Good for the economy, good for the people?

A lucrative oil industry means Angola's economy is booming. Yet poor rural areas receive little funding. Sergio Calundungo, director of ADRA, a large NGO, wants research to investigate how high-level decisions are made concerning rural livelihoods.

Sérgio Calundungo is director of ADRA – Acção para o Desenvolvimento Rural e Ambiente (Action for Rural Development and the Environment) – a large NGO in Angola. He has a degree in pedagogy from Agostinho Neto University in Luanda, and a postgraduate degree in development and international cooperation from the University of the Basque Country in Spain. Calundungo has 16 years' experience in the development sector and before joining ADRA in 2007 was country director for Intermón Oxfam. ADRA receives funding from ICCO, NIZA/Actionaid, Oxfam and British Petroleum. www.adra-angola.org
Interview by Jojanneke Spoor.

Tell us about ADRA

The Angolan government lifted the ban on NGOs in 1992, when the first elections were held as part of the peace process between MPLA, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, and UNITA, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola. ADRA was set up the same year to fight poverty and improve rural livelihoods. Seventeen years of bitter civil war taught us that poverty is not just about a lack of funding and basic services, but that social poverty – the fact that poor people find it difficult to develop useful skills or form valuable networks – is a crucial issue.

ADRA focuses on four areas. We aim to increase the socio-economic status of rural families. And we want to improve the quality of education. Children should learn how to read and write but they should also learn about democracy. Angola needs creative, active citizens who can think of alternative solutions to poverty in rural areas. We also work with local politicians to increase their accountability to the public and teach them to adopt a more participatory way of governing.

ADRA's most important mandate is to build the capacity of civil society. We believe that the route we followed from colonialization, through independence and war, to democracy was possible because our political representatives and civil society worked well together. Angola is traditionally hierarchical, but our leaders are beginning to realize the importance of collaboration.

The Angolan government is known to be critical of NGOs. What kind of relationship does ADRA have with the government?

Multiparty democracy is relatively young. In September 2008, we had our first successful elections in 16 years. The results of the 1992 elections were not accepted by UNITA, which led to another decade of civil war. We do not have a strong history of collaboration between the government and NGOs, because NGOs only came into existence in 1992 and are struggling to increase their technical capacity. New ones are set up every day, making it difficult for the government to decide which ones to talk to.

ADRA, one of the oldest NGOs, works hard to maintain its reputation as a trustworthy and professional organization.

We generally have a good relationship with the government. Some government officials support our goals and methods, others are sceptical. One of the reasons we are a trusted partner, I believe, is because of our employment strategy. We think people's commitment to fighting poverty is as important as hiring good technical staff, if not more so.

Communication is the most important aspect of our work. We try to attend important national meetings and forums through our satellite offices across the country. We make sure the root causes of Angola's problems are visible and not overshadowed by the government's push for economic growth or by donor-driven agendas. We applaud efforts by our government and international institutions, but change has to come from within. Decades of civil war have destroyed agriculture and education: these sectors need investment.

What kind of research is useful for your own work?

A good researcher is not necessarily a good activist and vice versa. Keeping the roles separate avoids confusion. ADRA is, as we say, a living organization. We know the context changes all the time. That is why we use *strategic thinking* instead of *strategic plans* that will dictate activities for years to come. To keep up with change, we keep on learning. Collaborating with universities and research institutions helps enormously. We often organize meetings with students and team up with researchers and journalists to make sure the Angolan people know what is happening and are involved in the development of our country.

We recently commissioned an independent study on how citizens participate in local governance. It examined the dynamics of participation and effective methods for learning about human rights, using our projects as examples. Last year the government decided to pilot more indirect forms of governing. We fed the conclusions of the ADRA study into the national debate on decentralization that evolved since then.

Research is useful: it supports our advocacy efforts. One of our recent studies on the socio-economic conditions in a rural community helped us convince the local government to invest in a new school and health facility. More importantly, the participatory research itself increased the commitment of those involved and encouraged them to become active citizens.

What research is needed in Angola?

What I would like to understand better is the effect that high-level decision making is having on rural livelihoods. Angolan politics is anchored in Luanda and the other big cities. Rural areas receive little funding. Angola is one of the world's fastest growing economies. However, most of this comes from oil and very little trickles down to ordinary people. The oil industry employs few Angolans; even unskilled labour is brought in from Europe and the United States. Yet, unemployment is rampant, especially among the young in the cities. Investment in agriculture, where most Angolans traditionally work, is rare. When the government does invest, it is on big technological improvements, ignoring the precarious livelihoods of rural farmers.

We need to be able to show that what is good for the economy is not necessarily good for the Angolan people. If we could prove that most oil revenue is not invested in sustainable development, we'd have a powerful tool. Research shows that it disappears but we don't know where. The decentralization process is supposed to redistribute wealth and opportunities, but for this to happen we need to know exactly what is going on.

We also need to face up to climate change. It is already having negative impacts on rural livelihoods. We need to understand what the government and NGOs can do to reduce these negative impacts and increase the resilience of rural households. The government has signed the Kyoto agreement. We have a national biodiversity strategic action plan in place. But over-exploitation of the land and the growing demand for woodfuel have led to eroded, exhausted soils, reduced biodiversity and desertification.

The government has started a five-year project on sustainable land management with UN funding, but it deals almost exclusively with environmental issues rather than livelihood challenges. Participation is a magic word for anyone interested in UN funding, but how genuine is this?

We would like to see an assessment of the effects of climate change on rural livelihoods with ideas for action at the local level. How can farmers protect their crops and secure a better future for their families? ■