



## Empowerment through the support to apex organizations in the informal sector: SDC experience in Mali

Laurent Ruedin, 2010

### 1. Historical background and context

Mali is a rural country with very little industrial development; as a result, some 80% of its population depends on agriculture. The secondary sector is virtually non-existent. In this context, the so-called “informal sector” has a high potential to generate jobs from limited investment, and has grown significantly, now occupying a third of the country's workforce. The “informal sector” is here taken to be persons working in a wide variety of manual activities who have no permanent contract and thus no associated employment benefits. We use the French word “artisan” since this is used in Mali – though we recognise that the term often has the narrower connotation of crafts person. The “artisan” sector has a high capacity to absorb labour and adapt to economic fluctuations. It is a core activity in rural-urban linkages, especially in a country that is marked by very high population growth (3.6%), rural exodus and rapid urbanisation.

The National Federation of Artisans of Mali (FNAM) is a national level umbrella organisation that supports artisans through training, and plays a very active role in the development of policies related to its members, as well as providing support to small artisanal businesses. Currently (in 2010) FNAM comprises 965 grassroots organisations covering a wide variety of activities: tailoring, mechanics, welding, carpentry, food processing, electronics and others. These organisations have a collective membership of some 51,000 individuals - of which 39% are women - spread throughout Mali.

This story focuses on the most recent episode in SDC's support to the artisan sector in Mali. This support began in 1982 with the funding of an ILO project in the city of Bamako. It initiated a process of encouraging artisans to form unions to better defend their interests and to improve their production capacity. An evaluation conducted in 1989 questioned this approach, considering it to be too union-focused, and overly centred on activities linked to construction and mechanics. The evaluation recommended that all artisanal activities should be considered, taking a more business and market oriented approach. The ILO project ended in 1991, but it provided the foundations on which the FNAM was created a few years later.

In 1993, the SDC support to the artisan sector is reactivated with a new perspective in which the artisan is seen an entity in the business sector, rather than an actor in the informal sector. In this more commercial logic, the idea is born of supporting

business services in the form of an exchange and advisory centre, “boutique de gestion d'échanges et de conseils”, (BGECO), which will sell its services. This becomes the heart of SDC's support to the sector. The BGECO program had two main fields of activity, notably to

- 1) provide business services (legal, fiscal, credit research, market research, new product ideas) to craft and micro-enterprises, and
- 2) support member organisations in the informal sector in order for them to influence their business environment.

The devaluation of the CFA in 1994 strongly increased the competitiveness of local products and offered very favourable conditions for artisans in general. However, they were unable to take advantage of them because the frame conditions - such as access to credit, taxation and recognition of their status - did not exist. For this reason - in order to improve the frame conditions - the BGECO programme focuses its support on strengthening the FNAM (rather than the artisans directly). The intention is mainly to increase the capacities and bargaining power of FNAM in the interests of artisans: ensuring transparent procedures for the granting of local government markets, avoiding trader monopolisation, facilitating access to credit, promoting recognition of the status of micro-enterprises etc.

In 1997 the choice of the business services centre is confirmed in a new financial phase: no specific goals for support are pre-determined beyond that of meeting the demand of artisans and their organisations to achieve their own objectives. These objectives are essentially the emergence of successful enterprises, the promotion of the consumption of Malian products in Mali, and the recognition of the role of the informal sector in the national economy – in the process of course creating more favourable conditions for the artisans themselves. In this sense, support is primarily aimed at artisan men and women who wish to expand and innovate, rather than simply replicate what they already know and do.

In terms of its functioning, the BGECO unit remains close to SDC, but operates independently - directly employing those working in the centre. In addition, an institutional support to the apex structures of FNAM is established. This phase is implemented in direct partnership with the FNAM as the institutional representative of the artisan sector; instead of signing

agreements with the Ministries concerned, the partnership is directly with the FNAM.

