

**Study of the impact of Norwegian voluntary organisations on civil society:
FORUT (Sri Lanka) and Redd Barna (Ethiopia)**

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This paper outlines the framework for an impact assessment study of two Norwegian NGOs. We are particularly concerned with impact in terms of how the NGOs contribute to strengthening civil society, and the impact that they, and their partner organisations, have as civil society organisations. The study is currently in an early phase and will be completed in the autumn of 2004. It was commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

1. Intentions

The purpose of this study is to assess the impact, in a broad perspective, of the activities of two Norwegian voluntary organisations, FORUT and Redd Barna, in Sri Lanka and Ethiopia, and to contribute to the development of an impact based reporting system.

The study will include:

- an assessment of capacity building by the Norwegian voluntary organisations in relation to their Sri Lankan and Ethiopian partners in terms of their own stated goals
- an assessment of how the Norwegian voluntary organisations contribute towards institutionalising civil society in Sri Lanka and Ethiopia
- an assessment of the work of the Norwegian organisations and their partners in relation to the 'wider societal impact' that they have as civil society organisations, particularly in relation to the areas that have been outlined in the Grant Scheme¹
- suggesting ways in which the organisations could report on impact

Based on Norwegian guidelines for support to civil society, other evaluations of voluntary organisations (Bye 2000)², as well as on the work of FORUT and Redd Barna, we have outlined three broad areas which we think may be relevant for an impact assessment: *democracy, human rights and poverty reduction*. However, we would also include a reconciliation perspective if this is relevant, particularly in a post-conflict context.

A 1997 OECD study that reviewed evaluations of voluntary organisations concluded that there is little knowledge about the societal impact of the work of voluntary organisations (Kruse 1997). Similarly, a study of several evaluations of Norwegian voluntary organisations concludes that short term objectives are often achieved, but that little is known about whether they achieve their 'real', long term objectives (Bye 2000). Since then at least two studies that

¹ This refers to the 'Grant Schemes for Humanitarian Assistance and Development Cooperation by Norwegian and International Voluntary Actors' published jointly by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD)

² According to Bye there is little documentation available on the role of Norwegian voluntary organisations in the areas of democracy and human rights, but the tendency is that a positive impact on democracy and peace can be achieved if the work of voluntary organisations is co-ordinated with the Norwegian foreign policy agenda. On the other hand there is relatively good documentation available regarding the role of voluntary organisations in peace processes through studies of Guatemala, Mali and Mosambique.

look at societal impact have been carried out, one by Oxfam/Novib³, and one by Centre for Development Research in Copenhagen⁴, both with an emphasis on the impact on poverty.

This proposed study opens up for another approach to impact assessment that focuses on particular civil society organisations (those that happen to be partner organisations to Norwegian NGOs) and the impact that they have not mainly on poverty, but also in other areas of development co-operation, like democracy and human rights/children's rights. Hopefully, experiences and lessons from these relationships may provide guidelines on how civil society as a whole can be strengthened.

Further, the study has been designed as a 'learning' process for Redd Barna and FORUT. We have addressed this requirement by using methods borrowed from 'formative dialogue research' (Baklien 1999). The study should also contribute to the development of an impact based reporting system, and suggest criteria for reporting from the organisations.

2. The NGOs and their context

FORUT in Sri Lanka

According to FORUT, the most important aspect of its work is the transfer of competence and support to local organisations in order to promote sustainable development. FORUT places a particular emphasis on the idea of creating and supporting new organisations that do not have some of the idiosyncrasies that already established organisations often have. Through a collaborative process with FORUT, these community based organisations should become 'localised' which means: 'operate as autonomous bodies that can self-manage all administrative and financial transactions including fund raising activities while functioning as democratic units' (FORUT 1998). Financial sustainability is based on the smooth functioning of revolving credit/savings funds. The improvements in the lives of poor people is envisaged to happen both as a result of access to credit, but also through a process of empowerment and an increase in the bargaining power of poor communities in relation to the government, so that their access to services are improved. An assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of this particular FORUT model compared with other partnership models, constitutes an important element in this study.

