving fund to secure the sustainability of the system.*

#### Ms. Nimabati Devi (SHG President):

*I belong to a scheduled caste. Before group formation our family was socially excluded by higher castes in the village. But now that the group has formed, I am enjoying equal status in it in spite of low caste as per our village social strata. Our SHG has broken the unjustified social caste division common in Indian rural society. Also, my husband and children are now enjoying equal status in our community and school. Finally, I myself have even become president of the SHG, which predominantly consists of higher cast members.*

	Activities	Results
<b>Economic Empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initially, six women SHGs were formed with women from progressive families. Gradually, more SHGs were formed.</li> <li>Exposure visits to active women SHGs to give villagers the chance to share their experiences.</li> <li>Regular group meetings.</li> <li>Internal and external saving and credit.</li> <li>Linkages with governmental schemes and rural development banks.</li> <li>Income-generating activities.</li> <li>Entrepreneurial development trainings on accounting, leadership, etc.</li> <li>Regular mentoring by field worker.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>23 SHGs with 365 members were still active.</li> <li>SHGs are interlinked through apex bodies.</li> <li>The savings of all SHGs reached the amount of 4,400 EUR.</li> <li>Credits are mostly used to meet urgent needs like clothes or medical treatment.</li> <li>115 SHG members have reported that their family income has increased thanks to the project by up to Rs. 1,500 per family out of wheat production or by up to Rs. 1,200 per family out of vegetables production.</li> <li>Money-lenders are not operating in the village anymore.</li> <li>12 SHGs have participated in the government "100 days employment guarantee scheme".</li> </ul>
<b>Socio-cultural Empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Taking part in community development planning.</li> <li>Meetings with local authorities to solve common problems such as drinking water supply or construction of a school building.</li> <li>Social action programmes and campaigns to address issues like dowry, alcoholism, importance of women's and children's education, health and sanitation, etc.</li> <li>Awareness raising and prevention of early marriage, caste discrimination and superstition to fight against cultural practices which legitimise discrimination.</li> <li>Organising village festivals.</li> <li>Learning and practicing interpersonal and social skills as well as applied skills for income generating.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initially, women hardly left the family circle. Now, women have expressed that they enjoy higher valuation, autonomy and (self-) esteem at home and in the community.</li> <li>At first, most husbands objected women's participation in the development process. Now, many appreciate the benefits.</li> <li>35 girls of the hamlet are studying at IX-X grade.</li> <li>Three girls only got married at the age of 18+.</li> <li>69 women mentioned that they enjoy much higher gender equity at family level.</li> <li>17 women joined a government child development centre as para-teachers or started to work as health volunteers.</li> <li>During the field visit, villagers only asked for more training. Nobody asked for money. This best reflects developments in people's mindset.</li> </ul>
<b>Political Empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Training on good governance and leadership and practising "good leadership" in the SHG.</li> <li>Attending the village assembly (Grama Sabha) and raising issues connected to the concerns of the villagers.</li> <li>Meeting and bargaining with local government and politicians to lobby for community development programmes.</li> <li>Contesting local body elections.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One SHG successfully bargained with local government. As a result, a child development centre was started in the village.</li> <li>10 women became members of the village education committee, while one SHG member became president of the committee.</li> </ul>
<b>Environmental Empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awareness raising and trainings including exposure visits on composting, importance of local seeds, sustainable irrigation, etc.</li> <li>Local seed banks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Farmers produce and apply bio-fertiliser.</li> <li>Farmers grow more local seeds.</li> <li>Farmers apply sustainable irrigation techniques.</li> </ul>



Photo: M. Holländer

*Ordinary farmers are proud of the fact that they are maintaining the lift irrigation system and the funds of the water-user group all by themselves.*

While in the beginning of the project, more technical issues dominated the concerns and debates of the villagers, they have found out that in the long run, group formation, solidarity, trust, transparency and, especially, soft skills are as important as technical aspects of the irrigation facility.

