

Study of the impact of the work of Save the Children Norway in Ethiopia: building civil society

Summary



Background

This report is part of a study commissioned by the Evaluation Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹ in December 2002. The study examines how Norwegian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) contribute to strengthening civil society in developing countries and assesses the wider impact and the “value added” of their work, in particular with regard to poverty reduction, expansion of democracy and increased respect for human rights. Two Norwegian NGOs and two countries have been selected for the study: Save the Children Norway (SC Norway) in Ethiopia and FORUT in Sri Lanka.

The first report examines methodological issues related to impact assessment. The second report discusses the findings from the Sri Lanka country study while the third report discusses the findings from the Ethiopia country study. The final report, to be published in December 2004, is a synthesis report drawing on the inception report and the findings from the two country studies. The reports are available on www.norad.no (Evaluation).

The Ethiopia study outlines the evolution of civil society in Ethiopia and the socio-political context of NGO operations. It attempts to fit the SC Norway country programme into this context and traces out how SC Norway implements its programmes through partnerships with government agencies as well as non-governmental organisations. On the basis of project documentation, interviews with key personnel in the partner organisations, field visits and focus-group discussions with intended beneficiaries as well as community leaders and members of various community based organisations (CBOs), including school committees, traditional burial societies (*iddir*), child rights clubs, this study maps outcomes and effects of the SC Norway programme and discusses possible impacts arising from them. Fieldwork was carried out in February and October 2003, as well as March 2004.

SC Norway’s Ethiopia programme has a budget of approximately USD 3.5 million (2003) and has since 2001 particularly emphasised a rights-based approach to improve the situation of children and to promote greater acceptance of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. SC Norway has also made a policy decision not to implement projects directly. This is a significant change from SC Norway’s previous policy of implementing a needs-based, child-centred development strategy through broad-based community development projects.

There is a clear tendency that SC Norway’s partnership projects with government agencies in Ethiopia are significantly larger than its partnership projects with NGOs. The six largest projects in budget terms in 2003 are all implemented in partnership with government agencies; a food emergency project, four primary education projects and a food security project. The SC Norway’s country programme for Ethiopia is composed of 28 different projects involving a total of 22 different partners.

Study findings

Civil society organisations

In Ethiopia civil society has become synonymous with the NGO sector, with an emphasis on delivery of social services. Many Ethiopian intellectuals, however, would prefer to reserve the term for organisations that articulate public interest and seek to influence public policy. Few Ethiopian NGOs are involved in this kind of advocacy work.

The NGO sector in Ethiopia is young and most local NGOs have come into being since the change of government in 1991. Local NGOs are heavily dependent on international NGO and other donors. They tend to shy away from advocacy work that might entail criticism of or confrontation with the government, but primarily see their role within service delivery. Advocacy is largely restricted to non-controversial issues like the rights of children and the situation of women.

Partnerships for children’s rights

SC Norway spends some 65% of its non-emergency budget in Ethiopia on primary education. By all accounts this has been a successful undertaking. SC Norway has developed and field tested an alternative model for the first cycle of primary school, – *Alternative Basic Education for Children out of School (ABECS)* that is cheaper, more flexible and more compatible with local conditions than the formal schools. At the same time it maintains high quality and ensures that children have the

1 The Evaluation Section was transferred from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) in February 2004.

opportunity to continue their education in the regular education system. ABECS was developed in close collaboration with the education authorities in *Amhara Regional State*. After a pilot phase the ABECS model will now be made available in all 114 districts of the state. SC Norway will continue to support the ABECS programme, concentrating on maintaining the quality of the programme in the scaling-up exercise. Thus far, the outcome of the ABECS programme seems highly promising, and its potential impact seems to exceed the comparatively modest funding that ABECS has received.

SC Norway has been involved in other innovative projects with government agencies as well, including a project to curb Harmful Traditional Practices, and several projects concerning child protection in the legal system

SC Norway partnerships with Ethiopian NGOs usually involve smaller, clearly circumscribed projects, to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, to prevent the economic exploitation of children and to provide assistance to handicapped children. Only a small part of the SC Norway project portfolio in Ethiopia is directed at increasing income and reducing income poverty

Advocacy

Throughout its history in Ethiopia, SC Norway has been a factor and a proponent of children's rights. Under the current regime the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* has offered itself as a platform for child rights advocacy, which SC Norway has engaged in through its partnership with Ethiopian agencies and organisations as well as through the *Save the Children Alliance* in Ethiopia. Ethiopian NGOs are not eager to confront or criticise the government, and rather shape their advocacy work into technical advice and practical cooperation in the implementation of public policies. The Alliance is seemingly better placed to engage in policy debate, including constructive criticism of government policies efforts in this field. This must be seen as a short-term solution. The active role of an alliance of foreign NGOs will sooner or later become a liability in the democratic process of promoting child rights in Ethiopia.

