DanChurchAid

**DCA partnership approach - any added value?**

Evaluation summary

August 2009

1 **Introduction**

The focus of the evaluation of DanChurchAid’s (DCA) partnership programmes is on *added value in partnerships*. The purpose has been to explore the benefits (if any) of channelling development and humanitarian assistance funding through DCA; to assess if DCA makes a difference; and to identify the most significant changes DCA partners have achieved.

In general the evaluation has been a positive experience - not only has it been conducted in an open and embracing environment, keen to learn from the exercise, but the overall picture of DCA partnership approach is positive. The Evaluation Team (ET) have deliberately looked also for *subtracted value*, but found very little. This, however, does not imply that there is no room for improvement. The evaluation has been conducted by COWI during the period of January to June 2009 with field studies in India and Malawi.

2 **Background**

The development and humanitarian work of DCA is implemented by local partners. It is through the building of strong local organisations that the work carried out by DCA becomes sustainable.

The conceptual framework for the partnerships are provided by the DCA Partnership Policy which aims at partnerships based on mutual ownership, accountability, participation, equality, harmonisation and alignment. Although based on Christian values, DCA extends its collaboration to partners of other faiths, of an inter-faith nature as well as non-religious organisations.

Fundamental for understanding the framework for DCA’s partnership relations is the *programme approach*, where five programme types has been defined (Political space, Food Security, HIV/AIDS, Humanitarian Mine Action and Humanitarian Response). Each country programme typically works with 2-4 different programmes.

The programmes are all formulated and implemented with strong focus on RBA and gender equality. The establishment of *partner platforms* for each programme is a key feature of the programme approach, aiming at facilitating capacity building, sharing of experience and knowledge and increased partner influence.

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1 DCA Partnership Policy document, 2006
2 The evaluation does not deal with the HMA programme, which is the only programme type that DCA implements itself.
DCA is simultaneously strengthening its **international alliances** with APRODEV-partners and through the ACT alliance. Latest, DCA has joined the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), which is a self-regulatory body within the humanitarian sector.

### 3 Findings

The back-donors interviewed in the evaluation consider the consistent approach of **working through local partners** an added value as it is cost effective, secures greater contextual understanding, flexibility of decision-making etc.

Both partners and back donors point to the importance of **capacity building & organisational development**. For partners it was the most important value added by DCA (see box 1). Key elements in capacity building are the Rights-Based Approach (RBA), gender mainstreaming and financial management. The fact that DCA sees audit as capacity building and a learning approach, instead of a control mechanism is seen as an added value by partners. However, also more tangible issues as skills-upgrading and the provision of equipment and assets were mentioned. It was expressly appreciated that DCA respects the organisational integrity of their partners through supporting their strategies (as opposed to getting into the *machine room!*). The increased capacity has helped partners to negotiate with governments and gain recognition and credibility in relation to other resource partners and donors.

The perceived added value or main benefits of **channelling funds** through DCA is shared by partner organisations and back donors: a smooth and well-functioning fund administration, DCA as a guarantor for the quality; raising partner organisations credibility via-à-vis donors; linking funding and capacity building, as well as elaboration of project proposals and alternative fundraising. The consistent focus on building partners capacity for future sustainability and independence is an overall added value, recognised by partner organisations as well as back donors. DCA is seen as less bureaucratic than back donors, transparent and flexible ensuring quick responses to funding requests.

Partners appreciated that DCA shows **flexibility in funding** and is willing to undertake budget revisions and adjustments according to needs presented by partners. Flexibility covers also the fact that DCA is willing to support core funding or organisational running costs, and supports the preparation of project applications for other funding sources (mainly EU) – even if DCA does not benefit themselves. The interactive approach applied to fundraising is considered unique.

The enhanced capacity in areas of **transparency and accountability** has lead to enhanced donor credibility, access to additional funds and increased organisational sustainability and independence of partner organisations. For donors this is very important and could be further extended. However, the convenience of operating with DCA as a buffer between the partner organisation and the back donor was also appreciated by partners.

The ability to **provide matching funds** for e.g. EU-funding is seen as a very concrete added value by donors, but it was feared that the ambitious growth strategy in DCA could be counter productive in relation to local partner organisations’ limited implementation and absorption capacity.

