



POLICY DOCUMENT

# Assessing the Effects of Development Cooperation - MISEREOR's Conception and Approach

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## Introduction

Assessing the effects of development cooperation is a theme to which MISEREOR has attached prime importance for many years. The workbook "Evaluations in the Churches' Development Cooperation" speaks of "joint impact assessment as a special form of dialogue"<sup>1</sup>, and MISEREOR's own conception of effects and how they are measured was presented in the book "Wirkungen und Nebenwirkungen"<sup>2</sup> and contrasted with the practices adopted by other institutions.

This Policy Document, which sets out MISEREOR's current position, was produced by the Thematic Group on Effects and Quality after intensive examination of the work previously carried out on this theme. It is designed to facilitate further exchanges between staff members at MISEREOR and to serve as a basis for the dialogue with partners and experts in this field. It dovetails with further organisational developments at MISEREOR and refinements in the instruments employed. These include the introduction of outcome and impact-oriented reporting by the partners, regular effects-oriented cross-sectoral evaluations, and the mainstreaming of an internal quality management system.

The individual sections in this Policy Document contain the core statements comprising MISEREOR's conception of effects:

MISEREOR views development as processes of social change that are shaped and reflected upon by the people directly affected. The sheer diversity of real-world conditions in which development processes unfold are not ideally tackled by means of a linear approach, but rather by viewing relationships as parts of a whole that influence each other and undergo change as a result. Furthermore, a specific characteristic of MISEREOR is that it does not implement development projects itself but supports the work of independent partner organisations. For the communication between partners, the assessment of effects and evaluations are important instruments of reflection. It is not possible to predict with certainty the effects that will emerge - effects understood as changes which are perceived as being important. In order to be able to steer change processes, we must therefore gear planning, monitoring and evaluation to effects.

The importance of this Policy Document rests on how it is perceived and employed to guide actual development work. For this reason, it aims to foster a common understanding and to enable readers to benefit from this in their own work.

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<sup>1</sup> Dütting, Martin, et al., Evaluations in the Churches' Development Cooperation, published by AGKED and MISEREOR, Aachen/Stuttgart 1991, p. 4

<sup>2</sup> Dolzer, Hermann, et al., Wirkungen und Nebenwirkungen (Effects and side effects), Aachen 1998 (exists only in German)

# 1. Our conception of development and social change

In its work, MISEREOR is committed to specific overarching objectives and themes: "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation". In this respect, a guiding principle underlying the goal of development is that the people themselves drive the process and lead self-determined lives in dignity. Accordingly, development work supports the poor, the disadvantaged and those whose rights are restricted in changing the conditions in society for their benefit.

This thrust of MISEREOR's work reflects a specific option. For development initially opens up a path that is not from the outset predetermined in terms of thematic content and direction: whether the desired development manifests itself as economic growth or in the degree of organisation among the population, in the democratisation of political systems or in the income security of the poorest population groups – this is a matter of the respective world or individual view. Each organisation actively involved in development must define the thematic content of the term for itself.

For MISEREOR, this can be illustrated by means of the following paradigmatic example: disadvantaged people become aware of the need for action in a spirit of solidarity and take it upon themselves to responsibly shape their lives, individually and as a community. Important steps in this development are improved incomes, the responsible use of resources and respect for the environment, and the formation of pro-community organisational structures. Based on the experience gained, the people gradually exert more influence on decisions that affect their lives at local, regional and national level. On the one hand, through their initiative and commitment they show how alternative forms of action and coexistence are possible and, on the other, they exercise their rights to codetermination and policy-shaping and contribute to broad-based development.

A key characteristic of this understanding of development cooperation is the focus on a desired social change, i.e. positive social, economic, cultural and political change in a country or region. This means that MISEREOR must gear up for long-term cooperation with partner organisations. The specific instruments in this cooperation are individual programmes or projects designed as inputs towards the desired social change. In this conception, the construction of a well is only part of the intended development. Further aspects of development include the changes brought about by the well in the lives of the people who took the joint decision to build and maintain it, who now spend less time fetching water and thus have more time to do other things, and who are less often ill and therefore able to dedicate themselves to further activities. This relationship between the individual project and the long-term and open character of development is what we mean by the term development "process".<sup>3</sup>

Development projects<sup>4</sup> thus contribute to a development process when the actors (target groups, partner implementing organisation/development organisation, donor organisation, other stakeholders<sup>5</sup>) observe and jointly advance social change in the desired direction through their interventions.

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of 'process' is also indicative of a systemic understanding of development that takes its complex nature into account.

