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Capacity Building: The Impact of Practice

Success Story:
SongES Niger 2002–2006

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Introduction

This note is presented by SongES, a Belgian capacity-building NGO, and its partner organisation SongES Niger, a Nigerien NGO that was officially recognised by the Ministry of Finance in Niger, and obtained its legal status in 2005.

The note discusses the experience acquired during the implementation of a capacity-building programme currently taking place in Niger which includes 20 local organisations working with children in difficulty. The first programme phase has proved to be particularly successful, and the first visible signs of the impact of the work carried out by the participating organisations, as well as the NGO sector in Niger as a whole are beginning to appear.

SongES in Brief...

SongES is a Belgian NGO whose mission is to contribute to the emergence and consolidation of civil society, primarily in Africa, by strengthening the institutional capacity of the NGO sector. SongES seeks to provide support to local NGOs on their path towards becoming legitimate actors

that are recognised by their stakeholders as valid and effective intermediaries acting as change agents in their neighbourhoods, regions or countries. The organisation pursues this objective by developing the autonomy of the NGO sector in order to improve its effectiveness in fulfilling the needs of its beneficiaries, and in playing a role alongside the State, the private sector, the traditional leaders and the entire population.

SongES views the NGO sector, and civil society as a whole, as a heterogeneous group of organisations in constant evolution. The organisation also perceives the NGO sector as a necessary contributor to the management of a country. SongES operates in urban areas, with its target group consisting of local NGOs working in the social sector — in particular those dealing with HIV/AIDS issues and children in difficulty. SongES implements its activities together with local partners working in the thematic focus areas of the target organisations, or by providing capacity-building support to them. SongES regards the role of the NGO as particularly valuable, and therefore pays attention to this type of organisation, which is generally represented by groups of individuals committed to one cause and pursuing common objectives.

Because of these characteristics, SongES' capacity-building support focuses on internal organisational aspects of local NGOs. SongES sees its role as a facilitator assisting the local NGO sector in pursuing its own development.

SongES Niger emerged as a sister organisation to SongES Belgium as a result of the programme activity taking place in Niamey, which aims to build the capacity of the parts of the NGO sector working in the fields of HIV/AIDS and children in difficulty. The team established by SongES Belgium, as well as the experience acquired during the programme, helped give birth to this new Nigerien actor. SongES Niger has adopted the same objectives, approach, and methodology as SongES Belgium. The team is currently developing a monitoring & evaluation (M&E) system for their activities. All indicators have been validated by the organisations supported through the programme. SongES Niger follows its partner, SongES Belgium, in seeking to question its own practice on a regular basis, and draw lessons from the experiences gathered in various documents. The two organisations are connected through a partnership agreement spanning several years. Its purpose is to facilitate the transformation process that will eventually turn SongES Niger into an autonomous entity.

SongES: an Approach, a Strategy, a Methodology

The strategy implemented by SongES and its partners aims to:

- strengthen the way local NGOs operate,
- improve the quality, effectiveness, sustainability and efficiency of the activities which they carry out,

- increase the accessibility to and the diversification of their human, physical and financial resources, and
- facilitate synergy and cooperation, essentially through capacity-building support to formal and informal networks with governmental as well as non-governmental actors, both national and international.

The capacity building of these local NGOs takes the form of 'training through action'. This type of support comprises a three-pronged approach. Firstly, regular capacity building interventions aim to strengthen the operational and/or organisational aspects of the NGOs. These are typically short-term activities with a tightly defined purpose and content (e.g. support to organising a general assembly; assistance in designing a project). Secondly, a long-term capacity building process is implemented, which aims to strengthen the operational and/or organisational aspects in a different way, through ongoing support over time.

This type of assistance is based on the interaction between activities adapted to the individual organisation and collective activities for groups of organisations. In the case of individual organisations, support is adapted to their specific levels of development, whereas groups of organisations or networks are given training, reflective workshops and networking opportunities and exchanges between different actors operating in the same thematic areas.

This approach requires the participation of as many of the members or persons engaging in the activities of each NGO as possible, and represents a process of fundamental organisational change touching on, for example, internal decision-making processes, the vision of the organisation and its perception of non-profit work, the types of activities

which it carries out, the strategies it develops, its internal culture, etc.