FORUT has been working in Sri Lanka since 1982 when the organisation was established there as a joint venture between the Swedish and Norwegian Godtemplar movement, in order to continue the work carried out by the Norwegian Godtemplar Youth Organisation since 1964. FORUT's budget has grown from 1.5 million rupees in 1982 to more than 175 million rupees or in excess of NOK 15 million in 2001 (which constitutes approximately 50% of FORUT's overall budget). In 2001, 44% of the budget was defined as rehabilitation and 21% as relief. For the purpose of this study, we have selected two geographical areas, Vavuniya in the North and Hambantota in the South. FORUT has worked in Vavuniya since 1987 in a rapidly changing war context, and continues with resettlement and rehabilitation work following the ceasefire in February 2002. In 1993 FORUT started work in Hambantota in the deep South and has been carrying out development work in this area which has not been directly affected by the war.

³ See Roche (1999)

⁴ Udenrigsministeriet (internet version of the report). The Danish Study concluded that overall the Danish organisations are relevant, efficient, but maybe not always cost effective and not always targeted at the poorest.

Redd Barna in Ethiopia

Redd Barna has a long history of working in Ethiopia and has since 1969 evolved through several different phases, ranging from being a small operational emergency relief organisation (in the 1970s) to a large, multi-sectoral development organisation (in the 1980s). In the current phase Redd Barna is divesting itself of operational capacity and becoming a support organisation for local partners, including local government institutions. The overall objective for the strategic period 2002-2004 is ; “to create a better life and future for the disadvantaged and vulnerable children of Ethiopia..... through partnership and networking”. The main challenges that will be addressed include:

- Lack of education opportunities (only 36% of the children are enrolled in primary schools and the government target is 50% by year 2002).
- Sexual Exploitation and abuse of children, including harmful traditional practices.
- Economic exploitation and child labour.
- Food security emergencies (48% of Ethiopian children are malnourished).
- HIV/AIDS (the number of infected are close to 10 million).

A total of NOK 16 million have been allocated for 2002. Some 50% of the funding will be used on Basic Education. Redd Barna will continue to work with regional, zone and woreda⁵ offices based on the positive response they have received from the Amhara regional government regarding the alternative non-formal⁶ basic education system they have developed. The regional government will now adopt this model and since it relies on the close interaction with parents/teachers groups, it has clearly an element of mobilisation of local communities as well as sensitisation of local governments regarding local needs.

The other prioritised activity is the promotion of children’s rights (28% of the budget). The UN convention on the Rights of the Child – UNCRC is the basis for the work in Ethiopia and will include both governmental offices as well as local CBOs. Local CBOs are a rather recent phenomena in Ethiopia and due to rigid government control and regulations they remain rather small and vulnerable. A significant amount of the project budgets is allocated for capacity building of the local CBOs, including overhead costs. In the rural areas there are few formal CBOs outside government control and this has made it necessary for Redd Barna to operate with the local governments.

3. Capacity building: strengthening local partner organisations and civil society

The current emphasis on capacity building reflects a shift away from a model where Norwegian voluntary organisations were operational organisations that themselves implemented development projects, to a *partnership* model in which local partner organisations become responsible for actual implementation of projects and programmes that none the less have been influenced and funded by the Norwegian NGOs. According to one study, the need to build capacity in civil society organisations in the South has replaced fighting poverty as the main rationale for channelling assistance through voluntary

⁵ Local government area

⁶ ‘Non-formal’ in this context refers to the relationship to the Ministry of Education rather than the content of the education programme as such

organisations (Bye 2000). A report on institutional development commissioned by the Norwegian Foreign Ministry concluded that ‘many Norwegian NGOs still focus their capacity building efforts principally on the *provision of funding, equipment and training* to their Southern counterparts, rather than taking a broader organisational development approach.’ However, ‘NGOs are moving in the direction of increasing support for organisational consultancies, the development of local sources of funding, and the use of local NGOs (service organisations) that specialise in providing support services to the country’s NGO community.’⁷

