

## Abstract

Three issues dominate the response to poverty reduction: Debt relief, Trade justice and Aid. It is argued that the best evidence that development is working is when ordinary people in poor communities can testify that they are experiencing a better life. True, but this indicator often falls short of either stating “how” the better life comes about (for example through “hand-outs”), or looking into the future of the poor. Consequently dependence and the cycle of poverty continue. In response to the urgency of action to reduce poverty, the big target of the Millennium Development Goals in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the study considers the response from the point of view of capacity: capacity (to compliment other efforts) for a sustainable poverty reduction. “Capacity” has grown into that aspect of development (in SSA) that is acknowledged and discussed largely in relation to foreign development cooperation (foreign expertise). Consequently a lot of development projects and development aid to most African countries have been left to rot for lack of local capacity to sustain them and enhance the much needed local synergy effect in the fight against poverty.

Development planning, implementation and management has been characterised in the past by a history of shifts between various paradigms, the private and public sectors. While the major helping hands such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and donors are yet to settle for a clear development approach, a third sector in the form of civil society, a strong part of which is Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), have claimed great prominence in development in SSA.

The mention of NGOs in poverty reduction is often largely limited to “northern” or foreign NGOs (FNGOs) and with the NGO landscape dominated by a handful of such ‘giants’ in Europe and the US, to explore the relationship between FNGOs and sustainable poverty reduction is a daunting undertaking. For notwithstanding decades of development co-operation and the gloomy prospect of meeting the development targets through FNGOs, the position of FNGOs as the agents of donor countries, duly guaranteeing the flow of money and development projects in SSA, is very important and their role in building capacities for poverty reduction should be investigated.

The relatively stable but poor West African country Ghana, which has a large foreign NGO presence is selected for the study. Poverty in Ghana is highly concentrated in the north. The Northern Region which lies below the national average in living standards and (thus) with the highest number of FNGOs after the nation’s capital is selected for the study. The selection of FNGOs working in the region considered type of NGO, country of origin, international spread, experience and diversity of interventions. The three emerging FNGOs for the multiple case-studies are as follows:

Case I: **Konrad Adenauer Foundation** (Germany) Political. Not resident in region.

Case II: **Action-Aid** (UK) Philanthropic. National affiliate. Resident in region.

Case III: **Catholic Relief Services** (USA) Religious. Resident in region.

The following questions were prioritised for the study:

- What are the capacity needs for a sustainable poverty reduction in the region?
- How (and with whom) are foreign NGOs implementing the Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy in the Northern Region?
- What are the guarantees for the future of FNGO poverty reduction interventions in the region?

The propositions of the study are summarised as follows:

- If foreign NGO interventions are to reduce poverty and arrest the dependence of the poor on development aid, FNGO programmes should have the objective of building local capacities without supplanting the local initiatives.
- A pro-people (organisations) approach to poverty reduction will bear more fruit in the future for the poor than a welfare service provision/project focused approach.
- Local ownership is needed to make FNGO intervention in poverty reduction sustainable.

To achieve the big target, the study focused on the following specific objectives:

- To investigate the capacity support provided by FNGOs to their local partners for a sustainable poverty reduction and development in the Northern Region.
- To examine how the process adopted by the FNGOs supports the implementation of the Ghana poverty reduction programme in the region.
- To identify and recommend areas in which the FNGOs and local actors can co-operate to reduce poverty and enhance sustainable local development.

Capacity building is defined considering “who” does “what” and “how”, and how these translate to actors, the content and the process of poverty reduction respectively. This means a sustainable capacity building should not only stop at impacting skills to the local actors, but should also consider appropriate resources and equipment, as well as the system and framework to ensure the operationalisation of the process.

The idea that capacities exist in Ghana and need to be developed synthesizes the conclusion that capacity for poverty reduction and sustainable development do not have to, and indeed should not be imported. Capacity for poverty reduction should not involve foreign actors, tools and strategies but also the poor themselves. Another component is the environment in which the whole operation takes place, the socio-economic and political context. The study found out that the talk about capacity development is hardly reflected on the ground. FNGOs are overwhelmed by welfare and relief work in the region, and are in transition from relief to real development, and yet to translate the talk about capacity development into local significance.

The true test of FNGOs is not (only) how to provide relief and welfare services, immediate emergency needs, but (also) enabling local capacities to consolidate foreign efforts for poverty reduction when they shall have left. With reference to the conceptual framework, the recommendations depart from drawing up a capacity building manual, and deal with a goal-oriented partnership among local and foreign actors based on a “hands-off” approach and the principle of subsidiarity, which allows beneficiaries to do what they can do better, to be productive and self-reliant. As no single FNGO makes an all encompassing intervention, it is recommended that FNGOs also collaborate and compliment each other. The picture of rural women at a midwifery class (cover photo) in the region speaks tons. The implementation of the recommendations will require political will, policies and commitment at all levels, as well as curbing the ensuing socio-cultural and policy implications.

A capacity building mechanism to guarantee a synergy effect and the sustainability of foreign interventions in poverty reduction will need to address certain issues in order to make the Ghana experience transferable to other countries in the SSA region. Capacity building for poverty reduction should be about mobilising African (human) resources: accountable Southern and local NGOs, and not “transnational development agencies”, vying for contracts in poor countries. There can hardly be a more crucial role for FNGOs in building capacities for poverty reduction than promoting and leaving the Southern and local NGOs to do the job.