The third aspect of 'training through action' is institutional development. This type of work concerns the relationship between the supported organisations and their external environment, as well as support to existing networks and new collective initiatives. It addresses such questions as:

- What services should a network provide to its members?
- What rights and obligations do the members have?
- How can cooperation (formal or informal) with other actors be facilitated in order to optimise the results and the impact of the organisations' work?

In order to strengthen the capacities and reinforce the strength of the supported organisations, SongES has built its method around five mechanisms which cover all organisational aspects of capacity building: the five social learning mechanisms or "AURA".²

The Five Social Learning Mechanisms

1. Reflection. What is the strategic vision? What meaning is attributed to the action undertaken? What are the aims of the projects? What are their associative values?

2. Group belonging. How is an individual situated within the organisation? Is s/he respected? Is s/he trusted by other members?

3. Communication. How does information circulate within the

organisation? Are there moments for exchanges of information? Are they formal or informal? Are they reserved for the leaders or accessible to members? Are they directive or participative? How does the organisation talk about its projects externally? Do all members know how to communicate the objectives of the organisation in a simple and coherent manner? Does the organisation have promotion and information tools?

4. Negotiation. What is the decision-making process within the organisation? Are the decision-making mechanisms representative and legitimate? How does the organisation defend its interests? How does one manage internal conflicts? What attitude should one adopt during negotiations? How does one negotiate a compromise? What are the advocacy techniques? How does one listen to other actors' points of view, whether these are allies or opposed to the projects of the organisation?

5. Action. How does one undertake a situational analysis? How does one define a project, its objectives and strategies? What activities should one initiate in order to respond to the needs identified by the target groups? How does one present a project to its beneficiaries, or to a donor? How does one implement a truly participative approach? What is an intermediary report? How does one attribute human resources to the management of a project? How does one evaluate the impact of an activity?

The process of applying this methodology is characterised by continuous analysis and adaptation,³ based on reflection together with the relevant local organisations, as this helps

² The AURA method, 'assisted self-strengthening', was developed by ATOL, a Belgian NGO with which SongES collaborates.

³ Mia Sorgenfrei and Rebecca Wrigley (2005), Praxis Paper No. 7 'Building Analytical and Adaptive Capacity for Organisational Effectiveness', INTRAC: Oxford.

to gradually improve the effectiveness of the capacity-building process.

The Context in which the Capacity Building Programme in Question Is Being Implemented

Programme location

The programme is being implemented in Niger (West Africa), primarily in three cities: the capital Niamey, Maradi and Zinder (in the east of the country).

The purpose of the programme and the profile of its target group

The programme is concerned with building the capacities of 20 Nigerien NGOs working with children in difficulty. It aims to increase the quality and the effectiveness of the activities carried out by these organisations by working closely together with the individual NGOs to strengthen their capacities (especially in the first programme phase), and by consolidating a collective space for consultation and advocacy (second programme phase).

These NGOs are intermediary organisations whose members, be they professionals (e.g. psychologists, teachers) or non-professionals (e.g. football coaches, individuals dealing with the issue in other ways), share a common objective: improving the living conditions of children in difficulty. The difficulties which the children go through may vary: some children come from poor families; some are forced to engage in child labour; some are orphans, street children, talibés (children receiving training from a spiritual leader/marabout); others are abandoned, sexually abused or beaten, in conflict with the law, disabled or infected by HIV/AIDS. The NGOs in question are small and young (on average 6 years old). They are all

involved in ongoing activities and/or developing new projects. Sixty per cent of them have received or are receiving financial support from one or several donors.

Each of the 20 NGOs were selected based on an assessment carried out jointly by SongES Niger and the members of the organisation. The support provided by SongES has been designed according to the recommendations made after the assessment, written down in a capacity-building plan which has also been developed jointly and formalised in a contract.

Contextual factors of particular relevance

In Niger, the phenomenon ‘children in difficulty’ is a particular concern, especially in Niamey — not necessarily statistically, but in terms of the violence and serious nature of the incidents, as well as the number and type of problems which the children are exposed to. Certain taboos persist in relation to this sensitive issue which reinforce and accelerate some problems, such as those concerning talibés, beggars or even the role of young girls in society — complex questions that involve the interplay between religious and sociocultural factors, and which therefore are yet to be addressed by local NGOs.