The partnership model also reflects a new emphasis on the role of civil society and civil society organisations in the donor community.⁸ According to the Foreign Ministry’s Grant Scheme, ‘civil society means the formal and informal networks that are active in the public sphere between the state and family’. The *roles of voluntary organisations* can be divided into three main types: *service provision, advocacy and mobilisation*. These three roles require different ways of working and different relationships, for example to the government. This study is mainly concerned with advocacy and mobilisation because these are the most relevant roles in a civil society context and because FORUT and Redd Barna mainly play these two roles.

Strengthening civil society, as discussed in the Grant Scheme, has at least three components:

- strengthening civil society organisations through capacity building
- creating an ‘infrastructure’ (meeting places and opportunities for interaction) in which civil society organisations can operate effectively
- facilitating an enabling environment for civil society organisations

The first two activities fall within the mandate of the Grant Scheme and will be included in this study (while in the Grant Scheme the latter is assigned to other actors, such as bilateral and multilateral organisations). We would assess the ways in which Redd Barna and FORUT contribute to capacity building both in relation to their *partner organisations* and in terms of *building, or institutionalising, civil society*.

This is an area that also was addressed in the Danish impact study (Hansen 2000). The Danish study took a broad approach to capacity building, while in this study we would want to focus mainly on how capacity building contributes to *sustainability* so that Norwegian support can be phased out. The problem of financial sustainability is a common theme in many evaluation reports and is related to the broader question of organisational strategy. This concern is reflected in the Grant Scheme and in the reporting forms used by organisations that receive support from NORAD. We need to pose questions about what sustainability means and how it can be achieved, including:

- to what extent is the local partner financially dependent on the Northern voluntary organisations (Hudock 1995⁹), are there alternative sources of funding?
- what kind of activities are most likely to become financially sustainable and on what scale?

⁷ The North-South Institute (1998)

⁸ For a discussion see: MacDonald (1994) and Van Rooy (1998)

⁹ Hudock (1995) has developed a ‘resource dependence perspective’ borrowed from organisational theory in order to understand the relationship between Northern and Southern NGOs.

- how does the local partner organisation define its capacity building needs, and how does this match the capacity building provided by the Norwegian NGO?

We also propose to locate the local partner organisations within the *broader environment* in the context of their own societies. How do the Norwegian organisations contribute to:

- network building with other civil society organisations
- collaborative efforts between voluntary organisations
- establishment of spaces/channels for communication between civil society and the government/business community
- creating or strengthening links between the partner organisations and organisations and institutions in the broader environment

The questions in the first phase of the study will focus on identifying the organisations that FORUT and Redd Barna regard as their most important partners. This will be a theme in our first interviews with FORUT and Redd Barna, and in the first studies of available documents.

With regard to FORUT, selection criteria could for example include the characteristics of the partner organisations' relationship to FORUT and the activities, or processes, that the partner organisations are involved in. We want to look at partner organisations in the South where many of them implement credit and saving programmes and in the war affected areas of the North where they mainly are involved in rehabilitation activities.

In the case of Ethiopia it would be natural to select the main areas of intervention: education and promotion of children's rights. The partner institutions would be governmental institutions at various levels and local CBOs. The study would assess the wider impact of the work the organisations carry out, their methodology as well as their relationship to each other.

4. The wider societal impact of civil society organisations: democracy, human rights and poverty reduction

FORUT and Redd Barna define their work primarily in terms of human rights/children's rights (Redd Barna) and 'improving the socio-economic situation of the marginalised' (FORUT). However, through their objective of working with governments and holding governments accountable, both also have the potential for contributing to democratic processes.

