

Results of the cross-sectoral evaluation of partnership, and MISEREOR's conclusions

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[Introduction](#)

Partnership is a concept that has been with MISEREOR ever since the agency was founded. This is because MISEREOR does not itself initiate action in development projects. It rather supports the work of partner organisations in the South, which are usually country-based. At the same time, MISEREOR is particularly closely embedded into the Universal Church: the majority of our partners in the South are dioceses, congregations and Church-based organisations. Yet we also support the work of secular development organisations.

MISEREOR seeks to build this cooperation on an ethos of partnership, which means practicing it on equal terms. We know that it is only through the dedicated commitment, the knowledge and the expertise of our partner organisations in the South that we can help tackle the causes of hunger and disease in the world.

But how successful are we as practitioners of partnership? To what extent do our partners in the South notice? And does it make any difference whether MISEREOR conducts itself as a partner, or as a donor entitled to take important decisions?

MISEREOR's 50th anniversary was a fitting occasion on which to review how MISEREOR translates its understanding of partnership into practice, and what effects this generates. This is why MISEREOR conducted a cross-sectoral evaluation, the results of which were presented and discussed in-house in 2008. Preparation of the evaluation, entitled "The reality and effects of partnership processes in MISEREOR's project work", was coordinated by Sigfrid Schröder-Breitschuh, an independent development consultant.

The study shows that in cooperation between MISEREOR and project-implementing organisations in the South partnership is a reality – yet it also has limits. The partner organisations are able to experience this ethos of partnership in the long-term nature of the relationships, in personal encounters and exchange conducted on an equal footing, and in joint actions and networks that extend beyond the immediate project work. The limits of partnership are reached where the expectations of both sides remain unspoken, where rigid rules constrain flexible solutions, or where there is no time for personal exchange.

Notes on the objectives and methodology of the study completed in April 2008

The objective of the cross-sectoral evaluation was to review the management of partnership-based processes, and improve their effectiveness, in projects and programmes supported by MISEREOR. The evaluation was designed specifically to

- identify and document the effects of the partnership principle, and
- promote processes of reflection on points of entry for achieving greater effectivity.

To this end first of all interviews were held at MISEREOR, and a workshop was conducted with staff members involved in cooperation with project partners. A questionnaire was sent to 87 partners selected at random in 30 priority countries (10 each in Africa, Asia and Latin America). In addition, interviews were conducted with partner organisations within the framework of other consultancy assignments taking place during the period of the study.

The core element of the evaluation was formed by six 'South-based studies': the partnership process – a process that unfolds over years – was studied with two partner organisations each in Africa, Asia and Latin America, in relation to a common frame of reference. To prepare these studies the consultants spent 5-8 days visiting the respective partner organisations, where they interviewed staff members, former staff members and target-group representatives. They also interviewed those members of staff at MISEREOR in Aachen who helped build these partnerships.

The partner organisations involved in the South-based studies were: in Latin America the Pastoral Land Commission in Brazil, and the NGO SEAS/AR, which operates in Paraguay; in Asia Caritas Nepal, and the NGO SPARC in India; in Africa the rural development programme DERN of the Diocese of Ruhengeri in Rwanda, and INADES Formation, an organisation that operates on an Africa-wide basis. At this point we would like to express our cordial thanks to them once again for their important contributions.

The evaluation was conducted by Mr. Sigfrid Schröder-Breitschuh of milango gmbh. The six South-based studies were carried out by the consultants Sigfrid Schröder-Breitschuh, Ekkehard Geray, Prof. Dr. Peter Herrle, Dr. Johannes Augel, Dr. Thomas Schwedersky and Dr. Thomas Döhne. The investigations took place between September 2007 and January 2008.

What do the actors involved mean by the word 'partnership'?

Results of the study

Partnership is a fundamental principle in the work of MISEREOR. Nevertheless, MISEREOR does not have a conclusive definition of this term. Key elements of MISEREOR's understanding of the term are:

- § The 'responding-to-proposal' principle, which means that it is not MISEREOR that defines project objectives and measures, but its partners in the South.
- § Personal relationships between the staff members of MISEREOR and the partner organisations in the South.
- § The self-reliance and independence of our partners; mutual respect and trust.
- § Shared values and goals in the work. This is where the community of the Universal Church again and again proves its worth. At the same time, though,

basic values and an understanding of development policy shared with non-Church-based partner organisations time and time again also lead to relationships of close partnership.

The partner organisations interviewed largely share this understanding. However, they also make clear that MISEREOR does not mention its understanding of partnership regularly, and that MISEREOR's staff members often do not have enough time to establish and develop relationships of partnership. They also raise the question of whether a partnership based on equality is possible at all between a donor and its recipients.