The Nigerien state is only sporadically involved in this thematic area. No national policy for child protection exists, and no resources have been provided to the sector in order to prevent or address the problematic cases. It is therefore essential that civil society mobilise to deal with these issues, not least through the local NGOs specialised in this field.

A few international NGOs have established support programmes of this type, including Caritas, Plan International, Prisonniers Sans Frontières, Aide et Action, and Association Française des Volontaires du Progrès (AFVP). Some of these organisations are more concerned with poverty than with other causes of maltreatment of children. Caritas is currently implementing a programme dealing with children involved in criminal activity, street children and beggars, while the AFVP has a programme called 'Justice for Minors'. Aide et Action and Plan International primarily work in rural areas, focusing on education.

Overall, the Nigerien NGO sector is relatively young and inexperienced (or even weak). So far, its activities, either in the thematic area in focus in this note or other areas such as HIV/AIDS, education, health etc, have still not had a significant impact. Its effectiveness needs to be increased, and the relevance of the NGOs' work needs to be recognised and implemented more widely. This is particularly pertinent for children in difficulty in urban areas, as the international organisations tend to prioritise the emergence of local NGOs in the rural parts of Niger working with agricultural communities.

It is crucial that the professionalism of local NGOs be developed and a true collective spirit stimulated. This is bound to take time and must be envisaged in the long term only. Furthermore, the obstacles represented by the difficult socioeconomic conditions in the country, such as the lack of resources, the fragile political stability, poverty, widespread illiteracy especially among women, the size of the territory, and the placement of public officials in different parts of the country, all need to be given due consideration.

Currently, the NGO sector is seeking to organise into more formalised structures, so the actual impact is still insignificant and difficult to detect. The emerging NGO groupings and networks are striving to manage and situate their activities strategically. Frequently, however, they do not succeed in playing the role of umbrella organisations representing members within a specific thematic area in order to pursue a common cause — and many end up resembling yet another individual NGO. Most of these collective entities are empty shells, or have very few members. They serve largely as means to contact donors and obtain information or funding, but certain initiatives do deserve to be supported in this way. It is clear that the facilitation of cooperation between different actors and sectors (private, public, non-profit) is needed to strengthen the NGO sector and increase the impact of its work within all thematic areas. This is especially true for the issue in focus in this Praxis Note: children in difficulty.

Programme Activities and Indicators of Success

Content and implementation of the programme

The programme was designed based on a collective analysis of the challenges faced by all 20 organisations when carrying out their activities and pursuing their objectives. Assessments were undertaken and capacity-building plans developed in cooperation with each organisation.

A range of activities took place throughout the implementation of the programme, such as:

- advisory sessions (support adapted to the needs of the individual organisations);

- training courses and workshops: reflective workshops and/or exchanges of knowledge and practice between several organisations (these activities included participants from the 20 organisations as well as external actors dealing with the issue of children in difficulty, such as the Ministry of Social Protection or international NGOs);
- Open House arrangements with the aim to disseminate information, provide access to reference documents and facilitate debates; and
- field visits to development projects and study tours (in the country or the region).

The themes addressed during these activities included: non-profit management, financial and administrative management, communication, negotiation, internal conflict resolution, delegation of roles and responsibilities, contextual analysis of children in difficulty, action plans adapted to the identified needs, listening to children in difficult situations, evaluation, and cooperation with or consultation of other actors (the State, national and international institutions, donors) involved in the issue.

These themes were treated both individually (working sessions adapted for each organisation) and collectively (gathering all the NGOs, and at times, other actors from the sector as well). Numerous workshops were prepared, organised or facilitated in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Development (Department of Child Protection), the international NGOs (AFVP, Caritas), and UNICEF (presenter and donor). Concrete contacts were established, and workshops conducted with religious leaders/marabouts, Islamic NGOs, families, parents and children.

More specific forms of training courses for teachers about how to listen to children in difficult situations,⁴ or the street children system, were organised. Subsequently, working groups have been created for participating teachers (professional or voluntary) from the different organisations in order to exchange issues arising from practical cases. The aim is to provide a space for sharing the difficult experiences and developing solutions together. These groups are based on the notion of Intervision⁵ (as opposed to supervision or scientific research), and none of the group members are specialists. These training courses, as well as the establishment of the Intervision groups, have made strong impressions on the organisations involved, and helped them overcome various challenges that they were facing.