At the end of the phase, promising results have been achieved. Major procurements have been negotiated, particularly that of school furniture (see box) and materials. FNAM has established strong involvement in major State reform processes, on matters such as decentralization, tax and employment, vocational training, etc. FNAM has often been called upon to play roles that are more those of a Ministry than of an organisation of manual workers. It is operating with a power of consultation, proposal or of decision-making in many national institutions: the Economic and Social Council, the Board of Directors of the Support Fund for Vocational Training, the National Commission on the Private Sector - State consultation etc.

The school furniture market represents nearly 2 billion CFA (about € 3 million) per year. In the past these contracts were awarded to large businesses that outsourced in order to achieve a price war with local artisans. Today, school furniture contracts are negotiated annually by the Chair of FNAM who awards work locally in tenders restricted to local artisanal businesses.

The high associative dynamics at the different levels of FNAM tend to absorb energies and resources, at the expense of fostering the development of successful companies. This concern is highlighted by an evaluation conducted in 1999, and leads to the main objective of the next phase: 50 companies, with at least 10 run by women, should have passed from the status of micro-enterprises to that of SMEs. The evaluation also recommends further clarification of the FNAM-SDC partnership. Program staff has to be contracted by FNAM rather than SDC. However, the transfer from the BGECO program unit to FNAM is strongly resisted by staff, who defend their status as SDC employees. On the other hand, the objective of focusing support on companies leads to the emergence of 109 companies, including 35 run by women, among whom 54 have become SMEs (including 24 run by women entrepreneurs).

## 2. The actors, their roles and motivations

This story concerns the interactions between three main players: the donor (SDC), the consultants (a two person team), and the partner (FNAM). Before entering into the story, a brief introduction to these three protagonists follows.

SDC manages its programme in Mali through a coordination office which comprises a number of national staff and some three expatriates, who generally rotate every four years. This team is in charge of the day to day management of the programme and interactions with partners, although major strategic decisions are usually taken in consultation with the Head Office in Switzerland. In particular, every new phase of a project has to be approved by Head Office. Swiss consultants are accountable to the Country Office but also informed XXX Head Office where they have regular debriefing sessions.

The team of consultants comprises two Swiss, François Ramseyer and Pierre Gautier. The former has been engaged by SDC to support its activities in the Malian artisanal sector since the very beginning of its involvement in this domain. He is a specialist in the promotion of local crafts and more generally, the development of small enterprises within the private sector in West Africa. At the point at which the partnership between

SDC and FNAM was redefined, he was joined by Pierre Gautier, who is a specialist in participatory action-research and organisational development. This team was brought together by SDC; the two consultants had not previously worked together.

The FNAM comprises a national (federal) executive office, based in Bamako, eight regional coordination offices in the eight administrative regions of the country, and a much larger number of local unions organised in circles (under regional divisions). The responsible persons at these different levels are elected, with elections being held every four years. The members of the federation comprise associations of diverse occupations – including tailors, car mechanics, electricians, etc. Not all artisans in Mali are necessarily members of an association belonging to FNAM, but even those who are not benefit from the fact that the organisation is working in their interests and contributing to an improvement in their working conditions. This includes matters as varied as taxation regimes, professional training or statutory recognition. That said, the work of FNAM is generally little known or acknowledged by the artisans themselves.

## 3. The beginning: Act One – the crisis of confidence and the launching of the self-assessment “Yérékimé”

It is 2003: members of a new team recently arrived in the SDC coordination office are discussing the results of a study on the impact of vocational training. The study notes that the link between the executive office and the decentralised offices of FNAM appears to be somewhat precarious, and that the process of institutional support does not seem to have any impact on the artisans themselves. During the summing up, a small phrase is voiced that provokes a major turning point in the relations between FNAM and SDC: is the FNAM “a Colossus with feet of clay”?

From the point of view of SDC, many elements are now open to question. The approach is focused on emerging enterprises – ones with potential; this excludes the majority artisans and in particular rural artisans. Furthermore, the BGECO is viewed as a Swiss project unit within the FNAM, and has never been owned by the FNAM. “*The BGECO was a sort of body within FNAM and never achieved a sense of belonging to it. This is what led us to change the partnership*” (Jean-Luc Virchaux, SDC). The relations between FNAM and SDC, via the BGECO, were considered far too close. “*There was a very close relationship – some even said incestuous – between the FNAM and Swiss cooperation after 10-12 years of collaboration*” (Patrick Etienne, SDC). The critical elements in the impact study, as well as in subsequent audit reports revealing serious management shortcomings at the heart of FNAM, provoke major doubts on the part of SDC.