MISEREOR's assessment

MISEREOR is currently supporting more than 5,000 projects in 95 countries, in which context it is cooperating with approximately 2,500 partner organisations. MISEREOR has around 65 staff members who are in direct contact with these partners. If we wish to reach as many people and organisations in the South as possible, and at the same time keep expenditure on our own administrative structures low, then we must accept restrictions on the intensity of partnership.

We are pleased to note that most of the partner organisations taking part in the study nevertheless did feel able to experience partnership with MISEREOR. And we hope that you will understand that we are not always able to maintain a level of presence that the term 'partnership' would suggest.

The practice of partnership and its effects

Results of the study

What does partnership with MISEREOR actually involve?

Partnership with project partners involves the financial support of projects, dialogue on those projects, project visits, consultancy and evaluation assignments, participation by partners in MISEREOR activities (such as the Lenten Campaign in Germany), and initiatives for exchange and networking.

What changes as a result of partnership-based cooperation?

Through all these initiatives MISEREOR helps enable Church-based and civil society organisations in the South to continue developing so as to be better able to perform their role of supporting the development processes of the poor. As a result, partner organisations are able to employ additional personnel, acquire new expertise and respond to new challenges by addressing new themes, or by further developing their working methods.

All these factors in turn affect the nature of cooperation between the legal holders of the projects in the South and their partners, especially the target groups. So partnership-based cooperation between MISEREOR and legal holders of projects also affects the ultimate beneficiaries – the poor who are involved in the projects. Partners report for instance that they attempt to also apply the principle of partnership which they experience with MISEREOR in their work with their target groups, who as a result develop more self-confidence and self-initiative.

Yet the study also notes: 'The partnership principle is the key concept and basis of intervention, and determines the quality of the cooperation. However, it can only take effect through interaction with other factors.' This is why the changes observed in the target groups can never be ascribed to MISEREOR's partnership principle alone.

MISEREOR's assessment

The cross-sectoral evaluation was guided by the hypothesis that building partnership has a value beyond financial support, and leads to additional effects in the South. Effects at the level of the partner organisations were demonstrated, and effects at the level of the target groups can plausibly be assumed on the basis of the evaluation. MISEREOR feels encouraged by these results to continue building its future cooperation with the South on partnership, to the extent possible given our limited capacities and the frameworks in place.

Stronger effects monitoring – a help or a hindrance to partnership?

MISEREOR is making efforts to orient its work more systematically toward the planned effects of project work, and the effects actually achieved. The cross-sectoral evaluation of partnership enabled us to ask our partners how they assess these ongoing developments.

Results of the study

In a large majority of cases the response to MISEREOR's higher standards of effects monitoring among the partner organisations interviewed was positive. Some partners see these higher standards as strengthening and protecting their own interest in obtaining more information on effects, and striving to achieve greater effectivity. They expect to improve their performance capacity and efficiency, and to achieve effects that are more sustainable. They hope to be better able to reflect on their own lessons learned, and further develop their understanding of change processes.

Some hold reservations as to whether effects can be demonstrated after only a short project duration, as to whether detailed and complex effects monitoring might lead to false priority setting in a situation of limited resources, and as to whether unrealistic expectations concerning the demonstration of effects might adversely affect cooperation. The question was also raised of whether MISEREOR has sufficient working capacities to be able to process the additional information. The partner organisations interviewed expect MISEREOR to provide practical support for implementation of the higher standards.

MISEREOR's assessment

We are delighted by the encouraging responses to our efforts, and take the reservations seriously. We are already in the process of organising workshops with numerous partners in order to dialogue with them on these issues, and of developing consultancy capacities to support partners in systematically implementing effects monitoring.

The Guidelines for the Submission of Funding Requests to MISEREOR and the Guidelines for Narrative and Financial Reporting

to MISEREOR developed in 2007 are designed to help our project partners orient their own work and their communication with MISEREOR more strongly toward effects.

These Guidelines can be downloaded here <http://www.misereor.org/en/serviceorg.html>.

Conducive and constraining factors for partnership

Results of the study

What works successfully between MISEREOR and its partners?

- § With a large proportion of its partner organisations, MISEREOR enters into long-term relationships. Over time, further aspects of partnership develop: respect, trust, more intensive exchange on substantial issues, participation in joint events and networks.
- § Dialogue and encounter are important, though need not be performed by MISEREOR staff members alone. Temporary support provided by consultants, and through consultancy and evaluation assignments, were also identified as positive examples of partnership, for instance.
- § Shared values and transparent communication remain very important.
- § For many of the participating partner organisations, solidarity and flexibility in situations of crisis was a strong trust-inducing factor in the partnership. Overall, flexibility and a willingness to support changes were mentioned frequently.

Where do problems exist with partnership?