4.1 Democratisation

An underlying assumption in much of the discussion about support to civil society organisations is that they can contribute to democratic politics and to the development of democratic institutions. A Danish study concluded that 'Danish NGO support was probably stronger in promoting democratic practices and principles than in actively strengthening civil society' (Udenrigsministeriet, internet). Is this also the case with the Norwegian voluntary organisations and their partners? To what degree do they:

- contribute to good governance by playing the role of watchdogs and in this way encourage accountability and transparency between government and civil society, both nationally and locally?

- influence policy as part of an advocacy strategy on behalf of beneficiaries or members?
- contribute to the creation of spaces for democratic politics
- function as ‘training grounds’ for democratic politics, or at least train people in the importance of following certain ‘rules of the game’ (Crook 2001)?
- engage local government officials in bargaining in order to protect themselves and their livelihoods and to improve their socio-economic position?

This democratising role is particularly important, and difficult, under authoritarian regimes and in conflict or post-conflict situations where establishing a political agenda which takes into account the needs of the civilian population, is critical.

4.2 Human rights

The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provided Redd Barna with a legal framework for its work with children, and for this and other reasons, Redd Barna changed its strategy fundamentally during the 1990s. Having been an operational community development organisation, the organisation became a children’s rights organisation with advocacy on behalf of children as its most important objective. Rather than remaining operational, Redd Barna decided to implement its new strategy through local partner organisations. The Ethiopian case demonstrates the difficulty of implementing a partnership strategy in the context of a relatively weak civil society.

Human rights organisations contribute to improvements in the area of human rights mainly through service delivery work (for example in the form of training), and through advocacy. How do the Norwegian organisations and their partner organisations work to influence actors, such as the national and local government, the police, the judiciary, for example with regard to:

- establishing new issues on the agenda
- changing policy positions
- changing procedures (for example allowing access to new organisations, groups)
- changing the behaviour of the actors that have been targeted.¹⁰

As is the case with democracy, advocacy processes are harder to establish in contexts of authoritarian regimes and in post-conflict situations (Haug 2001).

4.3 Poverty reduction

The aim of this component is to establish whether voluntary organisations are able to include the poorest people/children in their work and whether they have created organisational structures which enable the poor and vulnerable to gain access to resources. According to Sen (Sen 1985) positive changes in these areas contribute to improvements in a persons well-being and reduced poverty. In other words, has the range of courses of action available to people increased and has the ability of people to establish entitlements to resources improved?

¹⁰ Based on Keck and Sikkink (1998)

In Ethiopia the focus will be on the situation among the poorest children both in urban and rural contexts.

Rather than looking at the impact of interventions at the level of individuals and households (in terms of measuring for example changes in food security), we would focus on:

- have the partner organisations included the poor, either as members, board members, beneficiaries or employees?
- ways in which the partner organisations are linked to local economic institutions, such as markets, banks, other businesses, centres of education/training?
- whether the work of the partner organisations has resulted in improved access to government resources (services, capital) and resources from the private sector (capital) for the poor?

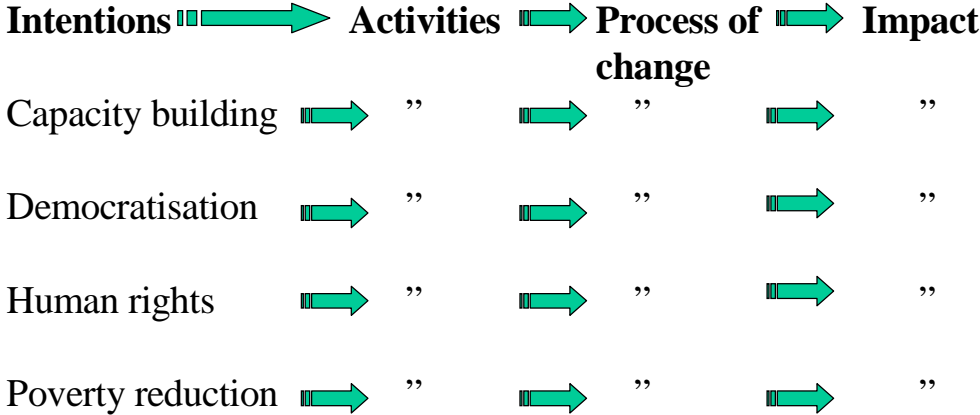
5. The connection between intentions, activities and impact

