general section

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Beyond continuum thinking: participatory development is possible even in wartimes!
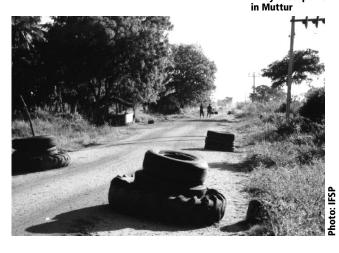
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Introduction

Do aid agencies, when they provide relief in times of warfare addressing immediate needs, also reflect on the developmental consequences of the way they provide food and other 'gifts'? Could the humanitarian community do more to involve aid recipients and build local capacity in the midst of violent conflict and civil war? It is often argued that in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or in times of war, participation of local people in planning, implementing and monitoring projects is not feasible due to the pressing needs requiring immediate action and quick impacts. In this article, I want to argue that participation is as essential in emergency responses as it is in development cooperation. Participatory approaches in aid interventions can be an important instrument to help build local capacities for development and to re-establish local governance rules, even in times of ongoing civil warfare. Community projects then may become a vehicle to prepare the grounds for more long-term development.

Beyond continuum thinking

Programming aid interventions that take place during ongoing civil wars or immediately after wars end, is still shaped by the influential 'continuum' thinking (Smilie, 1998). 'Continuum thinking' views relief, rehabilitation and development as distinct sequential endeavours in a static time-phase model. In times of ongoing warfare or immediately thereafter, aid agencies would have to provide immediate relief to 'helpless victims' in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. Only when these immediate needs were fulfilled and political stability restored could aid agencies start a new phase of rehabilitation and reconstruction and later on, development.

I want to advance four main arguments to underline why the continuum thinking may not be useful under conditions of violent conflict and civil warfare:

- In the often circular nature of social conflicts and civil warfare, periods of relative calmness are often interrupted by sudden eruptions of violence, destruction and displacement, followed by another phase of relative stability. In conflicts of a protracted nature, aid agencies tend to remain in the relief phase of the continuum model for too long a period (e.g. Sudan, Sri Lanka), until the wars are over. However, development-oriented emergency aid is not to be restricted to post-war interventions, but should start as early as possible, even while violent conflict is ongoing.
- One never encounters a 'pure' emergency situation (where only relief is possible) as distinct from development situations, but rather elements of each type are found during specific periods of a humanitarian crisis. Hence, agencies need to develop a bundle of relief and development measures at the same time that may be applied in different localised contexts.

Army checkpoint in Muttur

Photo: IFSP

Box 1: The Integrated Food Security Programme, Trincomalee

From 1998 to 2003, the Integrated Food Security Programme Trincomalee (IFSP) has provided livelihood support to people in the war-affected Trincomalee district in the east of Sri Lanka. The IFSP was funded by the Federal Republic of Germany (BMZ) through the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and the Government of Sri Lanka through the Ministry of Eastern Development and Muslim Religious Affairs and the North East Provincial Council (NEPC). IFSP was addressed as a 'special project' under the overall development efforts for the north and east of Sri Lanka. Implementing a variety of village projects in the district of Trincomalee, participatory needs assessments and community mobilisation were carried out in approximately 40 villages. In addition, the IFSP implemented smaller projects in another 130 villages. For more information see: http://ifsp-srilanka.org

- Rehabilitation and reconstruction approaches all too often focus on the reestablishment of the situation, based on predicted results. This overlooks the fact that the situation prior to warfare had carried the seeds for the subsequent escalation into violence. We need to find an approach that prevents a reappearance of such destructive patterns and to find a new way forward.
- Emergencies do not take place in a social and political vacuum. Emergency response cannot be separated from peace building, since any kind of aid is political. While humanitarian agencies may want to be neutral actors, the question is whether or not local people and power holders also perceive them like this.

Nevertheless, continuum thinking remains fairly popular. This is because many policy makers, donors and agencies regard conflicts as something abnormal in the path of development and perceive civil wars and 'ethnic' conflicts as 'human disasters' and 'complex political emergencies'. They therefore respond to these challenges in an emergency mode. Aid is primarily perceived as a logistical and technocratic challenge. Conflict as such is, however, inherent in social interaction. It is the escalation of conflicts into violence and war, which causes concern, because this is an indication that the institutions, which a society has developed to resolve conflict, are defunct. At the same time, aid is not delivered in a social vacuum, but aid can contribute to fueling warfare (Anderson, 1999) or be used as a weapon in international politics – rewarding governments or withdrawing aid – depending on a government's behaviour (Duffield, 2001).