From the point of view of the FNAM, not one of the issues brought up is contested; the reaction is more one of surprise at the reaction of SDC. All within the executive office are well aware of the weaknesses of the organisational base – indeed, it is a constant preoccupation. The previous 20 years have seen a proliferation of associations in Mali. Most of them have a limited capacity and a weak sense of association; there are even some cases of fictive organisations. For many associations, the fact that it is necessary to pay a membership fee to the federation, even if it is a modest one, gives them the right to its services - “they are passive and await guidance”. With the small membership fees and the limited overheads on the limited

number of public markets awarded (such as school furniture), the executive office lacks the means to offer direct support to its grassroots organisations. In these circumstances, as the BGECO programme is only providing direct support to a small number of artisans (focus on 50 enterprises), but the fact that its existence is known to grassroots organisations creates grounds for misunderstandings and suspicion among artisans. How can one understand that the executive office of FNAM receives the support of a donor, but that the majority of artisans see no result? The executive office is thus faced with a multiple crisis of confidence – criticised both by its membership, and by its main donor.

Misunderstandings make communication difficult between the two partners. The expatriate team in the SDC coordination office is new, and comprises a set of very experienced individuals who are open to new ideas but are struck by misgivings (is the history of FNAM just a fairy tale?). The new questions formulated by the Coordination office lead to a further questioning of the approach – and this is done in a very direct, plain style of communication to which FNAM personnel are unaccustomed.

In addition, some of the critical comments formulated by the SDC coordination office put into question matters that were proposed earlier by SDC itself: for example, the choice to focus on 50 enterprises to avoid dispersing limited resources. Another even more eloquent example concerns accounting procedures. SDC first required a unique book-keeping for the FNAM. In 1998 this changed and separate financial statements for the Swiss contribution were specifically requested. Then a few years later, this is criticised and seen as sign of weak ownership of the Swiss contribution.

The resolution of this crisis occurs in a sort of challenge launched by the SDC Coordinator and taken up by the President of the FNAM during a meeting. This particular interaction demonstrates nicely how important personalities and experience are in such crucial moments. To quote Jean-Luc Virchaux, SDC, *“There was an evaluation by Swisscontact of the vocational training component, in which it was said that the FNAM is a colossus with feet of clay. At the meeting to discuss the report, things got heated as the FNAM did not appreciate this assessment. At a certain point, Astan Traoré (the woman president of FNAM) said, “The FNAM is doing well!” I responded, “Well since the FNAM is doing well, let’s work on what it does well. Are you willing to do that? Because in fact we have our doubts, but since you say that the FNAM is doing well, that’s great. So let’s try to specify in what exactly it’s doing well”. And it was with that that we launched the whole process [Yérékimé], because she (the president) said that she was willing”.*

This is how FNAM has been proposed a self-assessment process based on a wide participation of FNAM’s structure. This process has been later named “Yérékimé” (in Bambara). For the FNAM, this represents a perilous move because, as we have seen, the relations between those in the executive office and those on the ground are not easy. There is a risk that in giving voice to the artisans themselves – allowing them to express their frustrations and their suspicions – the whole federation will implode. Certainly an explosion of criticism from the grassroots will tarnish the image of the federation in the eyes of donors. Yet according to the consultants *“The FNAM had a high opinion*

*of its own worth, it didn’t believe that it was a Colossus with feet of clay and it said – let’s go for it!”*

To quote Astan Traoré, president of FNAM, *“This federation has existed since 1986, and the grassroots were asking questions. Everyone thought that the decisions came from the top and went down to the bottom. So there was the request from the grassroots to the top to change the manner of support and to review the system of federation. With all the questioning not only at the level of the grassroots but also the partner.”*

