3.1 What Is the Operational Environment, and Why Is It Significant?

The operational environment stands for political, social, legislative, economic, cultural and natural environmental factors that significantly affect the implementation of any cooperation. These factors need to be considered during planning in order to ensure the cooperation fits the operational environment and is based on current local conditions. Cooperation is successful only when the operational environment is taken into consideration. This means:

1. do the right things
2. in the right way
3. with the right groups

A cooperation which is planned and conducted in isolation undermining its contextual factors is doomed to fail.

Though it is a challenge to fully understand the operational environment of a development cooperation project, an open mind and a humble attitude are always helpful in the learning process.

The rights-based approach uses human rights as a reference point to place problems caused by poverty seeming local into a national, regional and global context. This is one of the additional values that the rights-based approach brings – it actually gives development cooperation a broader and more complex perspective. Therefore it is absolutely necessary for rights-based operations to analyse the operational environment, obstacles and interest groups from a human rights perspective.

Besides taking the operational environment into account, it is also vital for the cooperation to notice any potential opportunities and initiatives. When needs for change arise from the actual working environment and meet the interests and values of the organisations from the North and the South, the actual project may start. The mapping of the operational environment could start for example with a power analysis. For example Oxfam's Quick Guide to Power Analysis (pdf) gives more information on that.

NGOs and the operational environment in Tanzania

Service delivery or advocacy - what is the role of CSOs and what challenges they face in Tanzania? Robert Fumito from Tanzanian civil society organisation WEETU explains on this video.

In the blog text and attached slide share presentation Kirsi Koivuporras-Masuka analyses the operating environment and reflects how Tanzanian civil society copes with aid cuts.

Analyzing operational environment: Financial sustainability of Tanzanian civil society from Kepa ry
Story of SAWA: It is possible to tackle the reasons behind poverty

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