The added value of the **programme approach** is the contribution to partners’ work and the partner-
ship through adoption of a systematic approach to programme design, implementation and monitoring with learning loops established and enhanced sense of ownership among both staff and partner organisations. The programme approach has helped partners strengthen their own focus and the long-term commitment (normally 5 years) is valuable. The active involvement of partners in programme formulation creates ownership and anchorage among partner organisations and is highly commended as a true participatory approach. The smaller organisations do not, however, always see the full picture, new partners entering the programme are not always fully informed and some old-time partner organisations have expressed concern that available funds are now being subdivided among too many.

The partner platforms have promoted networking, synergy, mutual exchange and learning and sometimes been a stepping stone for advocacy. They are, however, established primarily as a programme implementation tool by DCA. Many partners have expressed doubts concerning the possible continuation of PPMs once DCA funding is no longer available. The platforms provide an excellent opportunity for networking and evidence based advocacy, but these opportunities are not sufficiently explored in Malawi. It would be ideal if partner organisations could align directly with existing civil society structures, and it may be a future goal, but the partner platforms are excellent “nursery schools” to strengthen future direct engagement in national advocacy agendas. A concern is that the platforms may overstretch partners, create parallel structures and increase transaction costs. DCA and sister organisations should strive for alignment and coordination.

Through partner organisations, the DCA programmes generate valuable experience and in some cases develop best practices. However, in Malawi, the ET found little evidence that best practices are promoted at a national level and shared with government institutions.

Both partners and donors appreciate that DCA introduce new concepts and approaches - RBA, gender, climate change, HAP-programme. In this regard donors recognise DCA as a creative and innovative organisation, which strives to walk the talk. The introduction of RBA as a new perspective has helped communities to claim their rights, made influence on government policy decisions possible and improved the dialogue between like minded partner organisations (networking). Through the programme platforms DCA has been able to attract high-thinking people into their network for cross-fertilization and exchange. This has also been seen by partners as an added value.

Some donors questioned, if DCA to the extent necessary has geared the organisation to RBA and mainstreamed RBA in all aspects of programme work. Others were of the opinion that DCA may have gone too far in terms of focussing on RBA and trusting partners’ capacity when it comes to technical skills.

Surprisingly few opinions on the role of DCA in global advocacy were presented by partners and back donors, and only few partner platforms are engaged in joint advocacy. The fact that local partners are facilitated access to international fora through partnership with DCA is, however, seen as an added value by donors. They also commented on the importance of working through a church-based network and saw the broad constituency and outreach as an added value. It was stressed that the partnership with DCA (and other INGOs) offers protection in terms of exposure, particular in human rights issues.

Most Significant Change – summary of observations:

“At the rights holders’ level, DCA collaboration has led to retention of re-integrated children in their families, as well as to food security and improved livelihood through sustainable agriculture and land acquisition. Rights holders participate in decision making and marginalised groups are empowered. And finally, a better understanding of root causes to e.g. poverty and trafficking is obtained.”

“Financial support from DCA has made it possible for partner organisations to engage in advocacy and lobby activities, leading to increased self-esteem among marginalised groups and articulation of women’s rights. Poor women have had the opportunity to engage in international networking.”

Except for what is outlined in the specific programme documents, there seems to be no clear selection criteria for new partner organisations, and this gives a wide room to Regional Representatives for interpretation of their mandate. Differences in composition of partner portfolios in Malawi and India respectively are inevitable. However, partner selection should be transparent and carefully communicated to existing partners. DCA Head Quarter should carefully monitor the partner portfolios in order to secure that the necessary critical mass of both church-based organisations and secular civil society organisations is represented.

The partnership policy of DCA does not contain anything on termination of partnerships, unlike some of the sister organisations. Partnerships are apparently terminated only when problems occur or when decisions on major changes in geographical or thematic focus is decided by DCA head quarters. Ensuring a continued dynamic partnership does not necessarily mean exit or termination, but a next level of partnership. This could included the establishment of, now often lacking, formal mechanisms for feed-back, consultation and learning building on the HAP complaint mechanisms. It should build on long-term partnership agreements, where only few have been signed to date, which go beyond project funding and contain explicit commonly agreed and mutual expectations.

**Humanitarian response** partners have consistently stressed the advantage of operating through ACT when launching appeals for funding of emergency situations. The fundraising, release and management of funds become much less troublesome for partners through a coordinated structure like ACT. It has facilitated the entry of new players in the emergency scene and enabled partners to advocate for international help.