Participatory development in times of war: experiences from Sri Lanka

The following case study from Sri Lanka shall underline **how** participation can be instituted in aid interventions even in times of **ongoing** warfare. Since 1983, the war zones of Sri Lanka have experienced recurrent cycles of violence, both between village communities of different ethnic backgrounds and between a Tamil rebel group and the Sri Lankan army. Many local farmers and fishermen were temporarily forced to leave their homes, and after returning, often could not pursue their traditional livelihoods because of the war (Korf, 2004). Warfare came to a halt only in February 2002 when the Tamil rebels and the Sri Lankan government signed a ceasefire agreement.

In this context, from 1998 to 2003, the Integrated Food Security Programme Trincomalee (IFSP) worked with local communities to stabilise livelihoods and improve household food security. The IFSP was closely cooperating with partner institutions and community-based organisations. Although working in areas of violent conflict, the IFSP lobbied for a development-oriented participatory approach to allow local communities to identify and utilise local potentials and opportunities, even though these may be limited in scope in view of the violent environment. It was the IFSP's firm belief that it was essential to enable communities to actively take part in development efforts without relying on relief alone. IFSP aimed to 'break dependency'. Only then would people be in a position to benefit from post-war development, which started slowly after the ceasefire agreement was signed in February 2002.

Community mobilisation was the project's core strategy to address priorities for village development. Needs were assessed in discussion with the local population (Korf, 2003). The most important role has been given to the participation of local implementing partners, established community-based organisations and/or informal action groups formed for the

Development cooperation in times of war

Photo: IFSP

specific purpose of implementing a local project. Targeting was based on the identification of vulnerable groups and is done by the communities. This procedure was based on the criteria of war affectedness, social deprivation and seasonal food deficit rather than individual interest. IFSP supported local implementing partners and encouraged transparency and accountability of all involved stakeholders as a first step to re-establishing good governance on local and intermediate levels. The IFSP supported initiatives to rehabilitate local infrastructure (e.g. roads, schools) and the agro-economic production base (e.g. irrigation systems);provided assistance in income-generating activities to vulnerable families; and engaged in health and nutrition campaigns. At the beginning of a project cycle, a team of facilitators supported communities conducting a participatory needs assessment (PNA).

While participation seems to be a widely accepted approach in rural development in the peaceful areas of Sri Lanka, it was new in the war-affected areas. Before IFSP started its activities in the district, most aid agencies concentrated on distributing relief items and implementing small rehabilitation projects without much involvement of either

the local population or the state. In fact, the IFSP even faced considerable challenges from other aid agencies and governmental organisations. The latter argued that participation would cost time and money, a luxury unnecessary and even dangerous in view of the pressing needs of the war-affected population. However, an impact evaluation conducted towards the end of the project (Schenk and Srimanobharan, 2003) confirmed that governmental and local implementing partners as well as direct project beneficiaries expressed their appreciation about the project's approach, in particular that they were actively involved in all decisions and in the implementation process. They said this even though the project would also demand a considerable local contribution in labour and kind for each project, while other agencies would provide everything as a gift.

Seven pillars of participatory development in times of war

Seven pillars in the project's strategy were essential to successfully ground a participatory development approach in the context of violent conflict.

Box 2: Participatory needs assessments

Participatory needs assessments (PNA) are a process whereby local communities assess their needs, identify village projects and plan to implement and monitor them. A team of field officers from various service providers and from the IFSP facilitates this process. A PNA workshop may last two to three days. During the first day, the facilitator team invites the whole village community to discuss communal problems and to identify community projects, which are then ranked according to priorities. This ranking is done for women and men separately to see whether their needs and concern differ. The community also analyses existing organisations in the village and service providers from outside and defines which of these are most suitable to support and implement a specific project. During the second day, the facilitators form small sub-groups with vulnerable families to provide them specific space for identifying livelihood support activities. These vulnerable families are selected in an open process by the community. Three considerations are essential in PNA:

• such workshops need careful preparation, flexibility and fine-tuning that they fit with the time availability of the communities;
• the service providers need to offer something that satisfies the interests of better-off families, while also targeting livelihood support to the most vulnerable; and
• PNA is only the starting point for a long process of collaborative community development.

