

# ARE WE CONTRIBUTING TO EMPOWERMENT IN LATIN AMERICA?

**Are we using our logic or the logic of the people?**

**Are we strengthening organizations which are legitimate, democratic and capable of solving problems?**

**Are we creating opportunities for all?**

**Do the people have access to vital, adequate and relevant information?**

**Does social control work and does it question old-fashioned patterns?**

**Do socio-economic growth and organizational progress go hand in hand?**

**Is learning a process emerging and growing in people's lives?**

**What are we doing to encourage competent, motivated and well-rooted leadership?**

**Are we promoting the pursuit of alliances?**

The poor will stay poor if they do not succeed in defending their legitimate interests and rights. Empowerment aims at establishing a new equilibrium of power and access to material and nonmaterial resources.

Empowerment challenges our cooperation mechanisms. In daily practice, we want to deepen our sensitivity to social processes, which are rarely linear. Our concepts have to be flexible so that we can respond first and foremost to the initiatives of local actors and respect their dynamics.

In 2002, SDC's Latin American Division organized a workshop on empowerment. The strategic reflection conducted in the meetings allows us to make a better contribution to poverty reduction. This document highlights the lessons learned from this workshop and is an invitation to further discussion and exchange of experience.

**This document presents a summary of the lessons learned in the exchange between the Latin American Division and its partners. It is an invitation for discussion and sharing of experiences.**

**We have to adapt our logic of cooperation to the people and get in tune with the local dynamics.**

### **Let the people advance towards their own visions according to their own logic!**

To make their visions come true, people are willing to invest their efforts and their own resources. They commit themselves to the objectives for which they see the best chances of success and are consequently motivated to committing themselves to the identification of problems and issues, as well as to the planning, implementation and evaluation of the projects envisaged.

Whenever international cooperation and the efforts of the people go hand in hand, optimal and sustainable results are obtained. The experience of success achieved through their own efforts raises self-esteem and creates confidence in the possibility of advancing even further. And the enhanced capacity of the people to manage their own initiatives can be useful for tackling new challenges.

The adaptation of cooperation to the logic of the people requires flexibility. The planning of projects has to be in tune with the local development process and the ongoing dynamics of the people. During the implementation of projects, when planning is shared among all actors, it has to be verified whether the response adequately corresponds to the people's visions.

### **The strength of organizations lies in their legitimacy, efficiency and transparency!**

Organizations are strong when they represent the will of the people. They gain stability when they work with democratic and transparent procedures. Mechanisms of social control keep them on the right track.

Organizations gain recognition if they are capable of mobilizing energies to solve problems. They gain significance and legitimacy when they successfully negotiate solutions and defend interests. Thus, they generate confidence in the future.

We want to respect and acknowledge existing organizations and maintain a critical and constructive dialogue with them. We aim at contributing to their consolidation. We try to avoid the encouragement of organizations which simply react to the initiatives of cooperation projects.

### **Men and women should both define their needs and benefit from opportunities!**

Gender-focused work shows us the importance of carrying out a detailed analysis of women's and men's roles, situations and needs, as well as that of the effects initiatives have on them. Thus are we able to overcome discrimination and mobilize all the active resources of the marginalized population.

Gender-focused work allows us to teach men and women how to conduct a respectful dialogue. It seeks solutions without producing winners on one side and losers on the other. It contributes to valuable options and leaves space for those of others. The potentialities arising represent new opportunities concomitant to a growth in organizational capacity. The principles learnt in this field can guide us in aspects of other social relations, e.g. the generation gap.

We intend to generate sensitivity not only to the internal relations of power and disenfranchisement, but also to the potentials and contributions of men and women, young and old. Let us promote equitable participation in all phases of the development process. Let us guarantee accessible opportunities for all.

### **Information opens spaces for participation!**

The restricted management of information leads to the concentration of power in the hands of a few. An equilibrium of power, however, implies that people have better access to information. Information can only be digested and understood when it is adequate and relevant.

If people have access to information on processes concerning them, they possess an indispensable element for the pursuit of their interests. Information allows them to follow up and question the practice of institutions. It opens possibilities for their own contributions and participation.

In our cooperation activities, we are called upon to watch over access to information and its usefulness to the marginalized. And what we expect of others, we ourselves have to apply as well: we want to be transparent in the presentation of our objectives and strategies, the framework conditions which define our cooperation, as well as the criteria for its evaluation.

### **Social control allows the poor to defend their interests!**

Legally, people have the right to supervise their institutions, organizations and enterprises. However, the right to exercise control over those who hold the power is seldom implemented effectively.

Social control allows people to supervise whether executive agencies are functioning democratically and to detect the possibilities of optimizing their functioning. It creates spaces for exchange between institutions and their counterparts, the local actors. People can effectively intervene to guarantee their rights. At the same time, social control legitimizes institutions and optimizes their efficiency.

We should demand that our counterparts be submitted to social control. We should offer the possibility of learning how to exercise the power of social control. We should help those agencies which carry out social control to make their voices heard. Wherever we hold power in the context of projects we support, let us hand over power to our partners.

