

Keeping the flame alive

Karsten Hundeide, 2000

I will try to summarise some of my conclusions from an ICDP meeting that we had recently. These are not official conclusions from the meeting; they are my impressions and reflections after the meeting.

One of the problems of enterprises and also social projects is that the focus always tends to be on the material, economical, technical and bureaucratic side. This is the professional side that the donors always put forward as a priority. The focus is on a systematic orderly approach, with clear goals that can be split into sub-goals that again should be organised within an action plan with clear time limits and within a budget that should not be deviated too much. Following this line of action creates rational accountability and credibility etc. that again provides the basis for further funding. This is what is emphasised in most donors' recommendation and evaluation procedures. There are manual for how this can be done in the best way... (example "the logical framework approach"). Let us call this the rational management side.

All this is necessary and good, but it is not enough – especially not when it comes to social projects where the human content is essential. Then another quality comes in, namely *commitment to some human values* – something that you experience as so important and meaningful that you are willing to sacrifice for it. At the same time you feel privileged to be able to do something important and meaningful, not only for yourself but also for others. When this feeling is shared by the other participants in the project there is *a feeling of mission and vision*, that generates energy, optimism, joy and willingness to do ones utmost. This is the key to quality in social projects, and when this is present you can feel it, and when it is absent although the economical and rational procedures may be in order, you can also feel it - it feels empty, there is something lacking. It has all become routine and trivialities, economy dominates and the spirit of mission and commitment has gone or it has never been there. Cynicism and arrogant development rhetoric prevail.

In our meeting in Madeira we discussed some of these problems relating to our projects in ICDP. Instead of focussing solely on economy and rational management that tend to take precedence on such occasions, we decided to go more into the human side of the project – where the key to both commitment and demoralisation lies.

In many cases being a development worker in a developing country can be a very hard and lonely experience that may easily lead to resignation and disillusionments - the reality proved to be different from what was expected. In such cases *there is a strong need for confirmation and approval from the outside; from others who are interested and supportive of your work, not only controlling your economy and management, but also supporting you and giving you encouragement - someone you can relate to and who will be interested to read and respond to your reports and tell further about your experiences. In this way you feel as if you are part of a supportive community.* I think this aspect is extremely important. As an example; we have had promoters working in Huambo during the Angolan war that were daily exposed to personal danger and extreme human suffering due to traumas of loss, uprooting and hunger. As they were trapped within a city that was daily shelled, the ICDP office in Luanda tried to be in daily telephonic contact with them to keep up their spirit and to show them that there is someone on the outside who really cares about their safety and well-being. When these

promoters came out to participate in our annual meeting, this was for them a relief and a great feast, to stay in a hotel, enjoy normal food and share their experiences with other promoters coming from other parts of the country. In this way the annual meeting served to promote a feeling of shared mission and reciprocal support – which gave them the support they needed to go on for another year. These social workers in the field need our appreciation and acknowledgement of what they are doing, because they are in fact acting on behalf of all of us, and they need to know that we are with them otherwise they may “burn out” and come into a cycle of resignation and demoralisation.¹

But not all are working in the field, some are working in the development bureaucracy, in the administration and management and they usually have a prominent role in the project. There is then another danger; namely the danger of becoming *alienated from the real content and intention of the project*. In this context it is important to remember that *the project is not to keep good accounting and management*, these are instruments, the real project is to implement the objectives of the project, in this case, to help where the need is – in the field. Sometimes these priorities are reversed, maybe because of the enormous pressure on economical accountability from donor agencies, which may lead to a one-side focusing on this (economical accountability) while the humanitarian content and the activities in the field recedes into the background or they change according to what is most appealing in a context of fund-raising. These are so called *market and donor-driven projects*, they may appear professional because the technology of application, management and accounting is in order, but the human commitment to the original cause may be weak and inconsistent. They are run like any other market-oriented businesses. The consequences for the target population may be dramatic as they start, create expectations and withdraw according to what donors consider feasible and opportune at any moment in a market of fund-raising.