The activities mentioned above took place between September 2002 and January 2006. A second programme phase started in August 2006, which can be seen as a continuation of the first.⁶ Its main focus is to build the capacity of a network of NGOs working with children (ReNE — Réseau nigérien pour l'Enfance). The aim is to create a space for consultation and effective service provision adapted to its members, giving them the opportunity to act as an actual representative working with the State, especially as regards the formulation of a national policy for child protection.

⁴ A manual is currently under preparation, based on the specific experience from Niger.

⁵ Particular technique for self-managed groups, who do not contain supervisors or specialists.

⁶ This second phase corresponds to a three-year-programme period financed by the EU (February 2006–January 2009) focusing on building the capacity of the network (ReNE) and promoting a collective dynamic between the different actors working with children, as well as improving the professionalism of this thematic sector (including the State, through the definition of a national policy for children's protection).

In What Ways Has This Programme Proved to Be Successful?

Individually, at least half of the supported organisations have:

- developed administrative and financial management tools adapted to their needs. This has led to healthier management in general, and has increased the transparency of the management of the funds which the organisations receive from different sources (membership payments and external funding), in particular.
- improved the division of roles and responsibilities of each individual in the organisation. This has led to greater participation by each member in the life of the organisation and the challenges it faces.
- obtained funding (at times very modest amounts) in order to implement specific activities (unfortunately, at the time of writing this is not enough to ensure the continuity of the work which each organisation carries out).
- reflected on the notion of collective action and associative life, seeking to identify what this might represent in terms of actual changes or continuity for the organisation itself, taking into account the needs and wishes of the membership. These working sessions have allowed each individual to express clearly the nature of his/her commitment, why they were there, what they were expecting from the organisation and what they felt they could contribute with (this was seen as quite innovative).
- improved their internal communication mechanisms, sometimes simply by systematising the meetings, inviting all active

members and informing them of the emerging results.

- acquired ways to deal with internal conflicts.
- learned to operate with the project cycle logic and its different phases (from situational analysis to evaluation).

Collectively, the organisations have:

- developed a better understanding of the NGO sector as a whole and of the phenomenon ‘children in difficulty’ in Niger, particularly in the zones with which they are concerned (towns and neighbourhoods in urban areas).
- acquired more knowledge, and engaged in joint initiatives with other actors intervening in this area (UNICEF, Ministries, international institutions, ReNE, etc).
- learned to trust each other and overcome the competitive ‘reflex’ (competition is defined in terms of activities implemented, number of children included in their projects, financial resources available).
- understood the need for collaboration and complementing each other’s efforts, each organisation contributing with its specificities, competencies and experiences (often very different) in order to improve children’s conditions.
- experienced an increase in the confidence of the individuals working for the organisations, and even among the children benefiting from their assistance: they are conscious of their work, how it is carried out and how it can be improved (or otherwise).

Overall, a stronger organisation with a more solid foundation is likely to implement more effective activities of better quality; activities that are better

adapted to the actual problems which children have to deal with. Today, these 20 organisations are showing their motivation to join a network of organisations and work together to create a real space for consultation, aiming to improve the practices of each organisation and engage in advocacy activities. The objective is to cooperate with the State and become involved in the formulation of a national policy, based on the realities in the field and the actual difficulties which the children are exposed to.

Another key indicator of the success of the programme is the professionalism of the NGOs in relation to children in difficulty. The positive impact on their target group, the children, has been manifold:

- Because the NGOs understand the context better, they are able to undertake more precise and complete analyses of the most pertinent causes of the problems which children face. The organisations no longer perceive poverty as the only type of problem, but recognise that issues such as family breakdown, or religious tensions can lead to additional problems.
- The listening training has led to real behavioural changes among the teachers in relation to the children. Little by little, they are beginning to see children as independent individuals with the right to express their views, and to be respected in the same way as adults.
- The creation of working groups for the exchange of experiences has helped improve the quality of the work which the organisations carry out and the way they deal with children. There have been cases where children have been transferred from one NGO to

another better equipped to solve a particular problem.

- These groups also represent a means of peer training, allowing the organisations to continue evolving after the initial training period.