At FNAM, the challenge is taken up not only because it is a conditionality given by the donor but also because it responds to concern of the FNAM’s executive office in relation to its base. The Yérékimé process must, *“Permit us as well, as artisans, to take things into our own hands, because the partnership is there for a period of time, but it must be recognised that once it has gone, artisanal work must continue to function, and do so wonderfully.”* (Baba Traoré, administrative secretary FNAM)

For SDC, the question was to decide whether to continue support to the FNAM, and if so, in what form. Yérékimé was about strengthening the involvement of the grassroots (in terms of democracy, accountability, transparency, management) and thus reinforcing the federation in its role. To impose the process of reform and participatory organisational development as a condition of continued support was thus a means for the coordination office to rid itself of its doubts about the programme. But this was not without uncertainties; the partner engaged themselves in a process about which they not only did not know where it would lead, but also how much time it would take. *“I think that as a donor we are always too pressed for time... Even if in fact, we are often the least well placed to plan it, because we are not artisans. We are planning over three to four years periods... the concern was to integrate the planning within the rhythm of the FNAM. We didn’t know where we were going, but we went. And we didn’t know at what pace... it was very difficult to plan that.”*(Patrick Etienne, SDC)

It is in this perspective that the coordination office engaged a second consultant specialised in this type of participatory process, to work in a team with the first consultant who had been supporting the programme over many years. It was not sure that the two consultants will be able to work well together, nor that they will manage to gain the confidence of the FNAM. This is nevertheless what happened – and more rapidly than one could have really expected. To quote again Patrick Etienne, *“much of the success was related to [the consultants] skills, they really played a central role. [This was] also in ensuring a link between the coordination office, the FNAM and its partners – but particularly the coordination office.”*

#### **4. Act Two– the Yérékimé process and the 2006-09 period**

Before going further into the story, the Yérékimé process should be explained in greater detail, as well as the change that it represented in relation to the previous phase.

Yérékimé is a self-assessment process consisting of 12 workshops - among which 8 in the regions over the period 2006 to 2009 - bringing together all members of the federation at regional level and some at union level. In each case, participants number some 30-50 elected men and women. The explicit

principle in these meetings is transparency. Everything felt should be voiced, and the comprehensive minutes, from which "not a word of what was said should be removed", are distributed throughout the federation. The workshops allow a thorough analysis of the manner in which the FNAM operates and how the institutional reforms have been initiated.

Following an extensive consultation process, the FNAM elaborated a policy paper (Document de Politique Générale DPG), which sets out its strategy for the coming years. This document is submitted to the General Assembly in late 2004. Based on the vision of development widely shared among FNAM members, the process continued during the year 2005 (transitional phase for SDC support), and focuses on the establishment of strategic orientations within the FNAM - essentially on capacity building and institutional reform. FNAM identifies three major objectives characterising its action plan (DPG), which echo the concerns of the SDC.

- 1) progress in the internal governance of the institution
- 2) restructuring of the management system
- 3) improvements in the provision of support services to craft businesses, including support to offers developed at regional level.

In late 2005, a review process shows that the FNAM is actively engaged in a participatory process to reorganise its structure and function. There are noticeable effects in terms of management, decentralization and openness to new donors.

*"These are remarkable results which reassure the donor who, therefore, is ready to engage in a [new] phase."* (Consultant). The partnership evolves from a "project" approach in 2006 to a logic of "budget support" - an important milestone. The centre-piece of this renewed partnership includes the ability of FNAM to ensure greater transparency in its accounting and reporting procedures.

Compared to the previous phase, the Yérékimé process implied a change of scale, and a distancing between the FNAM and SDC. Earlier, the support and discussions involved some twenty persons (SDC coordination office, 10-15 FNAM leaders and the staff of the BGECCO). With Yérékimé, more than 2,500 "artisans" from all regions participate directly or indirectly in discussions about the orientation of their federation and strategies for the use of donor aid. These discussions are facilitated by the consultants - and more distantly by the SDC coordination office. Furthermore, there is also a shift from support to craft and small enterprises to more global institutional support.