There is still room for much improvement in terms of coordination among APRODEV organisations, especially in India. Most partner organisations interviewed stressed that different reporting requirements is a burden, and the ET saw only few examples of joint funding arrangements where lead responsibility was entrusted one of the sister organisations. In Malawi, coordination and collaboration is far more advanced, probably due to the relative importance of APRODEV and ACT for the majority of partner organisations. Partner organisations pointed towards the fact that sister organisations share office premises and/or are neighbours in Lilongwe, which eases access and communication.

The shift from a needs to a rights based approach has engaged rights holders as active participants rather than passive receivers and has changed focus from being on short-sighted solutions to immediate problems to deal with long term mitigation measures and addressing of structural causes to emergency situations. Partner organisations’ capacity in the area of humanitarian response has grown significantly and issues such as targeting have become more transparent. Partners have also been enabled to undertake disaster risk reduction measures. Donors acknowledged DCA for its innovativeness in disaster response. There is a consistent focus on sustainability through partners’ sense of ownership and continuity in DCA engagement.

Among partners, there is a unanimous positive response to the DCA in-country presence and staff attitude: technically competence, in-depth understanding of political context, language skills, easy access and decision making, frequent contact and regular feed-back are among the added values. However, the tendency to fundamental changes in approach when a new RR arrives has been commented by partner organisations. DCA is seen as accessible, non-intrusive and a practitioner of openness. The true partner attitude is characterised by recognition, respect and reliability.

Donors recognised that DCA has established good practices of dialogue with local partners and appreciated that DCA is lean on Danish field staff. DCA was believed to hold a remarkable in-depth understanding of the local, political-cultural context, which one does not normally see among INGOs.
4 Conclusion and recommendations

The short version of the conclusion is therefore, yes - there is added value through DCA’s partnership approach! Main areas highlighted through interviews with partner organisations and back donors are: increased capacity in all aspects of programme implementation and management; raised partner credibility vis-à-vis donors, increased advocacy skills and networking access, reduced transaction costs in humanitarian response work, active engagement of rights holders in emergency mitigation, and access to new perspectives on development and humanitarian response work.

The interviews and documents confirm the relevance of the DCA partnership programme. When comparing DCA’s partnership approach with that of other organisations, the DCA policy appears clear, comprehensive and operational. The framework in terms of policies and guidelines is solid - but some practices must be strengthened and refocused to add further value to partner organisations. DCA is on the right track in terms of adding value to partnerships, and the following recommendations are therefore aimed at fine-tunings, not major radical shifts.

A. Next level partnership

DCA has an ambitious partnership policy, which guides the development of partnerships, but the practice can be strengthened to fulfil the intentions of true partnership. It is recommended that DCA:

1. continuously reflects upon its own role in partnership - not so much of a donor, but as a partner - increasing partner organisations’ knowledge about international advocacy activities;
2. designs an annual feedback mechanism to systematically seek views of the partners on the role and added value of partnership with DCA;
3. enhances discussions with partners to formalise long-term partnership independent of project funding through the Partnership Agreements and identify shared vision and common goals;
4. operates with negotiable Partnership Agreements with explicit commonly agreed and mutual expectations stated to obtain an efficient tool for mutual assessment and follow-up;
5. takes measures to enhance transparency on changes in intervention strategies (e.g. geographical focus, partner portfolio) as well as on issues related to financial management;
6. engages in discussions about next level partnership and on exit strategies/sustainability in their dialogue with partners and include it in the Partnership Policy.

B. Partner portfolio

The selection of new partners and the composition of the partner base should be carefully monitored. It is recommended that DCA:

1. monitor development in partner portfolios from Head Quarter to secure a critical mass of organisations representing core values and strategies of the organisation;
2. consider adopting criteria for partner selection as well as categorisation of partnerships to create more clarity on expectations and objectives;
3. establish practices for screening of potential new partners, which involve consultation with existing partners;
4. pay more attention to integration of new partner organisations invited in after the programme formulation process has taken place.

C. Capacity building.

Capacity building and organisational development is identified as one of the cornerstones in partnership. It is recommended that DCA:

1. makes tailor-made training for individual partner organisations and develop long-term capacity building plans;
2. puts more efforts into defining what skills at various staff levels within RBA; gender equality and on organisational development, process approach and facilitation skills;
3. adopts a systematic approach to secure that technical capacity on RBA and gender equality is provided through networking within as well as outside DCA;
4. applies its experience of capacity building on fundraising and financial management broader, allowing for support to partner organisations’ own fundraising.