Capacity Building

SC Norway partnerships are pragmatic arrangements aimed at reaching as many children as possible. SC Norway successes in Ethiopia have largely been achieved in close cooperation with government agencies.

A recent evaluation undertaken by SC Norway with external consultants on its cooperation with partners in Ethiopia² stresses that partnerships usually are limited to formal cooperation on clearly specified projects, on terms set by SC Norway. Some partners actually claim that SC Norway partnerships are donor driven and promote SC Norway's strategic objectives at the expense of objectives pursued by local NGOs, such as poverty alleviation, food security and health.

SC Norway's close collaboration with Ethiopian NGOs will continue to be important, partly to maintain a capacity to intervene in the many issues that constitute the bulk of NGO gap filling and service delivery activities in Ethiopia, but more importantly to foster the capacity of Ethiopian NGOs to engage in rights-based advocacy.

Democratisation and good governance

The current government has characterised the gap-filling functions of the NGOs as "*simplistic welfare activities*" that have not contributed significantly to the social transformations necessary for genuine development to take place. Yet, the government has jealously guarded its hegemonic control over the political processes at all levels and has only granted miniscule parts of the political space to organisations with alternative views. Opportunities for articulating alternative points of view have been restricted to non-controversial fields, like children's rights or the situation of women.

Impact on poverty

SC Norway's country programme for Ethiopia has concentrated the bulk of its resources in activities to promote primary education, which is directly related to the *Millennium Development Goal 2 (achieve universal primary education)*. The ABECS programme has achieved significant results and is likely to have the greatest and most widespread impact. Hence, SC Norway's country programme does impact on poverty. One must realise however, that investments in primary education take considerable time to mature, and their effects on income poverty are likely to be difficult to measure.

2 Mac Donald, N: Ethiopia Strategic Plan 2002-2005 Mid-term Evaluation, Addis Ababa, December 2003.

Universal primary education is, of course, not a sufficient condition for the eradication of poverty. In terms of the *Millennium Development Goal 1 (eradicate extreme poverty and hunger)* Ethiopia represents an enormous challenge. SC Norway has allocated modest resources (approximately 5% of its non-emergency budget) to improving incomes and food security. These are individual projects that in and by themselves have demonstrated positive outcomes (e.g. in urban micro-credit projects) but given the scale of the problem in Ethiopia, these limited inputs can only make a minor impact.

Challenges for the partner organisations of Norwegian NGOs

Financial sustainability

The operations of Ethiopian NGOs are strictly controlled by government regulations that prevent them from engaging in income-generating activities. The NGOs are therefore entirely dependent on donations from the public, primarily from international NGOs. Current strategies to diversify the sources of income primarily involve increasing the number of donors, but the new NGO legislation expected in the near future may relax regulations and allow NGOs to find alternative sources of income.

Advocacy versus service delivery

The relationship between the government and the NGO sector has been tense and NGOs exercise care not to be identified with the opposition. A few Ethiopian NGOs engage in advocacy work on comparatively non-controversial issues like women's rights and the rights of children. The efforts of the NGOs are rather directed at small-scale service delivery projects, often in close cooperation with local government (the *kebele*) or community-based organisations. Filling local gaps in the delivery of social services is a legitimate field of activity, providing NGOs with a platform from which to build networks and reputations that over time will give them both a constituency and a voice to articulate particular interests.

The long implementation chain

SC Norway has abandoned direct operational responsibility for project implementation in Ethiopia and now works exclusively through partnerships. Although local partners may have been dominated by SC Norway and the partnerships criticised as simple subcontracting of SC Norway's programmes, SC Norway has removed itself from direct involvement with the development issues at hand. Partnerships do not involve chains of command, but chains of partly overlapping interests. The outcomes of SC Norway resource inputs are influenced by factors not easily accounted for. Reporting on the impact of interventions must take this complex environment into account.

Conclusion

SC Norway has been in Ethiopia since 1969 and has gone through several phases before formulating its present rights-based approach to development with an emphasis on partnership to promote the rights of children. This approach involves addressing the duty holders in government as well as in civil society in a consistent advocacy on behalf of children. Many SC Norway partners in Ethiopia work with service delivery and have been established on the basis of SC Norway's former strategies for a needs-based approach, while SC Norway resource flows to the partners increasingly is directed at strictly defined and delimited activities. New SC Norway initiatives are none the less aimed at fostering the autonomous capacity of Ethiopian NGOs to engage in the full range of activities associated with the sector, including a greater emphasis on advocacy work. This can only be achieved by paying close attention to the enabling framework for NGOs in Ethiopia, in particular the new NGO legislation.

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