

## REPORT ON LESSONS LEARNT

### **Local Plans to achieve the Millennium Development Goals The added value of the Human Rights Approach in Strategies to Combat Poverty**

#### **I. Introduction**

The contextual framework of the Millennium Development Goals allows any local government to develop an action plan to reduce poverty, using an accurate methodology. The above framework brings together all plans and actions which are generally divided among several sectors of the municipal and/or provincial and national administrations (health, education, social action, etc.) and that many times face serious coordination issues. Furthermore, the MDG plan at the local level allows the inclusion of a clear time horizon and the establishment of goals based on indicators, which allow the government and citizens to assess the level of fulfillment of the plan.

Experience gained in the Pilot Project “**Start-up of Local Strategies to Achieve MDGs from a Human Rights perspective**” - although this project was implemented in three municipalities with proven management capabilities- showed that there are remarkable difficulties, for instance, in planning and in producing relevant information for the formulation and evaluation of policies.

Even in those cases in which local governments are resorting to processes such as strategic plans, participatory budgets, management plans, etc., their design often times either does not explicitly include the social dimension or does not consider medium and long-term goals or the building of indicators. In this regard, the contribution of programs to adjust to MDGs at the local level is undeniable.

It must be emphasized that when these processes are embedded in pre-existing participatory strategies, they facilitate appropriation of MDGs by local communities as well as by the government’s technical and political cadres. In turn, the Human Rights approach entails transcending the widespread perception of government actions to meet the population’s needs. Indeed, this approach emphasizes that the needs are human rights which encompass the whole of an individual and a community’s life and governments must promote them, while civil society and social organizations must demand their effective enforcement.

The contribution of the Human Rights approach with regard to the Millennium Development Goals can be considered from two standpoints:

#### **a) conceptual:**

**Firstly, it allows framing the strategy to combat poverty within a universally accepted theoretical corpus based on the general principles which can be considered the “floor” for all plans of action.**

Indeed, human rights, as such, are universal and indivisible. That is to say, each woman, girl, boy and man enjoy them on an equal basis and whether they are civil, political, economic, social or cultural rights, individual or collective, all are equally important for a decent life.

All human rights call for oversight, promotion and protection and the State is in charge of ensuring their effective enforcement with all means within the Government’s reach,

for all inhabitants alike without any kind of discrimination. This is guaranteed by our National Constitution and the International Treaties on Human Rights signed by our country.

Therefore, making efforts to achieve the proposed Millennium Development Goals while progressively applying the human rights at stake, calls for state agencies, at any level or jurisdiction, to bear in mind these basic principles for designing their plans and actions. It is worth pointing out that, although this perspective is not usually expressly present, in many cases, when programmes are designed at the local level, the universal, progressive and indivisible nature of the rights is usually tacitly included.

Secondly, this approach allows going beyond civil and political rights to also include the so-called second and third generation rights, that is, economic, social and cultural and collective rights, which are the rights reflected in the Millennium Development Goals. Although there is no doubt that local communities acknowledge the importance of problems related to poverty, decent employment, health, education and even gender equality and the right to a sustainable environment, these are not perceived as rights and less still as demandable rights since the latter are normally those identified as civil and political rights.

Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the objectives set in this regard –both ambitious and necessary- will only be guaranteed if this approach can be internalized by the officials in charge of guaranteeing and promoting the pertinent human rights and, at the same time, by those in charge of controlling, exercising and demanding their effective fulfillment.

#### **b) programmatic:**

- It allows the importance of citizens' participation to be a pillar in all the plan's phases: diagnosis, planning, monitoring and evaluation. The generation of structures and standards to formalize citizens' participation in actions allows going beyond mere statements on the term.
- It allows a clear identification of responsibilities not only of the political power but also of the role of civil society and the different public and private organizations which act locally.
- It states the need for management transparency by including identifiable mechanisms and appropriate information for the population.
- The MDGs can be set forth in policies and instruments adapted to the needs and possibilities of each of the communities thanks to discussions at the local level and the mobilization of civil society, its social organizations and its inhabitants, so that together with the municipal governments they discuss the goals to be achieved.

## **II. Obstacles and problems hindering the process**

A first obstacle is essentially a political one and is related to the actual and not merely formal decision of implementing the whole process (diagnosis, preparation and execution of the plan of action) which necessarily entails the mobilization of resources (human, budgetary, normative, etc.) and the implementation of changes (in decision-making mechanisms, government structure and mainly in the way in which civil society and government relate to one another), a decision that not all municipal officials are willing to take.