Actual Impacts of the Activities Implemented During the First Programme Phase (2002–2006)

The tools applied during the training, as well as the process of reflection which the NGOs have participated in, have helped improve their capacity to conduct situational analyses, in particular to analyse the needs of the children included in their projects in order to adapt their strategies. As a result, their dialogue with the children, the way they are listened to and their relationship with the adults, is changing for the better. The NGOs adapt their project strategies to these ‘new realities’, and have gained confidence to negotiate with donors to obtain funding. They are hence able to implement more sustainable projects and long-term activities. This is crucial for the quality of their work with children.

1. Behavioural change and raised awareness within the NGOs

Certain teachers or members now realise what role they may play when carrying out their activities. For instance, a football coach (TGV-Association) trains children in one part of Niamey every day. These children are in conflict with their families and have ceased to go to school. The coach has become aware of the role he plays as a trainer, and of the meaning and the consequences which his teaching may have on the children. He further develops his role, compares it with other roles and wishes to play it differently.

After receiving training in how to listen to children in difficult situation for more than a year, based on the experiences of the organisations and the perception of children by adults in Niger, certain teachers have become aware of their own attitudes and the consequences for the children. As one teacher puts it:

'before attending the different training courses which were part of the SongES Capacity Building Programme, I sometimes hit the children, but since then, I have come to understand that, more than anything, the way to help a child is to listen to it'.

Undoubtedly, this realisation has contributed to increasing his confidence in himself, and this has a positive effect on the children.

2. New strategies developed and adapted by the NGOs

With strengthened analytical and reflective capacities in relation to strategy development, several NGOs have been able to adjust their work better to the needs of their target groups.

The NGO Action Jeunes (AJ) designed a project to support children in guiding blind beggars, with the intention of placing these children in vocational training workshops. In a workshop on project development (organised by SongES as part of the programme), the AJ project was used as an example and discussed by all participants. As a consequence, the members of the NGO decided to review their project. They returned to their beneficiaries and redirected their strategy towards awareness-raising of the parents in order to secure their cooperation.

The NGO SARED also decided to review the initial design of the project 'Village SARED' which aimed to receive

children in conflict with the law in a centre that provided vocational training. They had come to realise the importance of supporting the children through continuing follow up, including education and psychological assistance — an element which was not initially part of the programme.

The conclusions from a reflective workshop for the NGOs and all actors involved in working with children in difficulty (private, public, national and international) made it clear that the implemented activities did not sufficiently include young girls or talibés. During a study visit in Senegal, the participants met organisations working with talibés. Today, two NGOs (ANTD and Opten Yara) have opted for an intermediary strategy. They now work with talibés children as well as street children. In parallel, they seek to establish regular communication with the traditional spiritual leaders to raise their awareness about the effects of their teaching methods on the children.

3. Growing confidence in the NGOs among the donors

The associations have acquired concrete capacities and greater confidence in themselves, both when submitting proposals to donors and when defending their validity. Several NGOs have received funding after participating in SongES' capacity-building programme:

- ANTD received funding from FCA/DANIDA for a one-year project concerning the reintegration of families
- TGV-Association's football tournament was funded by FCA/Cooperation Technique Belge
- AIVO were successful in their application to Global Fund for a project working with orphans in a commune in Niamey

- SARED received funding from USAID
- other projects are waiting for a response from UNICEF.

Within the framework of the second programme phase (financed by the EU), a support fund has been accepted. The NGOs will start to benefit from this arrangement from the beginning of 2007. A selection committee including members from the NGOs has been formed and rules have been defined. SongES felt that it was critical that the supported NGOs were given the opportunity to implement activities which would help them gain recognition, and to learn from the results.

4. The impact of the emergence of the new support organisation SongES Niger on the dynamics of the NGO sector.

At the time of writing, it is difficult to talk about real impact, because the NGO has only existed as an independent actor since April 2005. However, the organisation is already recognised by all local and international actors based in Niger (a request for such an institution was formulated to SongES Niger within the framework of the 'Global Fund' by the evaluation team from the first programme phase). The presence of a national capacity-building actor (perceived as legitimate by its stakeholders) is the concrete result of an objective formulated by numerous actors in the majority of the projects/programmes. The fact that it is a Nigerien NGO makes it more sustainable in their eyes.