Besides, all villagers have acknowledged that women SHGs, the village development committee and the lift user group were important driving forces not only for individual empow-

erment but also for the positive development of the village as a whole. However, this is only true if economic, socio-cultural, political and environmental empowerment interlock and if at the end of the day, people can gain from real benefits such as enhanced household income or more and better food. When asked about examples of activities which lead to empowerment and measurable results, villagers referred to the activities mentioned in the table on page 38.

## ■ Remaining challenges

The biggest challenge left according to the villagers is to maintain consensus within the groups. Fair, respectful, constructive and mutual benefiting conflict resolution within the group is the basic challenge. Therefore, problem and conflict solving skills (through mediation) need to be (further) trained.

Another challenge mentioned by the villagers is to maintain transparency and accountability in managing the lift fund and the SHG savings. Only if all stakeholders equally take care of rules and regulations can transparency and accountability be guaranteed in the long run.

## ■ Lessons learnt at conceptual level

The debate on aid effectiveness is often either academic or, in some cases,

more about influence, money and institutional self-interest than about a constructive struggle for improvements which matter to the beneficiaries. A rational discussion on aid effectiveness and development co-operation should move from an either/or to a both/and debate. The example presented here shows empirically how both paradigms complement one another.

Regional rural development needs a clear commitment from policy-makers, a supportive legal environment, pro-poor social policies as well as transparent and accountable public service delivery. This can and should be externally supported e.g. through legal advisory services or sectoral programmes to improve public service delivery. But macro-level interventions alone can neither provide the necessary support

from the beneficiaries nor ensure participation and empowerment at grass-root level.

Apparently, only participation and empowerment can guarantee ownership and long-term sustainability. Even in more developed partner countries like India, there is still a long way to go and an enormous need for capacity building for local NGOs when it comes to people empowerment. Only if we continue to work together with local NGOs and combine our efforts, we will achieve sustainable regional rural development. What is needed is a more strategic co-operation and honest co-ordination at eye level of those actors in development co-operation representing the two paradigms in order to unfold best all potential impacts.

*After the formation of self-help groups, women of different castes are enjoying an equal status within the community.*

Photo: M. Holländer



## Zusammenfassung

Integrierte ländliche Entwicklung wird von Gebern und Zielgruppen gleichermaßen daran gemessen, ob sich Familieneinkommen erhöhen oder die Ernährungssicherung verbessert. Solche Ergebnisse lassen sich dauerhaft nur erzielen, wenn neben technischer Beratung und Hilfe vor allem in die Unterstützung und Förderung der Zielgruppen investiert wird. Nur wenn sich, gefordert und gefördert durch partizipative „Hilfe-zur-Selbsthilfe“-Maßnahmen, auch das Leben der Menschen (besonders der Frauen) verändert und sie nicht als Ob-

jekt von Entwicklungsmaßnahmen, sondern als selbstbewusste, emanzipierte und aktive Gestalter der eigenen Entwicklung eingebunden sind, lassen sich relevante und nachhaltige Wirkungen erzielen, wie das Beispiel aus Jharkhand, Indien, zeigt.

## Resumen

Tanto los donantes como los grupos meta evalúan el desarrollo rural integrado analizando si han aumentado los ingresos familiares o ha mejorado la seguridad alimentaria. Tales resultados sólo pueden alcanzarse de manera duradera si se in-

vierte no sólo en asesoría y ayuda técnica, sino también – y sobre todo – en el apoyo y la promoción de los grupos meta. Sólo se logra alcanzar resultados relevantes y sostenibles si las medidas participativas de “ayuda a la auto-ayuda” logran a la vez exigir y fomentar cambios en las vidas de las personas (sobre todo de las mujeres), tratándolas no como objetos de las medidas de desarrollo sino como protagonistas seguras de sí mismas, emancipadas y activas de su propio desarrollo. Esto queda demostrado por el ejemplo de Jharkhand, India.