D. Coordination and programme management

One main area of complaint stands out: the need for DCA to coordinate with other funding partners to minimise partner organisations’ transaction costs in terms of meetings and reporting requirements. It is recommended that DCA:

1. considers to what extent it is realistic to strive for coordination among APRODEV sister organisations;
2. to a wider extent coordinates and aligns with sister organisation when involved with the same partner organisation for instance through lead agency models and the use of basket funding;
3. takes up the discussion with back-donors as to how RBA can best be monitored.

E. Advocacy and best practices

DCA has an excellent base for evidence based international and global advocacy, but it seems not to be clear to all partner organisations. It is recommended that DCA:

1. makes an effort in increasing the visibility among partner organisations of the international advocacy work - especially within climate change;
2. links systematically to national advocacy agendas and civil society networks in order to ensure application of experience and ensure outreach;
3. pays attention to best practice replication not only within DCA, but also in relation to national institutions and other organisations, as well as across country programmes;
4. undertakes more in-depth analysis and studies and replicate the valuable experience on filling the knowledge gap from India to other country programmes.

5 DCA Management response

Summary by Christian Friis Bach, International Director, DCA

DCA welcomes and supports the findings and recommendations of the evaluation. We believe it reflects the state of the DCA programmes and policies and we appreciate the clear recognition that DCA indeed does add value through partnership.

The recommendations are useful and constructive. We recognise the need to move to a next level partnership and the evaluation injects new urgency into this work. We will use the opportunity, as recommended, to adjust the Partnership Policy and increase our efforts to enter into “next level partnerships” guided by partnership contracts.

- International Director will initiate a process October 2009. Adjusted Partnership policy to be approved April/May 2010 and implementation strengthened.

We also recognise the need for DCA Head Quarter to more carefully guide and monitor the development in partner portfolios to secure a critical mass of organisations representing core values and strategies and to increase the level of information to both old and new partners.

- Country Coordinators monitor partner portfolio and Development Director follow up.

It is appreciated that the partners value the capacity building efforts and we agree that a more systematic and context specific approach could be taken. In 2009, DCA has started the development of an Organisational Development policy to be approved April 2010 and pilot activities within organisational development will gradually start in 2010. DCA already assists partners in their own fundraising but this work could be strengthened. Further commitments are:

- Establishment of flexible OD task force/working group in 2010 responsible for coordination of OD initiatives, learning and adjustment of OD policy and tools, as well as ACT Alliance coordination/cooperation on OD. Programme Development Unit will take the initiative.

- Development of operational guidelines and tools (targeting DCA staff and partners) starting in 2010 on how to facilitate different stages of an OA and OD process, incl. special reference to church related actors. Programme development Unit responsible.


DCA has been and will continue to be in the forefront when it comes to increasing our cooperation, coordination and alignment with sister organisations in APRODEV and ACT. As the ACT Alliance will be launched in early 2010, DCA will initiate even more concrete, relevant and realistic ACT activities in the countries. But given the diversity of our international alliance it is indeed also very challenging e.g. in regard to monitoring of Rights Based Approach. The evaluation rightly encourages us to proceed. DCA response will be:

- As part of the Regional Strategy a strategic plan for future ACT cooperation initiatives developed in all DCA countries. Country Coordinators responsible. Strategies to be developed jointly with Regional Offices. To be approved by Development Direc-
- In all DCA focus countries at least one ACT Initiative is successfully implemented in 2010 (Office sharing, programme cooperation, partnership agreement between a partner in south, at least one APRODEV partner and DCA on common monitoring and reporting procedures). Regional Representatives responsible.

- The new ACT Alliance implemented and branded in 2010. Senior management responsible.

The relatively low visibility and acknowledgement of DCA’s international advocacy work among partners is definitely a wake-up call. Feedback mechanisms on international advocacy initiatives to partners will be established, and DCA international advocacy work should to a larger extent build upon the advocacy goals of partners. Follow up in 2010 will include:

- At least 3 DCA Head Quarter Advocacy research papers are explicitly based upon the work and advocacy of – several - DCA partners. Advocacy Unit jointly with Regional Offices responsible.

- Programmatic Forum on DCA Advocacy (2008) has been followed up with another meeting looking at “linking programme with advocacy”. Programme Development Unit responsible jointly with Advocacy Unit and CCs.

- Partners will be more involved in and informed about DCA advocacy work. Regional Offices responsible jointly with Advocacy Unit.