- § MISEREOR does not directly raise the issue of partnership vigorously enough. This means that mutual expectations that go beyond the Project Contract often remain unclear. This can have an unsettling effect, especially in situations of asymmetric decision-making power resulting from the roles of donor and recipient. Our partners in the South often lack awareness of how much they contribute to partnership, and of the fact that MISEREOR is just as dependent on their expertise and willingness to cooperate as our partners in the South are on financial support from MISEREOR.
- § Our partners often feel inadequately informed about MISEREOR's internal procedures and rules. This is a problem particularly with respect to financial cooperation. Often, after there has been a good dialogue on the issues before a project is approved, the strict communication of accounting rules is then perceived as lacking in the spirit of partnership. Once a project has been approved, MISEREOR staff members lack the time to continue the dialogue.
- § Generally speaking, differences of opinion concerning objectives, themes and procedures of development cooperation are not seen as a problem. Many partners reported that disagreement with MISEREOR generated important impetus for them to further develop their own work. Sometimes, though, MISEREOR's attitude is seen as directive and counter-productive for the interests of target groups.

MISEREOR's assessment

Thanks to this evaluation we have noted the need to also talk about partnership more with our partners. Through the present document, which is posted on our website in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, we would like to make our thoughts on partnership transparent, and invite you to respond to them. Please do so by using the form provided here <http://www.misereor.org> or via e-mail (evaluation@misereor.de).

The role of the donor and that of the partner - how do the two fit together?

Results of the study

The relationship between MISEREOR and its project partners is characterised by a fundamental imbalance. The financial resources, and the decision-making power over them, rest with just one partner – MISEREOR. Many of our partners in the South believe that genuine partnership is not possible under these conditions.

Financial management often appears to be the 'touchiest issue' of cooperation. Our partners in the South are often not aware of the reasons behind the strict rules of accounting and disbursement, and perceive the cooperation as inflexible. Delays caused by administrative procedures place a strain on partnership.

MISEREOR's assessment

Since this point of criticism is the one expressed most frequently by our partners, we would like to respond to it in detail.

The funds that MISEREOR makes available to its project partners do not belong to MISEREOR: These are monies made available to us by individuals in Germany (who provide around 34% of these funds), the Catholic Church in Germany (around 5-6%) and above all the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (almost 60%). Those who entrust us with these funds expect them to be used as effectively and transparently as possible to help reduce poverty.

MISEREOR is the trustee of these funds, and is accountable for the fact that they are used for their designated purpose. To this end - especially bearing in mind the large number of promoted projects - we need rules that are clear and apply to everybody. The Project Contracts with their General Agreements provide for mutual rights and obligations subject to the same requirements in all cases.

In other words MISEREOR has no other choice but to apply certain standards – because those who provide us with funds expect this, but also and above all because this meets our own expectations of fairness and transparency. We have learned from the evaluation, though, that we must also make more of an effort to communicate this to our partners. We are working on that – already in a very hands-on way in our everyday dialogue, but also on a fundamental level within the scope of our quality management. We hope that our partners are already beginning to feel the effects of this.

Our own efforts to achieve transparency are reflected for instance in our commitment to 'MISEREOR's transparency principles'.

Recommendations by the consultant

The consultant who conducted this evaluation, Sigfrid Schröder-Breitschuh, recommends that MISEREOR:

- § intensify its exchange on partnership, and on the role of the Project Contract as a component of partnership;
- § intensify its exchange on the requirements of financial management and the reasons behind them;
- § make a more conscious decision to invest more working time in partnerships, where circumstances permit;
- § establish additional dialogue and networking points in the South, and
- § boost its support for networks.

MISEREOR's assessment

We are already attempting to translate the first three recommendations into practice. However, we must always accept that our working capacities are limited. Because any resources that we invest in our own staff are then no longer available to the projects. Striking the right balance between staff and project funds is therefore a difficult challenge.

MISEREOR is also interested in developing its dialogue capacities – decisions on the appropriate form of dialogue will need to be taken on a case by case basis.

MISEREOR does not share unreservedly the consultant's thoroughly positive assessment of networks – we see the potentials of networks, but in concrete cases we would raise questions concerning their cost-benefit ratio. It seems to us that a more differentiated strategy would be necessary here, enabling us to provide targeted support to networks at those points where they are particularly effective.

Contact

We would be delighted to hear your responses – and especially the responses of our partner organisations – to the results of the study and to our conclusions. Please let us have them by using the contact form available here: <http://www.misereor.org> or via e-mail (evaluation@misereor.de).

The full report on the study is only available in German. To protect the confidentiality of the report in the interests of our participating partners, it will not be published. For research purposes it is available for consultation at MISEREOR's Head Office in Aachen.