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Councillors and community leaders - partnership or conflict of interest? Lessons from the Sustainable Mwanza Project

One central objective of the Local Government Reform Programme (LGRP) is fostering of public-private partnerships in delivery of essential services at community level. As we shall discuss in this research brief, this entails not only having access to financial resources (e.g. from donors) but also public and private leaders sharing the same views. The case of the now aborted Sustainable Mwanza Project, a squatter upgrading scheme initially supported by DANIDA, illustrates how political ambitions and competition for funds may become an obstacle for genuine partnership. Our observations below are based on interviews conducted with a number of local stakeholders and council representatives in August 2002 and February 2003.

Mwanza city centre is surrounded by picturesque hilltops. On fourteen of these hills, informal settlements or squatter camps have been established, varying from simple shacks to well-built houses that hold high standards. The settlements have in common a general lack of basic services like tapped water, waste management, passable roads, schools and health facilities. During the 1990s the inhabitants of several squatter settlements in Mwanza formed community based organisations (CBOs) to improve services in their respective communities by way of self-help activities and by lobbying for service provision by the council and central government.

In April 2001, DANIDA launched the Sustainable Development Programme in Mwanza. The purpose of the project was three-fold: (i) to improve the environment of the squatter settlements in line with guidelines from UN-Habitat; (ii) to support capacity building of NGOs and CBOs; and (iii) to support the legal rights of people living in squatter areas. During the planning and implementation of the project DANIDA worked closely with the Ministry of Lands. The project was meant to be a pilot project, providing input to a national standard for upgrading of unplanned urban settlements, and to provide input for and to influence national policies on squatter upgrading and related issues.

Two settlements, with altogether around 2.500 households, were selected to be part of the first phase of the now called Sustainable Mwanza Project. In both settlements CBOs were active and had prepared the ground for upgrading by suggesting designated areas for construction of roads, schools, health facilities etc. As part of its goal to facilitate capacity building, the project worked closely with the CBOs in detailing the plans for upgrading ..



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While DANIDA sponsored the actual surveying of plots and collaborated with University College of Land and Architecture (UCLAS) to prepare detailed maps of the selected areas, it left it to the CBOs to come up with solutions as how to compensate the people whose houses would have to be removed or demolished. The resources were to come from the community itself - estimated at TSh 20 million. The CBOs decided that each household was to contribute TSh 20,000, and the task of collection was delegated to street leaders. Considering the relatively high amount asked for, and despite some reported conflicts between the street leaders and the CBOs, the compliance rate was high. The CBOs were able to collect around TSh 10 million before political conflicts put a stop to further progress. The collected amount would have been enough to compensate those who would either have to demolish their houses or to give up a parcel. However, the project never reached the stage of implementation.

A main factor causing the project to stop seems to be its failure in establishing a partnership with elected political representatives. We note there was insufficient capacity and initial unwillingness by the Council to involve actors of the private sector (e.g. construction firms), and lack of interest and support from the ward level, as well as insufficient managerial skills within the CBOs. However, the main stumbling block was resistance on the part of local councillors.

In two of the three wards involved in the project, the councillors had stood against CBO leaders during the last election. With the large-scale upgrading project being under CBO control, the councillors seemed to fear that they would be sidelined by the CBO leaders if they were to contest again. According to a number of stakeholders interviewed, the councillors claimed that leaders of the CBOs were misusing and mismanaging the funds collected. Consequently the flow of contributions from people dried up. In an attempt to mediate, city council town planners suggested and designed the format of a formal agreement on how the funds and accounts were to be administered. The councillors were asked to sign it, but they never did. In August 2002 DANIDA pulled out of the project and withdrew a contribution of TSh 200 million earmarked for the project.

The Ministry of Lands has formally approved the plan. However, since there are no resources to follow up the project, and since the CBOs as a result of the conflict have lost some of their legitimacy, areas assigned for various communal purposes are now being appropriated by individuals, making the future realisation of the plan a much more difficult task.

On conclusion, the core problem facing the Sustainable Mwanza Project appears to be one of representation. Who is representing the people? The donor looked for community representatives to plan and organise the project. To the donor, the CBOs already actively working for upgrading of their settlements seemed to be a good alternative to the professional bureaucrats and political representatives of the three different wards as they covered much larger areas than the targeted settlements. In this context, the donor strategy was in line with other central principles of LGRP, namely cost sharing and involvement from below. At the same time, the failure of the project demonstrates the pit-falls involved and the importance of involving all stakeholders, including councillors, administrators and professionals at all levels.

Conflicts over development projects and donor funding between CBO leaders and councillors have also occurred in other places, e.g. in Dar es Salaam. Reform processes in which elected councillors are given increased influence give rise to concern not only about issues of voter sensitisation, but also about the questions of legitimacy and contesting interests at the local level.

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