This situation can be expressed as follows:

- the inappropriate selection of the government sector in charge of the process
- a deficient decision about the official/s responsible for the process.
- difficulty to access relevant information
- deficiencies to ensure representation when summoning community organizations
- persistence of “formal” mechanisms for the participation of civil society
- the non inclusion of the process into substantive political and management decision-making mechanisms.

As can be noted, the importance of this first obstacle is such that it can even impede the plan's implementation.

Secondly, despite the revitalization of the role of municipalities which have left aside their duties that used to be centered almost exclusively on providing a few public services, to now undertake a dynamic role in the local development of our country, there are still **long-standing difficulties related to traditional centralism**.

This is reflected in five key problems:

- a deficit in basic **statistical information** at the local level,
- the **national scope of the main social programmes** and
- the **problem of articulation** between national, provincial and local actors.
- Reduced municipal competences provided for in the pertinent Organic **Charters**.
- **Deficiencies in the municipal structure** which are reflected in the lack of training of human resources and the inexistence of administrative careers based on merit and education.

The issue of **information is crucial since it not only makes diagnosis more difficult but is also an important factor for establishing objectives** related to each of the goals. The lack of information affects the quality of policy design at the local level and also the targeting of social organizations' actions. The situation differs among the municipalities since the criteria to breakdown national statistics are also different.

Although the efforts to have their own instruments are worth highlighting (for instance, the design of a Household Survey in the Moron Municipality), **this is a problem which goes beyond basic statistical data, since information deficiencies also appear in the lack of records or in the way of recording their own actions and in the little knowledge the target population has about the different programmes**.

The combination of issues connected to the lack of information and training of human resources can account for deficiencies in the preparation of the current planning instruments (for instance, Strategic Plans) which many times consist of political proposals defining objectives but with no specific quantitative goals.

On the other hand, the national scope of the main social programmes entails that the essential design pillars are in this sphere, particularly the criteria and quotas by which the populations can effectively gain access to such social plans, thus leaving a very narrow maneuvering margin for the Municipality regarding those aspects, which are decisive as far as the criteria of universality of human rights is concerned.

The special feature of local actions appears above all in the conception and conceptualization of the problems tackled, in the qualitative nuance of interventions

and the tapping of national and provincial programmes to create other working spaces for the beneficiaries in local programmes and actions.

There is a paradoxical aspect related to the interaction of the different actors involved. Undoubtedly, the local governments are in more direct contact with the population and their needs, but they have fewer resources available to meet such needs –at the information and intervention levels. This not only applies to problems strictly related to overcoming poverty but also to other key areas such as education and health. It is a long-standing problem although no appropriate strategies have yet been found to solve it, despite the recurrent call upon all to articulate the different public actors.

An aspect closely related to this issue is the lack of suitable, technical human resources in municipal governments. With a strong presence of traditional management styles, one of the main obstacles faced by the strongly innovative governments is the lack of staff, or even the more or less passive resistance of its “inherited” personnel, which is very difficult to mobilize for achieving new objectives. This cannot be solved by bringing in “outside” staff which would be rightfully resisted by those who have acquired rights. Much attention must be paid to this from the very beginning, by setting up “mixed” teams to include the most sensitive and suitable pre-existing staff members.

The development of the pilot project revealed in its diagnosis -but above all in the elaboration of the plan of action- the strategic nature of articulation not only to join the efforts of different levels and areas of government but also to ensure convergence of the different municipal programmes.

Indeed, the problems are interrelated and can only be overcome if substantial transformations take place at the different government levels and in the various areas. There are, however, three issues that can have a positive influence given the current situation.

- There is an opportunity which can be tapped because the Millennium Development Goals and Objectives are being undertaken simultaneously by the national government and –at least some of them - by provincial and municipal governments, although this calls for efforts and resources specifically devoted to articulating all actors.
- The role of the United Nations, through the UNDP Office in Argentina, which participates in all the experiences being carried out at different government levels, should enable inter-jurisdictional articulation.
- The adaptation of the Millennium Development Goals to the municipal government’s reality and to the planning and control of goals adopted is an excellent opportunity to articulate the different government areas and include other public actors which operate in a decentralized manner such as School Councils and Health Centers.