5.1 A complete chain of actions

The organisations are engaged in a wide range of activities such as:

- training in different aspects of capacity building, for example strategic planning, children’s rights
- building of schools, rehabilitation of water systems and other infrastructure
- mobilisation of local people for participation in credit and saving programmes
- organisation of advocacy campaigns
- interaction with local authorities

A more detailed selection of the activities that will be included in this study will follow from the selection of partner organisations and initial discussions with these institutions. An important part of our study will, however, be to connect these activities to the intentions of capacity building and strengthening the civil society sector. This can be illustrated by a figure:



5.2 *Operationalisation and research questions*

The chain that connects intentions and activities to impact and goal achievement in the above figure, leads us to a series of research questions:

- What do FORUT/Redd Barna and their partner organisations do to achieve:
 - Capacity building
 - Strengthening the civil society sector
 - Democratisation
 - Human rights/children's rights
 - Poverty reduction

To what extent do FORUT/Redd Barna and their partner organisations agree on what are the most important activities?

- What do FORUT/Redd Barna and their partner organisations regard as the most important mechanisms in this process of change? How do they expect this particular activity to lead to goal achievement? To what extent do FORUT/Redd Barna and their partner organisations agree in their views on the mechanisms?
- What do FORUT/Redd Barna and their partner organisations regard as the most important impact of their activities? To what degree do they regard that they achieve their goals? To what extent do FORUT/Redd Barna and their partner organisations agree in their views on impact and goal achievement?

All these issues will be themes in the dialogue between the researchers and the organisations. The intention is that this dialogue should both function as a source of data, and a continuous feed back to the stakeholders. Like process evaluation, formative dialogue research is focused on ongoing processes as well as effects. Instead of focusing exclusively upon the results and effects, the researcher asks *why* something happens. This underlines the utilisation focused dimension of the research and the intended learning process in FORUT/Redd Barna.

6. *Methodology*

6.1 *Design*

The research process is intended as a learning process for Redd Barna and FORUT and should therefore be carried out in the tradition of '*formative dialogue research*' which is based on close collaboration between the researchers and the stakeholders at different levels, both in formulation of research objectives and project reporting. This approach is characterised by a continuous dialogue between the researchers and the decision makers responsible for the programme. Through the dialogue, the research should provide the stakeholders with reflective information concerning the development of the programme that will enable them to make knowledge based decisions at the right time. Through the research process, i.e. the research method and the research itself, the institutions should be able to develop a culture/method of self reflection that should enhance the institutional learning process as well as its capability for innovation.

Many aid impact studies have been concerned with impact at the macro level, or they have been concerned with the impact of particular projects or programmes at an individual level,

for the beneficiaries. However, the focus of this study is at the level of *organisations and institutions* that mediate between individuals and the state or the macro level.

As mentioned above, the approach would involve an *analysis* of:

- the *objectives* of the intervention, including the perceptions of different actors (for example an end to the recruitment of child soldiers)
- *the intervention*: input, measures and activities (for example an advocacy strategy)
- *processes of change*: including identification of the mechanisms whereby change is intended to occur (for example: knowledge building and sharing, alliance building, political pressure)
- changes in the area where *impact* is intended: includes changes within civil society, changes in the patterns of interaction between civil society organisations and the government (or other actors outside civil society), and changes in policies and behaviour of other actors targeted by civil society organisations (for example: changes in the political agenda, improved access, policy changes, behaviour changes)
- contextual or external factors, such as the enabling environment for civil society (for example space for civil society allowed by the government)

6.2 Operationalising the design

In part 5.2 we described the operationalisation and the research questions derived from the connection between intentions, activities, processes of change and impact. As mentioned above, the first phase of the dialogue will be to document which activities and interventions the organisations regard as most important. However, we already familiar with some of the activities that these organisations are engaged in, and to concretize the operationalisation, in the table below we suggest some of the questions that could be related to different activities and expected impacts.

