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STORY ON PARTNERSHIP AND LOCALISATION IN WEST AFRICA

Mobilisation and Empowerment of Children and Youth on the move (EJM)

Partner: Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs (MAEJT)

WHAT IS THE BACKGROUND OF THE STORY?

When learning about successful partnerships many questions come up. Among them were the following ones: How to partner effectively, and responsively with a partner whose strength and identity is also a source of tension in the project? How does a highly structured and organised INGO build trust and equal respect with a partner that is opposite in nature and way of working?

This particular partnership story focuses on the **relationship between Helvetas and one partner** from the EJM programme, a complex multi-country project with an international consortium and multiple national and regional partners. The relationship within MAEJT puts a spotlight on **trust, openness and a willingness to learn on both sides**.



Helvetas came to know the Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs (MAEJT) during the tendering process for the EJM multicountry programme. A key consortium member, Terre des Hommes had a relationship with MAEJT and this proved key during tender development. «MAEJT is special because they were born through street children». They are strong on participation and are able to bring out the authentic voice of the children that they represent. They had an important role as a well connected movement that was directly in touch with the programme target group and a strong history of working on youth-on-the-move issues across North and West Africa.

Although Helvetas recognised MAEJT's obvious strength as a well-rooted partner, the movement's 'lose' structure and ways of working that were unfamiliar to Helvetas, led to them being seen as 'high risk'. Right from the start, this 'high risk' perception was the basis of a decision to stagger transfer of funds to MAEJT whilst simultaneously strengthening MAEJT financial systems. This 'conditionality' proved to be a test of whether the partnership would work or not.

EJM PROGRAMME IN BRIEF

Funders

6 SDC departments and SEM. Coordinating funder is SDC Tunisia.

Target group

Children up to 24 years old and on the move in North and West Africa.

Focus

Education (25%); Integration (25%) Protection (50%) - includes prevention and re-integration.

Approach

Roughly 1/3 service provision and 2/3 system change. Intervention levels extend from community level to transnational and cross-border dialogues, regulation and policy.

Cross-cutting themes:

GSE, Data & Research, Innovation, & Digitalisation, CSPM and KNL.



CHALLENGES

In the words of the Helvetas Multi-country Programme Manager, «There were times, I wanted to cry - we had two years of weekly discussions». Helvetas and MAEJT learned from each other, and built trust and respect over time. «We explained why we have to be restrictive with certain expenses and discussed how we could find solutions. They accepted to follow the rules.» Although some of the discussions were tough, Helvetas' intention to support was clear and believable. MAEJT wanted capitalisation but Helvetas insisted on financial management first and then they would get resources for capitalisation. Helvetas kept this promise, and hired a part time finance officer to support them. In the beginning, the weekly meetings were sometimes very hard, because many financial documents were not OK. Things seriously improved over time. Other donors of MAEJT feel the difference. «It has been one of the best results with them.»

WAY OF COOPERATION

Through this intensity and frequency of interaction, monitoring and discussion, Helvetas shifted in its view of MAEJT – «we began to understand their identity and their strengths and to get an idea of why strict structures and rules were not so important to them».

The daily working habits of MAEJT were very different from what Helvetas would call 'normal or usual' – they communicate mostly via WhatsApp, they have no regular working hours, they do not work with an agenda, and needed to be reminded of meetings all the time - then they might come late because urgent issues with street-youth pop up and they must respond – they give priority to being available when they are needed on the ground. «As an INGO, we do not take such a way of working and culture and different way of living into account - this is something we should consider when we work with partners».

With the trust build over time, these things, although still challenging, could be discussed openly between Helvetas and MAEJT and sometimes with a smile and laughter – «at least in this partnership we talk about it when I get mad or frustrated with their free spirit».

«In the context of localisation, 20% should be reserved for strengthening organisations.»

Partnership and Localisation Workshop, Senegal



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EFFECTS AND PROGRESS

As an effect, difficult meetings became less frequent and those happening were more focused on operations. With the improved systems, Helvetas acted on its promise to fund capitalisation. This went towards general support to MAEJT to strengthen their movement and their strategy. This year, MAEJT will organise a workshop to celebrate 30 years of existence. Helvetas has become more supportive and flexible because they now have a better understanding of

MAEJT's day-to-day rhythm and constraints. This complementarity took time and trust to build.

Helvetas is more ready to step in to help – sometimes at short notice. A good example of this was an occasion when someone from MAEJT was arriving from Niger. Helvetas had arranged the invitation letter and MAEJT was supposed to organise the rest. At the last minute it was discovered that they had not booked a hotel, which is a requirement for entry. Helvetas had to step in and do it. When people arrive in a country with a Helvetas letter and their papers are not complete, it could become a big issue. This is an example of how their free identity can sometimes cause complications. «At the same time, if we are too rigid, we will affect or stifle their identity – their strength comes from this identity as a fluid, responsive and adaptive movement– we have to find ways of working in a two-way relationship with them.»

LEARNINGS

- Helvetas, learned a lot from MAEJT about how to mobilize children. MAEJT's role is to mobilise youth, promote their autonomy and advocate. They are skilful at this and have a methodology that works. In Morocco they manage this entirely on their own. When a problem emerges, they find a solution on their own, through small humanitarian activities, direct support and solidarity, or income generation. For instance when one has an issue with the police, the group delegates someone to go and help. In Niger they had difficulties accessing markets because of the way they were dressed. They adapted and now cover their head and can have access to women vendors in the market.
- «We believe if they can keep their identity and legitimacy with the youth, they can become stronger policy influencers». This requires support to develop a clear strategy for advocacy and for engaging with both national governments and other INGOs. At the moment, they are not as influential as they could be in dealing with systemic issues – this is why it is important to identify specific resources for building organisational and strategic capacities of high potential partners like MAEJT.

- MAEJT tends to be reactive and responds to demands from other INGOs as well as national ministries when it is convenient – they even work for free sometimes, simply because they care so much about youth-on-the-move issues. Partner strengthening is key and should be an integral part of Helvetas localisation policy.
- As part of the EJM capitalisation work and these reflections, Helvetas is now working with consultants to develop a manual for multicountry operations with local partners. They will work with a national representatives of MAEJT in each country who will have the opportunity to learn the methodology directly from the consultants. MAEJT should be able leverage this learning to improve its own systemisation efforts.

CONCLUSION

Helvetas sees its relationship with MAEJT as a successful partnership where both partners make their case in a strong way. Their journey to build trust has underscored the importance of investing in capacity strengthening as an integral part of partnerships. «In the context of localisation, 20% should be reserved for strengthening partners».



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Thanks to Naa-Aku Acquaye-Baddoo and Lucia Nass for recording the story