### **III. Participation of civil society, social and non-governmental organizations and the population at large**

One of the key elements of success of the Pilot Project was the mobilization of the community during the stage of diagnosis and during the implementation of the plan of action. Thus, as from the convening made by a renowned non-governmental organization in the field of Human Rights, the “Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo”, in their role of operational coordinators of the project, through to the planning of workshops, one of the main working pillars has been and will continue to be the promotion of participation.

Experience has proven that to be consistent with the Human Rights approach, the project cannot be tackled as desktop work carried out by specialists but instead it must be done by local technical teams working as facilitators, who will hold interviews with key informants and play a leading role in preparing and holding participatory workshops.

We believe that the mobilization of society as a whole and not only that of the governments can guarantee the effective achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and Objectives. On the other hand, the fact that the population and particularly the most vulnerable sectors play an active role is a part of the objectives themselves, and helps to provide these sectors with capabilities, social influence and, overall, increase their intervention in the power mechanisms. From the human rights approach it is essential for the individuals to exercise these rights, thus acquiring control capacities and demanding effective fulfillment of the rights.

This process is greatly facilitated when the participating municipalities appreciate the involvement of their communities and have structures and mechanisms to ensure the participation of the population and their social organizations.

These were the bases for convening participatory workshops for diagnosis and preparation of the plan of action although in all cases the convening process took place after a thorough analysis of the participation dynamics so as to analyze the need to include specific territories and/or sectors of interest for the Project's purposes.

Indeed, participation and social inclusion are promoted by most programmes and activities carried out at the local level. Nonetheless, the participation of the community and/or beneficiaries is generally focused above all on the implementation aspects related to control, follow-up and monitoring. Civil society organizations and officials working in this field have highlighted the need to reinforce participation mechanisms, particularly regarding design and evaluation, which presupposes a more thorough analysis of the quality of participation.

It is worth highlighting that during the workshops, participants focused on the qualitative aspects of the different millennium development goals and the government programmes and actions and a lot less on quantitative issues. The conclusions set forth lots of criticism and suggestions on the programmes and actions carried out and participants unanimously voiced their interest in continuing with these discussions with the purpose of better adapting operations and including design and planning stages.

The mobilization of the community working together with local technical and political human resources and the contribution of facilitating teams in each municipality ensured an important impact on the project's visibility due to their multiplying effects within their area of influence.

However, the other side of this general feature was to confirm that, from the quantitative standpoint, neither do social organizations have basic information and, in many cases, they ignore available programmes which could meet the interests of the people they represent.

The problem of having appropriate information is core to ensure effective community participation. The fact that the population is aware of the mechanisms and criteria by which they can benefit from a programme is essential for gaining access to all potential beneficiaries.

Resorting to public information is a citizen's right which, on the other hand, generates an obligation by officials. Such obligation not only refers to the production of data but also to facilitating access to such data and promoting their dissemination. In this regard it is worth pointing out, for instance, that it was difficult to accurately evaluate the scope of coverage of the different programmes and the ratio between the included population and the whole of the target population.

Undoubtedly, the start-up of the Pilot Project demonstrated that the active inclusion of the community is an opportunity to improve the quality of participation of the community within current municipal structures and institutions, incorporating more and better information channels and identifying training needs. It also highlights the need to train technical cadres to join the municipalities and the executives and cadres of non-governmental organizations and the community at large.

## IV. Recommendations

### a) On how to organize the process for preparing the plan

- It is appropriate to develop the project in three stages: Diagnosis, Preparation of the Plan of Action and Evaluation, with clearly defined outputs for each stage.
- helps to determine goals and prepare the plan.
- The plan should be permanently adjusted and, therefore, the diagnosis study should also be updated.
- The methodological design should enable the establishment of intra and inter-jurisdictional relations to meet the above objectives.
- It would be advisable for the project to be tackled by articulating several strategic actors to ensure transparency and technical quality. Such articulation will, in turn, call for a clear division of roles and functions.
- It is recommended that the facilitators' teams be mixed: participation of a counterpart of the municipal government to ensure access to information and key informants and external staff to ensure the necessary independence of criteria.
- It is advisable for local teams to articulate their actions with those responsible at the national and provincial levels (if pertinent) for following up on the Millennium Development Goals.
- It is important to consolidate the active incorporation of universities and scientific centers to act in local environments because the latter can provide knowledge and qualified human resources. Furthermore, this will allow densification of the network of institutions mobilized to design and achieve the goals.
- A specific budget should be allocated to executing the project. Such budget should be maximized by efficiently using resources through the mobilization of pre-existing resources, above all the network of institutional relations and the local participatory options.
- Given the above-mentioned limitation on jurisdiction that the municipality faces in several MDG-related aspects, it could be advisable to consider the criterion of prioritizing work on those objectives and goals with regard to which the municipality is more capable of guiding and executing the pertinent actions.

