

## Sharing experiences makes the difference

In spite of the fact that local differences may determine whether a given activity is successful or not, these differences should not limit the willingness to share experiences, exchange knowledge and learn from each other. A case from the Honduran municipality of Tutule clearly shows that when people get together and get to know how citizens in other parts of the country and region are acting and organising, it can generate new processes of reflection & action.

For several years, MS Denmark-ActionAid<sup>1</sup> has been supporting different regional initiatives with the sole purpose of creative learning forums for our local counterparts – or partner organizations as we call them – meet and informally exchange and discuss their experiences, for instance, in relation to building local democracy. Sometimes, one doubts the short term benefits of these kinds of encounters or exchanges, but recently we have seen several examples of organizations being able to learn from the experience of others in other countries, adapt these to their own reality and implement modified and improved local versions.

### Broad participation

In 2006, a local partner organization called UTC La Paz organized a trip to the Eastern part of the country, where others local organizations already had good experience with the *patronatos*, a para-municipal structure composed of trusted and elected citizens who can to a certain extent influence mayors and municipalities with regard to local development, financial management, and municipal investments.

Even though the *patronatos* are legally constituted, their influence and efficiency evidently depends on, for instance, the mayor's willingness to let them have a say. In other words, if the mayor favors the existence of the *patronatos*, they can have an enormous influence. If, on the other hand, the mayor does not approve of their existence, he can ignore the *patronatos* and only superficially take them into consideration. The *patronato* is a first level organization, of public benefit and with non-profit aims. The purpose is to contribute to improving the quality of life of the citizens of a given community. It has a board with 5 or 7 members, elected at community or municipal assemblies. Its main responsibility is to function as a link between the municipal government and the community, by proposing and promoting projects of collective development.

The UTC La Paz delegation that had come to learn about *patronatos* in Eastern Honduras consisted both of UTC representatives, community leaders, and mayors. The three main actors in local development were thus present, all received the same exposure and information and were able to build a common agenda on the basis of the information they received.

The main purpose of the exchange/learning visit was to get to know how the *patronatos* work, and the coordination which had been set up with the municipality in order to carry out activities that benefits the citizens. The group also got to know the importance of assigning sufficient budget for the internal functioning of the community organization.

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<sup>1</sup> Mellempfolkeligt Samvirke – ActionAid Denmark has been managing a regional program in four Central American countries since 1991. Presently, the program focuses on building local democracy, promoting trade justice and contributing to a new way of viewing the issue of migration.

The sharing was done through the participation of the different actors responsible for promoting, negotiating, executing and supervising productive and social project in the communities. The most significant lesson learnt was the importance of acquiring access to decision making spaces in a coordinated manner, and that the changes implemented should be done with the integrated participation of representatives from social organizations. This was taken into account when setting up the *patronatos* supported by UTC La Paz and strategic adjustments were made at local level, in order to minimize influences from political parties in the decision making process and adapt these to local contexts.

#### Increasing pressure

Back in Tutule, the participants decided to proceed together and formed a local 'leadership school', in order to assure that the citizens involved in the *patronatos* were conscious of their responsibilities towards the citizens and their roles within the municipality. Likewise, they were trained in the different skills needed in order to understand and influence, for instance, the municipal budget and decision making process.

#### **Leadership School**

The established process for leadership training consists of six training modules, during which deals with issues that strengthen internal democracy in the organizations as well as values that support active participation.

These currículo has the following module:

Module 1-2-3: Political advocacy, the road to local development.

Module 4: Democracy and popular participation.

Module 5: Good local governance.

Module 6: Social audit and citizens' control.

This training process was initiated with the assistance from MS in 2006, and at least 30 local leaders (men and women) have been trained each year. So far, 90 have received training, and they now form part of the *patronatos*, civil society networks, municipal offices for gender issues, and citizens' transparency commissions. At the same time, we would like to emphasize that some of these trained leaders are currently candidates for election during the upcoming municipal elections. The training modules start in July and finish in December, and the training material are constantly adapted to experiences gained. Training material is supported by MS. For each training community leaders are selected by the *patronatos*. The main challenge is to avoid that the training simply becomes yet another training session, and that the acquired knowledge is applicable and shared internally, due to the fact that some of these organizations had lost their credibility, because they had become party-political spaces serving the purposes of the mayor in office. This aspect was specifically underlined, and an effort was made to secure the participation of outsiders who were willing to lead their communities in an active manner. It has been a promising process.

At the same time, UTC La Paz and the municipality were able to negotiate cooperation agreements, which permitted UTC La Paz, an agricultural workers' organization with technical knowledge and a lot of experience, to support and directly influence the municipal structure. The signed agreements basically consisted in creating the necessary space for civil society, coordinating and accompanying training processes, as well as assigning resources for improving levels of empowerment and decision

making. The shared responsibilities between municipal authorities, UTC La Paz and local organizations are clearly defined and permit autonomy and independence. Until today, this has been a decisive element in handling the proposals coming from the communities

Utilizing learnings from the exchange visit and a supportive mayor, UTC La Paz had managed to build a structure where the mayor and the municipality would respond to and address the issues raised by the *patronatos*- *the elected body* and by UTC La Paz – the local civil society group. With this coordinated actions of building democracy, the ability to put pressure on the municipality was all of a sudden increased.

### Community Managed Project

So when the Honduran Social Investment Fund decided to finance a local health centre in Tutule, everybody's attention was focused on citizens' participation. That was when the mayor responded to people, and decided to hand over the entire project to the citizens. A so-called Community Managed Project. Four months later, in July 2006, the health centre was ready. And not only had the citizens, through the *patronatos*, managed the project efficiently in terms of construction, they had also managed the financial aspects so well that a small amount of money could be invested in not-planned-for decorations at the centre.

To cut a long story short, the Social Investment Fund was so pleased with the result, that they granted the municipality and the *patronato* an additional grant which was used to buy equipment for the health centre and finance the construction of a system of clean water tanks, providing some 2.000 inhabitants with clean water. That project was also carried out in complete harmony and satisfaction, and the Social Investment Fund granted the community yet another grant enabling them to carry out another clean water project, this time at the very spot where the local fountain originates.

### United we stand...

"I believe that the cooperation between local government and civil society in this case has helped a lot. As *patronato*, we have been involved whenever reports on the progress of the work have been given, and we have made our observations and put forward our ideas on how to proceed. In other communities they also start projects, but never manage to finish them because the citizens aren't involved in the process. In our case, we pay for materials and skilled workers, but all the rest, the non-skilled workers, involve themselves on a voluntary basis at whatever level they find convenient. Before, there was a division between the *patronatos*, the civil society organizations and the municipality. We didn't support each other and nobody listened to the others. But ever since we signed the cooperation agreement, the mayor has taken us into account. Now he understands that he has to listen to the people who voted for him, because they above all know what their own needs are. I think this attitude is what has brought development to our community," says the president of the *patronato* of Tutule, Crescencio Aguilar.

### Passing on the experience

Based on their own experiences, the citizens and politicians of Tutule now have to pass on their experiences to citizens and politicians in other places, eagerly waiting to adapt the experience to their own, local reality. The process is only just beginning.

-, Benedikte Jeppesen , Lisbeth Petersen & Christian Korsgaard, MS<sup>2</sup> Central America.

For more details on the experience in Tutule in Spanish, please visit [www.ms.dk/sw116532.asp](http://www.ms.dk/sw116532.asp)

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