Balancing output and process

Challenge

In the context of violent conflict, it is essential to find an appropriate balance between physical output and participatory process. To only commence with a long mobilisation process without simultaneously combining the concrete realisation of tangible livelihood projects will create an impression among the population that other than 'hot air', little else will happen. Since the future is uncertain and can, in the short and medium term, easily change again, people are generally wary of making long-term investments. This is true of both physical as well as of social capital.

Conceptual approach

The project adopted a pragmatic approach. The basic idea was to strengthen the practical problem-solving and functional capacities of community-based organisations (CBOs), informal action groups and vulnerable families 'on-the-job'. While taking over tasks and responsibilities in specific activities and village projects, the villagers develop confidence and capacities. The activities and village projects, the vehicles for developing these capacities, also need to make significant contributions to improving the immediate livelihoods of people.

Experiences

In Trincomalee, many aid agencies conduct some form of needs assessment with the people, however, often not in a consistent manner. What appear are long 'shopping lists', which these agencies cannot fulfil. Then, they do not dare to go back to the community and vanish. Easily accessible villages often describe such stories. The IFSP has made an effort to link needs assessment with the immediate planning steps thereafter, continuing communication with the community and keeping them in the picture about the status and progress of planning procedures. The project developed procedures to speed up decision-making and screening processes internally in the project and with service providers cooperating with the project (Korf and IFSP Team, 2003). The impact survey (Schenk and Srimanobhavan, 2003) underlines that this transparency in procedures and the clear link between participatory processes and progress in livelihood projects was what both service providers and project beneficiaries valued most.

Targeting: reaching the unreached

Challenge

It is important to target interventions carefully to reach the most needy with adequate support, rather than to those who have best access to those with political power. In times of violent and ethnicised conflict, access and allocation of funding and benefits often follows clientele networks. Ethnically biased decisions can then easily fuel grievances between politically opposing groups. Government officials are not neutral actors. They too can act according to an ethnicised logic, because this is how they can best safeguard their own position and political survival.

Conceptual approach

Targeting needs to work on two different levels. On a regional level, it needs to identify marginalized geographical areas and localities and, it needs to identify the more vulnerable within the community for specific support. Regional targeting needs to rely on technical, socio-economic data to counter political interference, while community targeting should be done by the community itself during PNA, possibly with facilitation support from project staff. In order to allow comparison across communities, it is fairer to suggest pre-defined criteria instead of allowing the communities to define their own criteria, which may then vary considerably across communities. That could mean that people who are ranked eligible for specific support confined to vulnerable

Planning projects – making transparent decisions. Photo: IFSP

groups may not have been selected in another community, which develops stricter categories of ranking vulnerable and non-vulnerable families.

Experiences

The experience from Trincomalee shows that government officials are not necessarily the best advisors in identifying truly needy villages and communities. Either they do not have much knowledge about remote areas or they might be ethnically biased (or be under political pressure to favour certain ethnic groups). By establishing a simple data system, which can often be based on already existing information, and by ranking priorities according to specified criteria, aid agencies are in a better position to justify their selection against political pressures. IFSP has collected ambivalent experiences with community targeting: the community selects the vulnerable people along pre-defined criteria. The local elite has to take social responsibility for the community, since it might be a small number of people pre-selecting the beneficiaries. However, the whole community has to agree on the selection. In some cases, this has been conducted with significant positive outcomes, and in others, it has been a very sensitive and difficult process. Overall, communities dislike identifying some individual families for specific support packages, because this always means excluding others, especially when wealth differences may rather be in nuances in the lower strata of rural societies.

Sharing the cake

Challenge
There is a danger when working exclusively with vulnerable groups of ignoring or sidelining the local elite. The latter can easily undermine attempts from outside to challenge existing power structures and local institutions. When working exclusively with existing organisations, on the other hand, benefits may not reach the most vulnerable, because the local elite can divert funds to benefit their specific clientele. In times of war, social obligations of local elites to their own clientele may be particularly pronounced in view of the emergency conditions.

Conceptual approach
The IFSP followed a two-pronged project approach: while community projects – mainly infrastructure rehabilitation – provide assets that benefit the whole community (and often benefit the middle-class and elite more than the vulnerable), the project also implemented income-generating projects for vulnerable families. It offered something to the leaders while at the same time bargaining for space for specific support to the poorest or disadvantaged households and individuals. The project's strategy was to involve village leaders in the whole process, from selecting the vulnerable families, through to guiding them in the project planning and implementation process. The project appealed to their social responsibility for the poor. It cooperated with existing community-based organisations, which are largely elite-dominated, as well as with informal action groups, which involve vulnerable families.