For SDC, the changed way of working is first about strengthening the organisation – by supporting it to formulate a shared vision of development, and then to reform itself to be better able to implement that vision. The change is also about the donor taking distance. *"The idea of budget support was to get out of this close relationship, sometimes unhealthy, between the coordination office and the FNAM. So budget support was likely to initiate a distance between the FNAM and the coordination office."* (Patrick Etienne, SDC coordination office). A clear contract is drawn up, with a planned budget that makes resources available on a timely basis, and clear guidelines on the reporting required for full accountability to donors.

*"The idea [was to be] predictable over four years, to define the amount of Swiss contribution over four years. And then run Yérékimé, ensuring the support of the consultant for four years*

*at a steady pace, knowing that the consultants had really a supporting role."* (Patrick Etienne, SDC coordination office). In improving the management capacity and internal governance of FNAM, it is anticipated that it will become a more attractive national player to other donors, thereby allowing it to diversify its funding sources.

In this perspective, budget support to the FNAM in the next phase is set to decline over the period of the phase. Within this new setting the support role of SDC is financial, with facilitation and capacity development being provided through the consultants.

The assessment of Astan Traore, president of the FNAM is also positive. *"Today, the federation has a clear vision that is based on the vision of artisan men and women members at the base, expressed through all the Yérékimé workshops in all the regions (...)artisans have realised by saying: "since its creation in 1986 until 2007 we did not realize what the federation had contributed to artisan men and women. "*

The highlight of the 2006-09 period is the 2007 General Assembly, which endorses the reforms developed under Yérékimé and re-elects the president, *"a big success, at least from the perspective of Yérékimé, and of the whole process which had led all players of FNAM to reflect on their functioning and to develop a number of reforms"* according to the SDC coordination office. *"Almost all the reforms that have been developed within Yérékimé in a series of workshops have been adopted, and the president has been re-elected brilliantly (...) [This] shows confidence in the presidency and leadership of the FNAM"*. (Patrick Etienne, SDC coordination office).

Whilst the perception of success is shared by the leadership of the FNAM, it would however be wrong to see the electoral process as the peaceful rise of a movement supported by the grassroots organisation. The internal politics of the FNAM are complex. The three regional coordination offices of Bamako city - which include the pioneers involved at the time of the ILO's support - have long held control of the executive office. They include heavyweights in national politics, whose presence has clearly contributed to the influence of the FNAM in policy dialogue. At the same time these persons have contributed to making the executive body of FNAM a centralized structure with little scope for grassroots participation. The reform process has contributed to a strong increase in the influence of the regions outside the capital, a move supported by the President and which resulted in the 2007 general assembly in the election of a large majority of individuals from the regions - at the expense of influential individuals from Bamako.

Yet there are three aspects on which the views of the FNAM, SDC and consultants differ, at least in part. First, how far should the Yérékimé process go in strengthening the "feet of the Colossus"? Second, the evolution of the amount of budget support and the diversification of funding sources. Third, the issue of distance and the relationship between donor and recipient organisation.

Regarding the first point, for the FNAM executive body, the "Colossus with feet of clay" means a weak base (especially member associations) rather than a weak link with its base. As a process of organisational strengthening, Yérékimé was certainly a step towards reinforcing the capacities of elected representatives in the regions, but it did not directly enhance

the member associations. According to this, the process which involved elected artisans at region (and a couple of circle) level, is only a first step and should be followed by similar processes progressively involving circles and ending with the strengthening of grassroots member associations themselves. On SDC side, the reference to the "Colossus with feet of clay" is largely understood as a matter of internal governance, of accountability, of the management of an umbrella organization which endorses and defends a vision shared by its constituency. In this sense Yérékimé has largely achieved its goals with the adoption of the reform in the 2007 general assembly, and FNAM has become a stronger and more credible organisation.