<sup>4</sup> A project is defined as a planned intervention to influence a (development) process. In administrative terms, for MISEREOR a project is an intervention of the partner for which it provides financial support.

<sup>5</sup> MISEREOR finds the term "target group" misleading but uses it in keeping with normal practice. The term refers to independently active people who are addressed within the framework of a project or programme. The partner organisation, as development organisation, implements the project on site. MISEREOR supports its activities. As a rule, other participants are also designated as actors, as the partner organisation operates in an environment in which other organisations (in some cases cooperation partners) influence development.

## 2. Systems thinking

Development in the sense of social change is a complex process. It is not clear at the outset whether a measure undertaken by a development project will lead to the expected results and effects.

Example – a lending programme for women:

According to the project plan, women were to form self-help groups and receive a series of small loans, which they would use for income-generating measures. This would lead to an increase in family incomes and in turn trigger further economic and social improvements. However, the expected improvements in incomes did not materialise. The linear logic, "loan – income-generating measures – rising incomes" did not pan out. The processes were apparently more complex.

A non-linear conceptual model - systems thinking - is more appropriate for dealing with this level of complexity. A system is understood as an entirety of interconnected parts whose interrelationships display a marked degree of intensity. A family, village, suburban community, organisation or self-help group can all be thought of as systems. Systems can spawn subsystems or be part of larger systems, and interaction is a feature of all of them. One action generates numerous reactions that have a reciprocal impact on the action as well as on third parties and so on. These interactions are complex and their downstream impacts are predictable only to a limited extent.

The 'family' system for example affects women's scope for action. The women were not able to use the loan in all cases as their husbands took the money for themselves. The women had to repay the loan out of other sources of income, with the result that the economic situation in some families deteriorated instead of improving. In emergency situations, e.g. illness, the money was spent on consumer items and not put to economically productive use.

Although for many women the project objective was not reached, they nevertheless remained loyal to the project as such – this was the second surprising discovery not envisaged in the planning.

When a system is confronted with an event (in the context of social development this could be anything from a development project to a natural disaster or a political decision), a process of dealing with the corresponding impact is set in motion which follows the internal logic of the system.

According to the internal logic, the women in the example project redirected the project for their own use: they established ways of sharing experience outside the boundaries of their own family system, and they were able to develop areas of common ground with other women etc. A new system evolved, the self-help group, which fulfilled an important function for the women.

The challenge facing those responsible for implementing development projects is to understand and take into account the internal logic of the systems. Intended changes are always best achieved when they are steered by the system itself, i.e. when the system itself defines the change it would like to achieve, identifies the measures most likely to secure success, plans which changes are actually to take place – monitoring and examining these itself, and decides what the response should be.

In our example project, this means we would have to jointly consider with the women,

§ which positive effects the project has already achieved and how to ensure their sustainability,

§ why the original objective – increasing family incomes – was not reached, and

§ how this objective can be achieved in the context of the systems involved.

In this way, learning processes can take place in the various systems involved: in the self-help group, in the family system and in the development organisation. Changes in one system have a reciprocal impact on the others, and these changes set in train a development process.

The role of an outsider (e.g. a development organisation) is then no longer to implement an intervention, but to provide impetus and to support a system in the change process. For this, we need to be able to think our way as far as possible into the system, while accepting our limitations in this respect .

### 3. Partnership

MISEREOR does not implement development projects itself but supports the work of partner organisations in the South. These organisations formulate their objectives based on their conception of development, their particular experience and their cooperative relations with the people they aim to assist in their efforts.

Support can be forthcoming in areas in which the objectives of the two sides, the partner and MISEREOR, are congruent. It is essential that the partners endeavour to meet as equals from the outset.

Such partnership is best attained when the two sides succeed in communicating clearly and in sufficient detail their interests and expectations, their experience, ideas and strategies as well as their obligations to others. This is the great challenge that partnerships face. Ensuring good relations between partners therefore demands qualities and attitudes above and beyond technical and professional skills: empathy and understanding, respect and tolerance, and the realisation that we can never fully grasp reality as perceived by others. MISEREOR seeks to select not only its own staff but also external appraisers for evaluations and consulting services with these characteristics and qualities in mind.

The purposeful planning, monitoring and evaluation of work activities and their effects are key building blocks for the communication between partners. When partners in the South can convey their conception of development to MISEREOR and outline how their project work is to contribute, MISEREOR gains a better understanding of their approach and can channel its own ideas and expectations into the process. Ideally, both sides learn from this.