Area	Activities	Mechanism/ Process of change	Impact	Questions
<i>Capacity building</i>	Training programmes Financial support	Organisational learning	Financial and organisational sustainability	What kind of capacity building takes place and what are the intended results (technical, organisational)? Has the intervention led to changes in the number of funders, amounts of, or type, of funding? Which aspects of your work would have been affected if you did not have the support of the Norwegian partner? Who are the key resource persons/supporters?
<i>Strengthening the civil society sector</i>	Financial support for networks and collaborative efforts	Improving accountability and legitimacy	Institutionalisation/ 'embeddedness'	Has the intervention allowed the partner organisation to establish new links with other civil society organisations? If yes, with whom and what type of links? Who are members of the

				organisation/who do they represent? Who is the organisation accountable to?
<i>Democratization</i>	Mobilisation of local population Sensitising local government Advocacy Training	Political pressure Watchdogs Learning democratic politics	Improved access to decision-makers Procedures for consultation Increased dialog with local institutions	Does the organisation/do you as a beneficiary meet with local authorities? How often? What kind of issues are discussed? Regular or ad hoc?
<i>Human rights/ Children's rights</i>	Building/running of schools, nurseries Research/documentation Advocacy/information campaigns Alliance building	Influence on decision-makers Changes in attitudes Institutionalisation of rights issues 'Scaling up' of innovations/adoption by other actors	Agenda setting Changes in procedure Policy changes Behaviour changes	Which other organisations do you work with in advocacy campaigns? Examples of successful advocacy campaigns, what was achieved? How?
<i>Poverty reduction</i>	Saving and credit programmes Mobilisation	Collective action Individual empowerment 'Scaling up' of innovations/adoption by other actors	Improved access to resources	Have the poor/children/women, IDPs in the community been able to obtain loans, get access to services (health, education), jobs?

6.3 Data collection and timeframe for study

Data about Redd Barna in Ethiopia will be gathered from the time when it changed its strategy from being operational to working with local partners. As for FORUT, the timeline for data collection would depend on the history of its relationship with the local partner; for some it may be possible to gather data from the inception of the partnership. We will follow the work of the organisations over a two year period.

Data will be gathered from:

- documentation relating to the work of the Norwegian voluntary organisations and the partner organisation (plans and reports, minutes from meetings, internal memos etc.)
- semi-structured (explorative) and structured (but open ended) interviews
- focus group discussions

We think that focus groups and semi-structured interviews will complement each other. Focus groups create a dynamic, 'brainstorming' like context which is particularly conducive to identifying and exploring new issues and areas. The formative dialog methodology depends on frequent feedback from the key stakeholders, ranging from local community groups to programme managers and government officials, that will guide the research process. To achieve this form of dialog we will arrange regular workshops where research results will be presented and discussed. This can both lead to further refinement of research methodology and research objectives as well organisational learning.

Indicators for reporting

Based on an in depth understanding of intentions (objectives, aims), intervention/activities, processes and impact, we would, building on *interviews/consultations with stakeholders*, suggest indicators for reporting. The table below provides an indication of how this could be done for the areas that we have defined as being of particular relevance.

Area	Intended and actual processes of change	Indicators of societal impact	Limitations
Strengthening civil society			
Democracy			
Human rights/children's rights			
Poverty reduction			

One intention of our research will be to reveal both intended and actual processes of change and impact chains. The indicators and the reporting system should be based both on empirically proven and established impact chains, and on data on the causal processes expected and intended by the NGOs themselves.

Much has been written about principles for selecting indicators. In the context of the work of NGOs it has been suggested that indicators should be *specific* (intended to measure changes that the intervention intends to achieve), measurable and unambiguous, attainable and sensitive, relevant and easy to collect, timebound (Roche 1999).

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