Experiences
A project's scope in reaching the vulnerable will depend on the willingness of local elites to let projects work for them. Success and failure largely depend on local context. However, the more successful the broader community projects are, the more project staff develop lobbying pressure to urge local leaders to assume their responsibilities. Also, when villagers recognise the value of local organisations, they select their

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representatives and officials in these organisations more carefully and opt for people who can be trusted and who carry out their task in a more responsible manner.

Building capacities: an institutional sandwich strategy

Challenge
In times of political instability and warfare, local institutions and governance structures are often weak. Aid agencies face the dilemma that if they focus on organisational capacity building, this may take too long a time and yield meagre tangible outcomes. More medium-term and informal solutions of collective action and organisation might then be more appropriate depending on the local circumstances.

Conceptual approach
It is essential to work on two levels: encouraging local partners at community level to take an active role whilst strengthening service providers to improve their work. The IFSP employed field staff to work on the communication link between local implementing partners and service providers. This was necessary because of the weak organisational capacities on both levels, which 20 years of civil war had left behind. In addition, the project provided targeted organisational capacity building, mostly on the job, by training, encouraging and urging governmental officials to take over their tasks. The project always involved the responsible government officers in planning and implementation procedures, such as PNA, with local implementing partners. On the community level, the project field facilitator worked closely with local implementing partners to build their capacity to manage projects, communicate with service providers and to organise their internal decision-making in a transparent manner.

Experiences
In Trincomalee, many international NGOs used to implement village projects using their own personnel without involving government authorities, or local NGOs and other organisations, arguing that they lacked the capacity to achieve the project's purposes. Such agencies could quickly achieve 'visible results', but this contributed to further undermining the government's capacities. Similarly, they often founded ad hoc organisations for their specific project purposes only. The IFSP's experience showed that it is worth the effort to involve already existing organisations, be it on community or governmental level, even though they may be weak. The project planning and implementation process offered sufficient scope to work on capacity building for local groups and governmental or non-governmental service providers. Of course, this is not always successful, but these should not deter careful consideration and involvement of local capabilities in project management. In fact, closing the gap between local organisations and their demands for services and the ability of governmental and non-governmental organisations to respond to these is an important precondition for gradually strengthening local governance capacities in war-affected areas.

Negotiating the tasks: local contribution

Challenge
It is often argued that in times of war, people are too poor to contribute. However, a significant contribution 'beneficiaries' can make comes in the form of labour, material or money, and remains an important element of participatory development. This is part of the deal struck between the project and its partners. It is a basic prerequisite to ensure that a sense of ownership develops, which encourages partners to further develop their capacities to maintain and continue the work for which they have invested efforts.

Methodology
One of the IFSP's principles was that of requiring local communities to contribute in cash, labour and kind to differing degrees according to the level of poverty. These conditions were negotiated with the community in a transparent process during the planning stages, starting in the PNA. The IFSP also urged governmental partner organisations and NGOs to contribute their share. This was called the tripartite approach: IFSP, local implementing partners and service providers each contribute to the project.

Experiences

When IFSP appeared on the local scene, and insisted on local contributions, it faced a great deal of difficulties, because the population had quite simply become used to another way of doing things: the handout economics of relief organisations, which distribute assistance free of charge. In those areas served by several different organisations, this could lead to a situation where the population would simply look for a better agency offer, i.e. one willing to offer superior terms (meaning less or no contribution). In such instances, the IFSP refused to water down their conditions, which required contributions. At first, it was difficult for IFSP to motivate local partners to contribute because of the contradicting practice of other agencies. However, with the continuous involvement of local partners in the process of planning, implementing and monitoring, many of them recognised that even though they may have to contribute, they also benefited in increasing their management capacities and self-esteem.

Sharing knowledge, coordinating action

Challenge

Strong donor coordination at various levels (national, regional, local) is essential for long-lasting, sustainable impacts of donor interventions. Unluckily, donor coordination rarely happens, not even at the local level. In emergencies, donors as much as local NGOs rather 'fence' or demarcate 'their villages', be it in geographical or sectoral terms. This leads to contradicting approaches on the ground. People might face different agencies demanding profoundly different terms of cooperation.

Methodology

IFSP's policy was to provide access for any interested party to its planning documents, such as reports from participatory needs assessments, evaluation reports and surveys. Local implementing partners documented project progress in local project books. The IFSP incorporated and sought to collaborate with governmental and non-governmental organisations, and encouraged local partners to link up with other donors and service providers.