SongES Niger is recognised as a capacity-building actor closely linked to the thematic areas 'Children in Difficulty' and 'Combating HIV/AIDS'. UNICEF, for example, regularly cooperates with SongES Niger,

contributes with funding, participates regularly in workshops and training courses, and calls upon SongES Niger to participate in all child-related activities which the institution carries out. This close collaboration has paved the way for a demystification of the relationship between local NGOs and donors. Unfortunately, this has yet to facilitate NGO access to funding, but the people currently working in the relevant department in UNICEF Niger are aware of the problem. The procedures are very long and at times tedious for the NGOs. In addition, the funding which they do obtain is not enough to ensure the continuity of their work in the long run.

5. Impact on other stakeholders (local NGOs, international organisations involved in social activity, the State, the private sector, traditional leaders...)

Local Associations

It is clear that the relationship between all NGOs working with children in difficulty has improved (and in some cases even taken the form of concrete cooperation between certain NGOs). During a listening training course (attended by other NGOs), the case of a child included in the project of one NGO (AFETEN) was discussed. When the NGO admitted to its failure to manage this case, another NGO (CARITAS) proposed to meet the child. As a result, the child has 'changed' organisation, according to an agreement between the two NGOs respecting the child's wish. Although the child felt better able to trust the teacher from CARITAS, this did not in any way lead to doubts about the quality of AFETEN's work in general. This case illustrates the benefits of improved cooperation between NGOs.

The working groups created to exchange experiences represent an extremely important development which extends

beyond the results expected from the outset. The birth and evolution of these groups has been the natural outcome of the implemented activities, the relationship of trust which has grown between the NGOs included in the SongES programme and the willingness of the NGOs to leave their isolation. Three groups currently meet once a month and receive support once or twice a year from an external consultant with Intervention experience.

The evolving dynamic between the NGOs has also helped define the priorities for the second programme phase, within the programme framework financed by the EU. The aim is not to create a parallel network, but to strengthen the existing network, ReNE (Réseau Nigérien pour l'Enfance), which has been very active during all the workshops organised by SongES. The second programme phase thus focuses on building the capacity of the network as a space for consultation and advocacy, and this can be seen as a direct result of what emerged during the first programme phase.

Problems with representation and the effectiveness of the service provision to member organisations have been clearly expressed. Today, ReNE is practically working all over the country, and has seen a massive increase in the membership by NGOs working with children in difficulty. The network has started several thematic groups in which representatives from the relevant Ministries participate. ReNE's credibility has thereby been established. This can be seen as the first result emerging in the second phase. UNICEF has asked ReNE to prepare the mid-term evaluation of the programme implemented jointly by UNICEF and the Nigerien state to improve child protection and children's conditions. With this gesture, UNICEF has shown

its recognition of the value of the work of the network.

The Ministry of Social Development is included in all the training courses and reflective workshops facilitated by SongES through the Department for Child Protection. This level of collaboration and participation in the reflection processes constitutes a major impact at this point.

SongES Niger and ReNE have formulated a common objective for the end of the Programme in 2009 to participate in the development of a national policy for child protection. The capacity of the network must therefore be strengthened to ensure that it is representative, legitimate and recognised as a valid intermediary working with the State, able to engage in advocacy activity.

Collaboration with other actors from the international community

The fact that the UNICEF case has been referred to in several parts of this document illustrates the amount of interaction that is taking place between SongES and UNICEF Niger. Earlier this year, SongES Niger received funding from UNICEF in order to finalise and disseminate a practical guide with the content of the listening training course in which over 20 NGOs participated. This guide will serve as a tool for those NGOs that attended the course, and a training of trainers course will be a means for teachers from these NGOs to share their knowledge with others about how best to listen to children and become aware of their needs. This training of trainers course is to take place towards the end of 2006.

Other actors such as the local units of AFVP (Association française des Volontaires du Progrès) and CARITAS have collaborated on different aspects of

the programme, and participate on a regular basis in all the workshops. At the present, this leads to greater coherence between the different projects and programmes. Gradually, ReNE is becoming the principal information centre, providing opportunities for gathering all actors whether associative or non-profit, private or public. The EU representatives in Niamey are also paying close attention to the evolution of the programme, and participate regularly in specific activities, invited by SongES and ReNE.

Expected and unexpected outcomes

In general, the expected outcomes, such as the development of more effective management tools, better division of roles and responsibilities, more in-depth reflection on contextual analysis, adjustment of project strategies, and increased access to funding have become apparent within the individual NGOs, while the unexpected outcomes are visible at the collective level.

