Whose process is this anyway?

By Lena Boberg

OD is complex at the best of times. When it is OD with churches; when the process is supported by external donors; when the funding is then channeled through more than one organisation, then the complexity increases exponentially. As stakeholders in the process, we are often so preoccupied with our own situation that we fail to see that we are part of a bigger picture. We need to relate our own actions to a system that is bigger than our own organisation. For those of us sitting in Europe, with power that comes from control over resources (whether we like it or not), we have to wield our power with great care and wisdom. In trying to do good through OD, we may do harm. But if we clarify what change is needed; whose process the OD is; how we will assess it and what we feel is our role in the process, then we will be better able to be part of something that brings deep and meaningful change.

In my work supporting OD from the Swedish Mission Council I hear frustrations from a wide variety of stakeholders:

"I am so frustrated. Nothing seems to be happening in this church partner. Should we continue to support the OD process when so little progress can be seen. They have accomplished almost nothing after a whole year!" (Staff of a Swedish Mission Agency)

"I need to make sure we do better in our international development assistance! This means the projects must show more and better results. We need to show tax-payers that their money is well spent" (Minister of Development Aid)

"We created a change team in the church to handle the change process that our sister-church in the North wanted us to embark on. We knew something had to be done and they gave us suggestions on how to start. And it is good we have the change team. It is better that they do it, than us pastors and elders. But to be honest, sometimes I'm not sure what is going on" (Church President)

"We were given the task from our church to manage this change process. We weren't sure what we were supposed to do, so we relied heavily on a consultant and trusted his judgment. The church board took a back seat. We were led to believe that we could change our church in a year or two. The funders wanted quick results. But how do you work quickly when you are not experienced" (Chair of the change committee)

"We don't want to be part of it if all it does is make us feel like fools! How would you feel if I started asking you questions about indeterminate soybean varieties? You say you want to involve us, but we do not understand what you are asking? You have not told us what you want to know nor why." (Farmer and lay leader)

Everyone sounds pretty frustrated. Perhaps this should not surprise us. By definition a change process is there to change things. The power balance is disrupted and whether or not the process leads to improvement it is not surprising that it causes anxiety and resistance – and frustration. Change and frustration often go hand-in-hand.

These five voices may not be commenting on the same OD process. Nor are they all actually actively part of the OD, but they are all involved. They all have an interest or a stake in the outcome. They demonstrate different perspectives on a typical OD process that involves a local church and a partnering church in Europe, who is receiving funding support for the OD from an external donor (or two!). An OD process in a church is complex enough on its own. It really does not need outside help to get more complicated. But add to OD extra dimensions and tensions through involving external actors such as funders, partners and consultants and you have a sure recipe for frustration.

While frustration may be inevitable in OD, allowing the frustration to remain, drain our emotions and prevent constructive change is not. To support the emergence of transforming OD processes we need to try to move beyond frustration and 'undevelopmental' practice in OD. To do this we need to understand some inherent issues in OD and develop clarity amongst stakeholders on the key questions outlined below. This is not a one-off event. We need to continually reflect on our OD practice, whether that is a direct OD practice or whether it is a 'support-OD-practice'. If we do this, the OD process can become smoother, or at least more conducive to relevant change in the church or the organisation.

What change is wanted? – getting to know the process

An OD process is often undefined, and yet we sometimes talk about it as if it was something obvious, something that is known to everybody - like a chair or a spoon. Even if there are many different varieties to a chair or a spoon it doesn't really matter – I still know what it is and how I can use it. But how do we talk about an OD process? It is like a seed, but we do not know what type of seed it is.

The church leader, the change process leader, the desk officer in the Christian NGO, the Minister of Development Aid all see the seed, see it get put in the grown – and they all imagine different plants coming from that seed, and the amount of time that the seed will need to grow. Starting an OD process in that context is like planting an unknown seed, unknown to everybody. You plant, and you water, and you wait. And then something green can be spotted in the ground and you all interpret it differently, according to your own needs and experiences. It's a sunflower! It's an oak! It's rice! It's a weed! Or what is it? It takes time to get to know an OD process, and there are contextual challenges in a multi-stakeholder venture that really puts much strain on the process.

Whose process is it? – appreciating power

But perhaps even more of an issue is who really owns the process. Who owns the seed? Any OD process is laden with power dynamics. Yet in multi-stakeholder OD process, we tend to underestimate this. This may be because there is such a distance between a government aid employee in Europe and a church leader in Latin America. Because the different stakeholders (church, consultants, partner organisations and funders) are not keenly aware of one another, the power dimension is sometimes forgotten, or at least under-estimated.

The ability to manage power issues is an essential part of managing a change process. As stakeholders in OD, we need to ask ourselves: Who has the most power over an OD process? Who should have the most power? What do we need to understand about power and multi-stakeholder OD? The challenge for each and every one of us who are in some way a stakeholder is to understand my own role, challenge my motives and my ignorance. What learning areas can we identify that could help us with these process-ownership-issues?

How do we assess the change? – defining progress

All the voices above would agree they want a positive 'result' from the OD process. So now we come to 'results', a concept almost as elusive as OD itself. But what is the problem with results in an OD process? There are obvious challenges in defining:
  • what are considered reasonable results? (reasonable within the time-frame and resources)
  • what are considered relevant results?
And perhaps even more importantly:
  • who determines what is reasonable and relevant?

In the development aid context with increasing demands for fast results - verifiable sustainable change on a societal level that changes the lives of people living in poverty – it does not go down well to explain that OD processes need time to develop and mature. In a donor supported OD process there is also the risk of the process being steered into activities that only focus on strengthening administrative capacity and ignore working on deeper issues such as ideology and identity.

But it is clear that we need to improve our planning, monitoring, reporting and evaluating OD processes in Christian organisations. We need to work out ways in which OD results can be described, followed-up and reported in a way that is conducive to both organisational leaders, consultants and funders.

How can I best support OD? – roles and boundaries

One way of simplifying OD with Christian organisations would be to avoid involving so many stakeholders in the process and find other ways of working with OD. But that could be a mistake. When a church actually embarks on an OD process it is likely due to a fundamental need for change that has been identified. This need has probably caused problems that prevent the church from being what it wants to be. But when a Christian organisation or church has reached such a state of wanting to change, they are likely to be weakened and possibly fragile. Church leaders are particularly vulnerable in a situation as this. No matter how strong you are, in a crisis you need support. Good support can give you the courage and patience to dare to challenge a negative situation, even if you yourself are partly responsible for that situation. A partner organisation, or sister church, can provide such a support, not primarily by finding funding for the change process, but by being a listening partner that knows you, cares about you and can give alternative perspectives on your situation.

Share your views and experiences

OD is frustrating at the best of times. There are often so many stakeholders involved coming with different interests and different perspectives. We each need to develop awareness of our own agendas, roles and the power we bring to the process. This self-awareness can help us work with the other stakeholders in a more honest and productive way.

This paper has highlighted the benefit of clarifying what change is needed; whose process it is; how we will assess it and how we can best support it. It may be worth reading more about these issues. SMC has explored some of these in more depth in two publications 'The OD Booklet' and 'Churches in Development'. It may also be worth learning more through greater involvement in this group on OD and Christian Organisations. Join in the discussion, from whichever perspective you choose!