Experiences

It seems that many organisations have little interest in sharing of knowledge and coordinating action, because they perceive other agencies as competitors on the development market. Although the different aid agencies and NGOs in Trincomalee regularly meet, they follow a minimalist practice

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of coordination, because they do not have a shared interest in stimulating critical debate around policy and programme issues; they concentrate on logistics and technical aspects. For example, in the five years of the IFSP's existence, it was not possible to find a common ground among aid agencies in Trincomalee on how much (and whether at all) local beneficiaries should make a contribution to project investments. Data and information was not openly shared, many organisations did not openly advocate the approaches they followed in easily accessible documents. The result was that needs assessments were often duplicated and several organisations worked in the same villages without much knowledge about the others' work. In this regard, an organisational analysis (who does what and how?) during a participatory needs assessment is a useful tool to identify beforehand which organisations may be working in a specific locality.

Dialogue and confidence building with the conflict parties

Challenge

In times of war, no aid agency can work without negotiating with the conflict parties. However, aid agencies need to find a balance when in discussion with these conflict parties without giving up their principles and conceptual approach. Conflict parties will want to influence where funds are allocated and which individuals will benefit from fund flows, because this helps them stabilise their legitimacy. The governmental machinery may also be perceived as a conflict party and aid agencies therefore need to reflect upon what signals they send out when collaborating with governmental officials.

Participatory needs assessment

Photo: IFSP

Conceptual approach

IFSP undertook continuous dialogue with both conflicting parties, which was necessary to guarantee the security of staff and goods. Sharing information and knowledge and full transparency in activities contributed to establishing a good reputation for the project and encouraged conflict parties to achieve a certain degree of understanding of what participatory development can offer. The dialogue with both parties can reduce their suspicion of agencies and government officials of being spies or agents for the other party. This is a prerequisite to opening space for participation, engagement and development as a contribution to local peace building. The IFSP closely collaborated with the governmental organisations and lobbied for an ethnically unbiased approach in its work.

Experiences

Initially, the IFSP was under considerable political pressure from both conflict parties, who both sought to influence the project's policy. Central government officials urged the IFSP to implement projects that favoured their clientele. The Tamil rebels argued that in the areas under their control, participation would not be necessary, because they, as representatives of the Tamil people, would know what the needs of the people were. The IFSP insisted that it would only work if it could follow its own principles, and, in fact, it was quite successful in taking this hard stance, since both conflict parties wanted the project to invest in their respective areas. At the same time, one needs to be aware that conflict parties may use the achievements of projects for their own political purposes (e.g. to show that they were best placed to care for the well-being of their people).

Conclusion

When the IFSP started its activities in the war-affected areas of Sri Lanka in 1998, it faced the reminiscences of 'continuum thinking'. Most aid agencies focused on delivering relief without a longer-term development perspective on the premise that as long as the war was ongoing, long-term development would not make sense. The IFSP developed a more development-oriented and participatory approach and collaborated with local implementing partners as well as governmental service providers and NGOs. This approach was to offer local communities at least a medium-term perspective, even in times of civil war.

Overall, the impact evaluation of the IFSP revealed that the participatory approach was highly valued by the beneficiaries, local implementing partners and governmental organisations, because it allowed them to build up their capacities to manage their village affairs and contributed to increased confidence. In this regard, the project's approach to link participatory processes with practical livelihood projects, which showed immediate benefits, was most useful in addressing the urgent needs in the context of war and in strengthening local capacities. The project's attempts to secure transparency, accountability and to demand responsibility from the stakeholders involved was an important step forward, in particular, since in times of war, transparent rules are rather the exception.

The experiences show that participatory development requires a process of continuous negotiation with local implementing partners on various levels, which also requires cooperation with service providers (regarding the approach used to deliver support to local communities) and with politicians and the military parties (to provide space for civic development) and a transparent process of fund allocation.

On the other hand, the lack of coordination among different aid agencies limits the success of participatory development. In over-aided villages, where different agencies offer different forms of packages, often as gifts without any local contribution, it is difficult to achieve ownership and to initiate local commitment. Local groups select those packages that appear most attractive to them, which means those where they receive most and have to contribute least. Where aid agencies are not interested in coordinating their work remains a serious bottleneck in attempts to institute participatory development. This is unfortunate, because participation in the context of violent conflict is not only feasible, but a necessity. Only if aid agencies understand their interventions in times of war as a broad concept incorporating both economic and social development, can their work can contribute to the social and economic recovery of a war-ridden society.

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