### **Socio-economic and organizational processes mutually strengthen each other!**

Organizational and socio-economic structures often go hand in hand. The organization of the marginalized population is strengthened when the people realize that organization contributes to socio-economic improvement. Successful negotiations regarding basic services or organizational marketing motivate the undertaking of new initiatives for socio-economic improvement.

Both the socio-economic and the organizational capital are indispensable for making progress toward one's own visions and toward overcoming poverty. They create a maneuvering space with enhanced autonomy.

Let us guarantee that both sides, the organizational and the socio-economic, receive the support necessary. Let us look for complements to balance our contribution. Let the productive, infrastructure projects take organizational aspects into account, and let the organizational projects take the socio-economic ones into account!

**In our work, let us guarantee the people's access to information and opportunities for learning, and let us make sure they have a vision of social-economic development.**

## **Knowledge and Learning: instruments of change**

Knowledge is power. Material input wears out, while knowledge arising from experience is enriching and self-enhancing. Many times people value knowledge and know-how even more than the delivery of technical equipment. Experience shows that training is successful when it is able to nourish an ongoing process. Human beings learn by doing, and they learn even better through knowledge about the experience of others in similar situations.

What people learn, on a personal basis as well as on a group level, provides them with the knowledge and tools that enable them to influence their future.

Our actions have to stimulate learning processes that are integrated into the overall development processes of the local actors. We should avoid offering isolated training. Let us coordinate actions which contribute to the learning process between all institutions present in a specific region. We should prioritize methods like the "peasant to peasant" method, because they respond better to the needs and motivations of the people.

## **A committed leadership can make the difference!**

Many experiences teach us that positive leadership can give a strong impulse for initiatives. For positive leadership, the group's recognition of the leaders is fundamental. Leaders give the group important contributions, and at the same time they have the opportunity of achieving personal growth.

Without individual leadership, it is generally difficult for groups to develop visions, formulate needs felt, and effectively negotiate in favour of their development. The promotion of leadership is reflected in the strengthening of a group's capacities.

We want to support individual leadership because we want groups to be represented and be taken into account. Leaders have their own personal motives: they want to grow as persons, acquire new knowledge, and broaden their horizons. Let us take their thirst for personal growth into account when we conceptualize our actions! Let us support them in growing without losing touch with their bases!

## **Alliances give a voice to the voiceless!**

When the people find allies, support for their ideas can grow. Allies can be neighbours who suffer from the same marginalization. They can come from other social sectors committed to democratic reforms. Or they can be found within institutions, where they work with the commitment to good service.

Alliances create greater power. Ideas find support more easily. Organized in alliances, the poor can better intervene in favour of their own interests. They can also learn from each other and help each other out with resources, be they abilities, ideas, political support, spiritual-cultural support, material or financial resources.

We can stimulate the pursuit of alliances and support learning processes to make them function. It has to be taken into account that there is a need for time and financial resources in order to be able to establish alliances and get them going. Not only the population, but we as well have to forge alliances in order to increase capacities to define a favourable framework for the development of the marginalized sectors.

**To promote initiatives, leadership needs to strengthen its capacities and to find allies. This individual leadership development and the creation of alliances with other partners and organizations can be facilitated by means of cooperation.**

The poor will stay poor if they do not succeed in defending their legitimate interests and rights. Changes are necessary on multiple levels: psychological, cultural, social, economic, organizational and political. To overcome poverty, changes must be made on the individual as well as the community level, and on the level of the relations with the frame conditions.

With its strong presence in the World Bank's World Development Report 2000/2001, the topic of "empowerment" was definitively introduced into the international discussion on concepts of development. From that moment on, important organizations began specifying empowerment, and proposing and implementing steps to increase the empowering effect of their actions.

For international cooperation, empowerment implies the risk of awakening latent conflicts and taking positions. But through conflict prevention and management, a major stride towards stability can be achieved, a fundament on which sustainable development can be better constructed. To us, conflict management means invitation to dialogue, offering our role as mediators and analyzing possible solutions which aim at "win-win" situations. Empowerment questions many forms of cooperation which are often unsatisfactory as to their transparency, ownership by the people, and participation.

Throughout 2002, the SDC's Latin American Division analyzed a dozen projects in order to detect changes which are relevant for empowerment, and to identify factors favouring empowerment.

For more information on the exchange process and its different sources:  
[www.cosude.ch/documentos](http://www.cosude.ch/documentos)

The PDF document „Are we contributing to empowerment in Latin America?“ constitutes a translated version of the Spanish brochure „¿Contribuimos al empoderamiento en América Latina?“.

This reduced and simplified text version completes the printed Spanish original of the brochure. The PDF format allows easy access and distributions of versions in different languages at no additional printing and mailing costs and permits easy reading on the screen and printing.

The authors of this document are:

SDC Latin American Division and Mark Schmid, cataliza gmbH, Lucerne, [www.cataliza.ch](http://www.cataliza.ch)

Graphics: GeoneX, [www.geonex.ch](http://www.geonex.ch) and xlogos

Copyright: SDC Berne, 2003

More information and the Spanish original of the brochure available at:

SDC, Latin American Division, CH-3003 Berne, Switzerland

Telephone: +41 31 322 34 41

[cosude.amlat@deza.admin.ch](mailto:cosude.amlat@deza.admin.ch)

[www.cosude.ch/amlatina](http://www.cosude.ch/amlatina)