The unknown factor in the capacity building of individual organisations is their capacity to maintain their learning attitude in the long-run, as this is necessary for this evolving process, whether the NGO continues to receive support or not. In one of the NGOs assisted through the programme, the reflection on the internal dynamics (information-sharing ; the place and role attributed to each individual in the group) provoked an explosive internal crisis which led to serious questioning of the power of its leaders. This crisis resulted in the break-up of the organisation. SongES decided to stay out of this conflict, as it was felt that it should be resolved internally.

In terms of collective activities, the creation of working groups exchanging experiences and concrete cases has produced the most spectacular, some

might even say revolutionary results. In Niger in particular, a country which is characterised by competition between the different NGOs as well as between the different sectors (public/private), it was hard to envisage such a significant outcome. Furthermore, the methodology based on exchanges has been a real eye-opener in a context where it is important to respect the existing hierarchy, such as that between students and teacher. This situation, installed little by little with the Intervention methodology, has helped promote real trust between the participants, as emphasised throughout this document.

Aspects that remain difficult to work with or simply take into account

At times, the NGOs lack motivation to acquire competencies and tools because they realise that they will not be able to use them in practice, as they do not have access to the resources they need. This lack of mobilisation of human and financial resources within the NGOs persists, to the detriment of their work.

The NGOs are still quite weak with regard to the nature of the members/persons involved. If an active member is transferred by his workplace to another part of the country, this can be an extremely destabilising element for the NGO. The majority of the members/persons involved are volunteers, and although there is no doubt that volunteers represent a strength to the organisation, they also potentially slow down its work — an issue which most NGOs have to address.

The relatively low level of education in Niger makes it difficult for the NGOs to identify people with the competencies and qualifications they need who are able to effectively implement project activities and develop internal reflection.

The socioeconomic conditions in the country do not facilitate the involvement by and availability of the members, some of whom are preoccupied by their survival or that of their families. This produces a series of destabilising factors.

The sustainability of the changes taking place in the NGO during a period of capacity building remains vulnerable, because it is closely connected to the commitment of the people working for it. If these individuals change, or their living conditions change to inhibit their ability to maintain healthy management of the group, difficulties can quickly be encountered. An alternative to strengthening the capacities of the group could be to focus on developing the competencies of each individual, but this would modify the overall objective of SongES' programme.

In Niger, the NGO sector still lacks cohesion, and its overall impact remains weak. The nationwide structure is quite recent, and the sector is rapidly developing. The outcomes of a programme such as the one implemented by SongES are inevitably intertwined with the wider evolution of the sector.

Lessons to Be Learnt from This Experience

This experience has shown us how the capacity building of NGOs of this type, young and modest in size, is a *very long process*, continuously exposed to changing contextual factors and vulnerable to the potential weaknesses of internal organisational mechanisms. The results which have been obtained remain fragile and are largely dependent on the youth of the NGO sector in a country which has little tradition for association and collectivism.

In addition, we have learnt that *a relationship based on trust between the support organisation and the supported organisation* is the foundation on which capacity should be built in order to be successful. This includes paying attention to the topics which the capacity-building intervention addresses — it is useless to start working on financial management or the wellbeing and participation of each individual in the organisational dynamics. It seems more appropriate to begin with something more neutral (the type of activity to be carried out, the contextual analysis to be undertaken, etc) and allow the time and space for mutual confidence to grow in order to approach more intimate issues in the life of the organisation at a later stage.

It should be noted that the social learning mechanism 'reflection' (from the AURA methodology) has remained abstract to the NGOs. This shows how important it is to *keep linking purpose/meaning and action* throughout the capacity-building process, by continually questioning the reasons for carrying out certain types of activities, what their purpose is and how their evolution be facilitated.

The dialogue which takes place within the organisation or between the organisation and the capacity-building specialist is bound to destabilise the NGO, its members, their ways of working and perhaps even their ways of acting and thinking. It is critical to pay attention to *the cultural and social factors* that influence the change process. It is not always easy to respect the wishes of the group members, or the limits they set, when certain stages of the process require total acceptance from the majority of the group members.

Today, it seems clear that a capacity-building process should enable the participating organisations to carry out their work more effectively. Even if an

NGO has the will to use the new capacities it has acquired as a result of internal reflection and evolution, this cannot happen without the human and financial resources required. The unavailability of these means may cause frustration and lack of motivation, and put the impact of the capacity-building intervention at risk.