Regarding the second point, from SDC viewpoint, financing a partner with a steady and long term budget support is not acceptable. In the definition of the 06-09 phase, the diversification of funding sources for the federation and a correspondingly decreasing budget was an element of credibility in the credit proposal sent to Head Office (it was a 5th phase and doubts had been cast with the evaluation and audits). More generally, it was also a matter of the autonomy of the FNAM; a long term grant could create a form of dependency. The diversification of funding sources is therefore an integral part of an empowerment process, although, as we have seen, the more general trends in the country do not favour self-financing or the contribution of other donors at the federal level.

On FNAM side, the process of organisational strengthening has created awareness, accountability and a greater capacity to formulate and implement proposals (ie, increased absorption capacity) but with this, greater expectations have also arisen. The explicit formulation of a development vision for Malian handwork, shared at all levels of the FNAM, has been put into operation through action plans and budgetary allocation at different levels. Thus, financial planning is now bottom-up, with budgets being prepared by aggregating from the grassroots up to the executive body.

All this took place against the backdrop of first attempts to implement the Paris Declaration. In Mali there has been a general trend towards an increased proportion of donor spending being allocated to the State budget. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have experienced this firstly as an overall reduction in available funds, and secondly as a tendency to support decentralised programs (to offset the centralisation trend of budget support to the state at central level). Moreover, being under pressure from the aid effectiveness agenda, donors increasingly limit their financial support to activities, and refuse to contribute to the running costs of the CSOs. Thus it is very difficult to cover the overhead costs of an apex organization such as the FNAM executive office (needed, for example, for their contribution to policy dialogue).

In these circumstances, almost all the decentralised FNAM units were able to obtain some funding to support activities related to the Yérékimé process, but this funding did not include any contribution to the federation as such. The FNAM's aggregate budget was therefore well in the red, especially given that the Swiss contribution was decreasing. *"The reduction in the budget means, it was high, it is going down, but on the other hand, a strong increase in the participation of artisans, it is going up. (..)In Yérékimé, artisans, they participated, they acted, they were*

*really there, (...) there was this mismatch."* (Souleymane Sarr FNAM)

A downward revision of the budget was necessary (requiring a reduced version at different levels), but this was not well understood by the different decentralized units, thus putting the executive office once again into a difficult position in relation to its base. *"Artisans at grassroots cannot understand that they were first asked to develop action plans based on their needs and after they are asked to reduce their budgets."* (Bakary Kané, FNAM)

Another aspect further increased this tension: the reform of internal procedures towards greater transparency and better management had a cost, not only in their design, but also in their operation. After Yérékimé the FNAM as an organisation was much stronger in terms of governance and management (according to criteria generally accepted and applied in industrialised countries) but its operating costs had increased.

Finally, regarding the relationship between partners, the FNAM did not understand the desire of SDC to take distance, given that the Swiss are a "privileged partner".

The consultants analysed this will to take distance *"The more the Yérékimé process advances, the more things are beyond [the control of] SDC (...) We are now in a healthy relationship between a development agency and an organisation it supports, they don't understand themselves too much, but it's better like that (laughs). Before Yérékimé, we were in a too close a relation, a relationship of disappointed lovers... now, there has been a breakthrough (...) One thinks sometimes that Malians are very easy-going, taking into account the way we are abusing them: changing procedures etc. ... That said, if there had been no such "coup de gueule" (out-pouring), Yérékimé would not have taken place - and ultimately it was a very good thing for FNAM."*

One point on which the three actors agree: FNAM is now a stronger actor which sets conditions when negotiating with donors and does not hesitate to say no.

*"Partners do not generally understand the philosophy of structures like our federation. And in most cases, donors in Mali want to use the structures for their projects and do not care about the needs of such structures. This is an important lesson we had within the federation. We are therefore willing to work with partners who understand us and support us in developing our ambitions and visions. We don't want to be a tool to please the partner. So if we have to work together, it must be within the framework of our vision, and not just to use us and leave us like an orange that you press and get rid of it once it is empty of its juice."* (N'golo Bouaré FNAM)

This stronger position of the FNAM has been manifested in several cases, including in its relationship with SDC. *"The FNAM had a mandate for the World Bank (...) FNAM disagreed on how it came about, the way support was designed, (...) and finally FNAM decided to stop it. I do not know many organizations that have this power."* (Consultants)