### b) On information-related problems

- Due to the serious information deficiencies at the local level, it is necessary to resort not only to interpreting data from national statistical sources but also from supplementary sources, public ones (national and provincial, in the field of health, etc.), and academic papers or specialized non-governmental organizations. Instruments specifically designed for data collection can be a useful and efficient option, although not an economical one.
- Systematized information on rules, programmes, projects and government actions in the different jurisdictions acting at the local level is a very valuable input for governmental management beyond the formulation of the plan of action.
- It is necessary for local governments to allocate resources to improve their information systems with regard to the necessary basic statistical data for establishing goals and evaluating the scope of coverage of the programmes implemented within their field of action.
- With the purpose of improving the information available to the population, which is a basic input for effective participation, it is recommended to improve the recording and/or production of data, make greater efforts for disseminating programmes,

which includes the network of related institutions or organizations, and improve access to the rules that govern such institutions.

**c) On participatory workshops and awareness-raising programmes.**

- There must be a broad and representative convening process for the discussion workshops from the territorial standpoint (all neighbourhoods should somehow be included because they may be undergoing special situations due to their location which should be considered), as well as from the sectoral viewpoint (all topics which in one way or another relate to MDGs should be present in the discussions because specific knowledge may be required).
- It is important that participation is expressed not only on the basis of the convening of formal, established organizations but that other “less professional” organizations also be allowed into the discussion, together with community members which are not a part of any organization so as to enhance the participation basis.
- Both the physical space for organizing workshops as well as the location of the venues should be selected so as to facilitate access and promote participation. Therefore, it is important that the venue be recognized and considered socially prestigious by the community.
- Participatory workshops for carrying out the diagnosis and preparing the plan of action should be forums for learning lessons and exchanging experiences between municipalities and their communities.
- The workshop methodologies should facilitate the consolidation or setting up of informal networks among community organizations.
- Participation in the diagnosis stage facilitates subsequent participation in the preparation of the plan with an appropriate level of awareness.
- An awareness-raising programme should be carried out for municipal officials and for those from other offices acting at the local level to facilitate involvement and allow access to information on state plans, programmes and projects and the management of interviews with such officials.
- The outcome of each of the stages of the action plan preparation should be widely disseminated so as to deepen social participation and bring about successive improvements and adjustments, always following the methodology of participatory workshops

**d) On the articulation of instances of the MDG plan and other local participation and management structures.**

- The key element for the success of local plans adjusted to the MDGs is the political willingness of the municipal administrations regarding their general objectives and methodology.
- It is a matter of including a new planning process into other ongoing ones, using institutionalized implementation mechanisms. A successful articulation will help to guarantee sustainability and feasibility of commitment at the local level to meet MDGs.
- It is recommended that a specific forum of debate and articulation of public and community actors be established regarding the millennium development goals at the local level. This forum should remain operational during the plan’s execution and monitoring stages.

- It is, however, critical to rigorously analyze the role of the current participation structures with the purpose of joining efforts and tapping and enriching experiences.
- Likewise, it is necessary to analyze the current management processes related to strategic planning, and articulate and adjust them to the process of preparation of the MDG Plan.
- In neither case is it advisable (in the participation structure and in ongoing strategic planning processes) to create new forums since there will be a risk of working “in parallel” or “at the margin” of other existing processes instead of strengthening them.
- It is important to clearly define who will be the politically responsible party in project execution. It is advisable for said official to have direct access to the Mayor and that, in turn, he/she is recognized by his/her peers so as to have their cooperation.
- It is necessary to analyze intra and inter-institutional relations of the area where the official in charge of the project comes from so as to determine the quality of the relations necessary for project implementation.
- It could also be advisable to create an inter-area structure to ensure the participation of all sectors and officials thematically involved.
- It is recommended that a political leadership and management analysis be made to appropriately design participatory working stages for the political cadres and municipal technicians.
- It could be advisable to formalize –based on specific rules- the facilitators’ team within the municipal structure so that their roles and functions are clearly established as well as their relations with the permanent staffing table.
- Both the diagnosis as well as the preparation of the plan should allow the detection of management flaws to be corrected (for instance, deficient information systems, inadequate or inefficient participation processes, improvements in previously used planning processes, etc.) so that it can become an efficient management instrument.