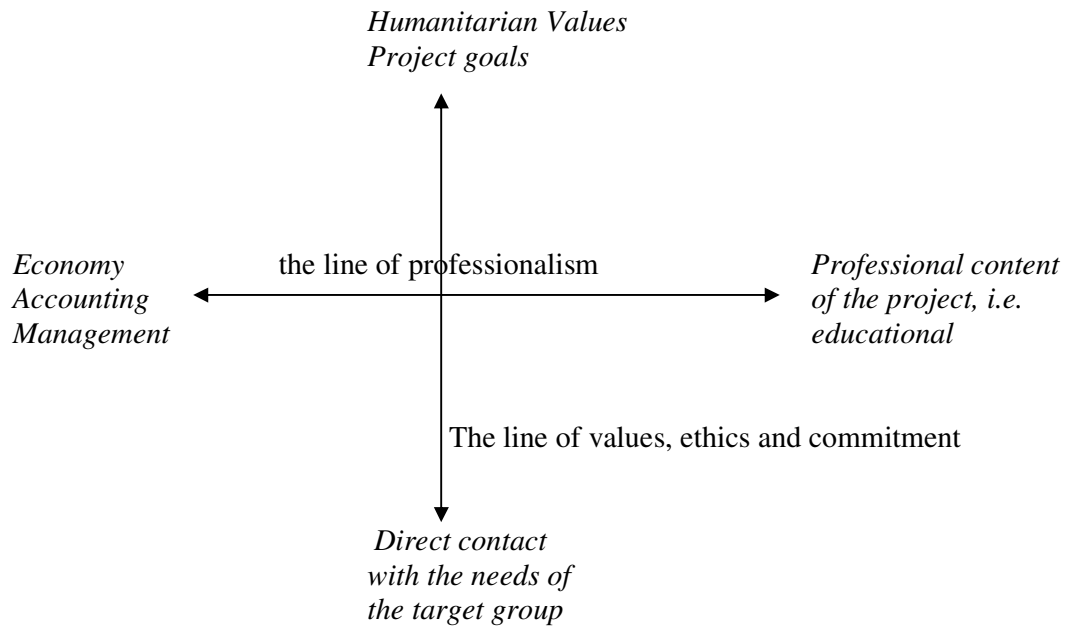
In order to sustain the original humanitarian commitment, or the ethical basis of a project, *it is important to be in direct touch with field and with the causes for which the project were started*. In fact humanitarian projects are based on values that originate in human empathy and compassion with others. Therefore it is important to be in direct touch with “*the faces of the other*” – *the faces of the other’s suffering* – not only for the sake of fund-raising, but in order to sustain and reconfirm one’s own moral commitment; the driving force behind the project. We see this in our own ICDP projects, the suffering of an abandoned child, lonely in an institution, or the suffering in the faces of refugees who have witnessed atrocities in relation to their own family and are uprooted from their homes and environment. This touches you deeply and you feel the need to do something. As Levinas² states, *the appeal in the face of the Other compel you to help without expecting reciprocity from the Other*. He further states that this is the basis not only for helping the other, but also for the development of yourself as a moral subject.

Certainly not all social projects have this emergent character of human suffering, but all development projects have some moral basis, that needs to be reconfirmed in order to sustain the quality of the project and to prevent demoralisation. This is what I mean by keeping the flame alive.

Below I have tried to summarise this in a diagram that includes all these aspects:

¹ In our future work we should in fact be more attentive to the need for debriefing and psychological support when our workers who are exposed to such experiences.

² Emanuel Levinas is Jewish-French philosopher. His writings is based on his experiences of holocaust and they have recently become very influential as part of “the ethics of nearness” movement.



As the diagram shows there is the horizontal line of professionalism that has two poles, the management and economy pole and the professional content pole. For example in a project for handicapped or traumatised children or an educational project, there is a field of professional expertise that is guiding the content of the project. In addition there is the vertical dimension that I have tried to emphasise here, this is the dimension of values and goals³ on the one hand and direct, empathic contact with the human needs in the field on the other.⁴ Contact with the field also implies a constant monitoring of the project in line with the expectations and expressed needs of the target group.

All these aspects are important and necessary and they need to be properly balanced in any high quality project. If it goes too far in any direction, either through uncritical enthusiasm and sense of “mission” without management-skills and insight into the professional side of the project, or through one-sided focus on professionalism and management on the other, without consideration of the dimension of values and human commitment, there is bound to be degradation of quality and reduction of what is so strongly emphasised in development theory, namely the sustainability of the project. *In the last instance sustainability is also based on the commitment of those involved* – the human resources and their commitment to the values that instigated the project in the first instance. When this is fading away the project is

³ Why include values in a project? Because values are in the last instance the reason why we care to do anything at all. Why should we care for the injustice, suppression, torture and the suffering of our neighbour? Because we as civilised human beings share some basic human values that are partly codified in declarations of human rights and in the teachings of the dominant religions of the world. By being conscious of our values in starting a project, we will also be more aware of the more concrete goals of the project and thus keep the project on the intended track. In addition, as I have pointed out above, it is in the realm of values our commitment and motivation reside.

⁴ These dimensions refer to human orientations of those who organise and run projects. They are not meant to provide exhaustive descriptions of the whole field of project development. Questions like the role of local needs and practices, ethnocentrism etc. is not part of this discussion, although they are certainly important in other contexts.

bound to degenerate. Therefore keeping the flame alive is an important factor in all development – at all levels.