Evaluations and effects assessments serve an important function in this respect. They can take the form of self-evaluations or self-assessments by the partners in the South, enabling them to productively apply and benefit from their ideas and strategies, the effects of their work, the difficulties encountered and lessons learned, and to share these with MISEREOR. Alternatively, in the case of joint evaluations and workshops, they are indeed 'privileged occasions for exchange' between the partner organisations and MISEREOR.

### 4. Effects and their assessment

Through its development work, MISEREOR aims to support processes of social change that lead to improved living conditions for the poor and disadvantaged. As such, our work is intended to impact systems that exist independently of MISEREOR. Various actors, with their own interests, resources and goals, are involved and influence the aspects and direction of social change.

This is why it is so important to monitor the effects of our own actions. Here, effects are understood as the changes in a situation or condition triggered by an intervention (e.g. a development project). The project itself does not generate effects, but merely provides inputs

that may help bring about certain effects. The products and services the project itself delivers or offers (e.g. the seminar, advisory services, the well constructed within the framework of the project) do not constitute effects; effects do not emerge until these things bring about change in the lives of the people. These effects may commence early on in the planning phase of the project<sup>6</sup>. They may be observed throughout the whole project term and possibly far beyond this period.

MISEREOR is interested in effects in the sense of changes in the material and non-material living conditions perceived by the people affected as being important, regardless of whether such changes are intended or unintended, expected or unexpected, positive or negative.

In addition to these effects on the immediate target groups, we are also interested in changes not (yet) visible in the living conditions of the target groups, but which are reflected in the framework conditions that determine what influence the target groups exert in terms of shaping their lives. MISEREOR is thus also interested in effects that are manifested as changes in the way those persons think and act who are working with or for MISEREOR's target groups, or who play a major part in determining the framework conditions in which these target groups live<sup>7</sup>.

Furthermore, MISEREOR is also interested in the sustainability of the positive changes achieved.

As it is not possible to predict these effects with certainty when planning a development measure, effects assessments, or more precisely: outcome and impact assessments<sup>8</sup> are essential as a basis for responsible project management and further conceptual development. Planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME) must be focused on effects. Since the poor, as target group, are the central actors in the development process, their participation in effects-oriented PME is crucial. On the one hand, effects assessments facilitate our understanding of development processes, thus enabling us to influence these more precisely; on the other hand, they make an important contribution in terms of meeting accountability obligations, both within the organisation and towards external bodies.

Effects-oriented planning entails:

- constructing a vision of development that serves as a guideline for assessing effects (including unexpected effects)
- formulating objectives as expected positive effects
- considering possible – desirable or undesirable – side effects during the planning stage
- planning activities on the basis of plausible assumptions about effects, in other words to answer the question: What activities have the potential to set in motion changes that will lead to the desired effects?
- including effects-oriented monitoring and evaluation in the planning from the outset.

Accordingly, effects-oriented monitoring entails:

- observing the changes in the target groups: planned and unplanned, desirable and undesirable
- taking into account the appraisals of the "target groups" when evaluating changes
- using these observations and assessments to steer one's own work, and
- documenting these for in-house reflection and reporting.

Effects-oriented evaluation entails:

- reflecting on observed changes together with the target groups

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<sup>6</sup> In some cases, planning awakens expectations, enhances motivation and alters attitudes and behaviours.

<sup>7</sup> For example in the project implementing organisation, or in the local authority administration.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the 2007 MISEREOR "effects" Glossary. In our terminology, 'outcomes' are more immediate effects, whereas 'impacts' are rather long-term and indirect effects.

- drawing conclusions from this for an appropriate continuation of the process or for designing new processes
- using these observations and conclusions for outcome and impact-oriented reporting
- examining existing assumptions about effects
- estimating the project contribution to an observed change by applying plausibility considerations
- considering the effects in long-completed project components (ex-post) in order to draw conclusions for shaping further cooperation.

This completes the description of effects assessments and the corresponding PME activities at the partner organisation.

For MISEREOR too, plausible assumptions about effects are an important component in the concept of effects monitoring. These assumptions about effects are based on knowledge about the country, the knowledge of the partners as well as the experience already gained and which will be augmented through project visits, the partner dialogue and the analyses of project reports etc. Due to the complexity of the situation on the ground and for reasons of cost, it is not feasible to carry out regular and comprehensive external effects analyses for all projects and programmes. The balance between working with assumptions about effects and the need in individual cases for more substantive information (for example through evaluations) must be constantly sought.

For MISEREOR and its partners, effects assessment plays an important role for an appropriate steering of development work and the associated process of institutional learning. In this way, attention is drawn to the joint responsibility of all concerned – partners in the South and MISEREOR as an agency for overseas development - to improve the effectiveness of projects and programmes.