SongES has also become aware of the need to analyse and learn from its experiences, and write down its reflections and results, in order to share them with others and enrich its practices, or simply socialise them. This requires time, competencies, a rigorous internal process, financial means and staying alert to what happens in the external environment. Despite these difficulties represented by the limited capacity of the NGOs, this seems crucial for capacity-building work — a discipline which should be rooted in practice.

Reflections Concerning the SongES Approach

The application of the AURA methodology

It proved difficult to analyse all of the social learning mechanisms (reflection, communication, negotiation, group belonging, action) in the beginning of the relationship. Mechanisms such as group belonging or negotiation (in its internal dimension), and all financial management issues, are subjects that are difficult to tackle because they are intimately related to the life of the group and require a certain level of trust between the NGO and SongES Belgium/SongES Niger. These issues are now raised during the capacity-building process. This initial analysis led us to review our own approach: in the beginning, it seemed logical to us to start with the ‘reflection’ mechanism which, however, has remained abstract to the

NGOs as mentioned above. We have since focused on the transfer of the methodology itself to the NGOs. The five mechanisms have been presented, discussed and a reflection process with the NGOs facilitated in order to understand and enrich the meaning of these.

The concrete, and more or less direct, effect of SongES’ work and of this reflection on the methodology itself within all the NGOs has been the evolution of the requests for support that SongES receives. Understanding the capacity-building methodology has helped the NGOs formulate a series of topics, reflections and mechanisms which they would like to work on in their organisations. As a result, certain new requests have been presented by the NGOs beyond more traditional requests for training and funding. This has also stimulated the debate between the NGOs and SongES about the factors that will bring an NGO to realise that it has been strengthened, that it operates in a collective manner, that it is able to reach some of its objectives and that it is coherent. As a result of this process, we have been able to improve the formulation of our M&E indicators within our M&E system.

SongES Niger has involved the NGOs from the programme in training their peers. A concrete example: during a training course about the street children system in which some of the 20 NGOs have participated, one module was considered too complicated by the participants. This module has since been reworked by SongES Niger and simplified in order to be disseminated by the participating NGOs among the other NGOs. This has promoted the confidence of the NGOs in themselves and each other, and contributed to the elimination of competition between them. Today, we are seeing close relationships develop between certain

organisations, as well as friendships between certain teachers or members that face similar difficulties but also share their joys and successes. This is very enriching for the group dynamics during training courses and workshops.

Questions arising from our practice

A question frequently reappearing in our work relates to the concern to not impose one associative model over all others. We have chosen to believe in these types of activities and collective dynamics, and see them as essential elements of a society in evolution. This means, however, that we use methods and tools developed in the Western NGO world in our capacity-building interventions. How can we facilitate a process in evolution without imposing our values and our ways of working, without having to avoid certain issues or practices (such as money or leadership) that are rooted in a particular ethical approach? How can we provide support, but still leave the creative space to the actors involved? We have initiated a concrete piece of work which analyses the practices of the African NGOs that have received support in order to compare them with our own practices (SongES and its partners). One note has already been written on this topic,⁷ but we are planning to continue the work.

Other questions have also emerged: What can be done to help the NGOs address the difficulties they face in operating as truly collective actors? Should initiatives taken by individuals be supported, or rather, should we only accept initiatives emerging based on a minimum of associative action?

How can NGOs be assisted to avoid the instrumentalisation imposed by donors and international institutions? How can

the gap between theory (based on laws from elsewhere) and practice (rooted in local reality) be used constructively as a source of reflection and evolution leading to new initiatives, innovative ways of working, and surprising positions?

It remains difficult for SongES and its partners to obtain funding for capacity-building interventions such as those implemented during this programme. The outcomes of capacity-building work, whose central subjects are people, are not visible enough to most donors. How can capacity-building actors, caught between the reality of the challenges faced by the NGOs and the rules dictated by the majority of the donors and the international institutions, position themselves more effectively?

Beyond these questions, our team and those of our partner organisations are constantly questioning our work. The willingness to arrange moments of reflection, to step back, attract the interest of other actors and take external criticism into account all help to facilitate this, to enable SongES Niger and SongES Belgium to guarantee a minimum of quality in our work.

⁷ Dynamiques associatives, instruments du développement ou reels acteurs et partenaires potentiels. (Etude de cas: Niger), SongES, December 2003