As part of a contribution to the preparation of the Accra conference, this more assertive position of FNAM is presented by the SDC coordination office in the following terms, *"The advent of a civil society that says NO to donors is probably a tangible sign of ownership and certainly an extraordinary event in Mali, in a context where resources are scarce."* (SDC 08)

## 5. Results, lessons and conclusions

*Empowerment happens when individuals and organised groups are able to imagine their world differently and to realise that vision by changing the relations of power that have been keeping them in poverty*

A term that arose frequently amongst all actors involved when referring to favourable relations was that of “confidence”. Confidence can take years to build, but can be rapidly undermined, sometimes simply due to misunderstandings.

From this point of view one can ponder the “right distance” between partners: what should a donor know about the day to day operations of the recipient, and what should the recipient know about the preoccupations of the donor? Should we not simply accept that we only know each other partially (“optimal ignorance”, to quote Robert Chambers), and live with the consequences? In the case of Swiss support to the FNAM, what came out clearly from the process of Yérékimé – and which was evident from the outset – was that it represented a risk, albeit with different implications, for both the SDC coordination office and the executive office holders of FNAM. It was not necessary that all these differences were fully understood; what was important was that there was congruence.

In addition, it is clear that the consultants played a key role as intermediates – they understood both FNAM and SDC better than either of the two understood each other. Furthermore, they appreciated the issues surrounding their interactions with others – the “artisan” members and non-members at the grassroots on the part of the FNAM executive office, and the Head Office and other donors on the part of the SDC coordination office. According to Patrick Etienne, *“I think that the lesson is that one simply has to accept the difficulty to understand, because we are in a universe of quite different professionals, with different approaches. So, we have this difficulty and we have to reflect on how to create a mechanism to assure that we don’t deviate too far from our perceptions and understandings.”*

It is important that donors take into account that their support never lands on neutral or static terrain, and that the effects of support are never neutral - and often unpredictable. The shake-up faced by the FNAM as a result of the reduced budget of SDC and other donors, and how this contributed to the functioning of the institution, was difficult to foresee. This is also linked to the necessity to respect the pace of a partner – and to have at least a minimum understanding of its internal workings in order to guide support in a manner that favours empowerment.

There are concerns about the influence that changes in donor orientations - as dictated by changes in their internal politics – have on the partners organisations, in particular in absorbing scarce resources to fit these changing orientations. Even if motivated by praiseworthy ideals, these changes may not always have immediately beneficial effects on the partners. National players often have difficulty in grasping changes occurring at the head of international organisations. That is to say, an important factor dictating the success of a national organisation is its ability to adapt to the changing winds of international aid whilst retaining a clear identity and building on it. This is illustrated in the long history of FNAM –SDC partnership but also in the difficulties created by the implementation of the agenda of aid effectiveness. The fact that

civil society organisations need to be supported to be legitimate actors, and are pushed into implementing programmes designed by others, is a perverse and worrying effect. Development that is owned by society requires that an organisation plays a pro-active role in public life, defends the interests of its grassroots members, and lobbies for a political voice. One important factor of sustainability and independence is the financial dependency. For this reason, multi-donor support is important.

In a more general manner, it is a fact that the aid relationship between donors and recipients is structurally inequitable – despite this sometimes being camouflaged by the use of terms such as “partners”, implying equality in relations. Given this fact, assistance that seeks to favour empowerment should place particular emphasis on promoting development that is owned by the actors themselves. Questioning and challenging power relations which lead to submission and alienation should start with the aid relations themselves. To be in favour of empowerment, such forms of power relations must be constantly checked and questioned as they represent a contradiction: to promote a vision of equity via a relation of inequity, to promote greater autonomy, empowerment and ownership when this is not necessarily requested by the recipient.

In the case of the FNAM the positive role played by the donor was to intervene and to rethink the nature of a (long-standing) relationship – and then to accompany a process that permitted the protagonists to reposition and reinforce themselves.