

Appendix 12

Give us a Chance: Research Students and Communities

<http://mirror.undp.org/capacity/cases/insights/opio-odongo.htm>

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In a Nutshell:

Three messages are conveyed here. First, knowledge and experience, (own and borrowed), are capacity cornerstones. Second, applying, validating and evaluating the credibility of such knowledge and experience represent capacity. Third, unleashing this motive force behind shared visions is capacity building.

Insights:

Offentimes development agencies promote blueprints that violate the basic dictum of doing no harm and the principle of building on what people already know and are able to do. Even advocates of participatory development management are sometimes guilty of failing to energize existing capacity within communities.

In 1999, we were training researchers in participatory poverty assessment, which involved field-testing in rural communities in Masindi District, Uganda. Our enthusiastic group of researchers established rapport with the community and immediately embarked on the exercise. Holding a deck of cards containing names of community members, the group leader explained the procedure to be used, hastily drawing four lines on the ground and labeling them A, B, C, and D to symbolize the different ranks of wealth in the community. "Mr. Chairman" he continued, "kindly read out the names on the cards so that members can decide which cards are aligned with which of these letters." He didn't pose to invite comments and suggestions on the procedure. However, when the Chairman read the first five names, no ranks were proposed. Instead dead silence ensued for nearly three minutes. The team leader was utterly puzzled.

A strong voice from the community then broke the silence. "Give us a chance!" it exclaimed. A small group seemed to have internalized the essence of wealth ranking, but was uncomfortable with the researcher's abstract method. The small group of five asked for five minutes to caucus. Off went the three men and two women to the next homestead, returning in style holding different livelihood-related objects - mud, chicken feathers, cow dung and a brick. These, they asserted, are the ranks to use. After placing them in sequence on the ground they requested the Chairman to proceed with the exercise.

We watched with delight members' use of their knowledge of the symbols and their community situation to very quickly align names behind the symbols. Consensus on ratings that initially seemed to defy common sense was readily reached. Within 30 minutes, we had before us the community's first wealth ranking done collectively. The analysis of the causes of poverty and the formulation of community poverty alleviation action plans were achieved with ease and realism. Nearly everybody remained fully engaged in the exercise from beginning to end. The outcomes of that exercise were truly theirs, reflecting their capacity to utilize the knowledge and experience at hand in responding to the livelihood challenges facing them. Our modest contribution was to facilitate the thought process.

To us the facilitators, the main achievement for the day was not the end result of the exercise, but rather the process used to attain them and the lessons learnt by the researchers. In the

course of the evening, I was thrilled by the researchers' open appreciation of the wealth of knowledge and experience that exists in the countryside, which, they lamented, remains untapped. The very active involvement by community members in that afternoon's exercise was clear testimony to local capacity, which oftentimes goes unnoticed as development initiatives are introduced as if the communities were passively awaiting the arrival of external benefactors to "lift them out of poverty." Where such passivity prevails, it could be reminiscent of disempowerment attendant to past paternalistic development methodologies, which we need not reinforce.

This very case reminded me of yet another one that I experienced in Kitgum District in 1984. In the course of implementing an empowerment project with village-level cooperatives, we had painstakingly worked with the staff of the Agricultural Secretariat, Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, and generated information that could guide resource allocation to various crop enterprises by members of the village cooperatives. We had carefully worked out the profitability rankings of the various crop enterprises within that district and were originally keen on sharing it with farmers. We dropped that idea, fearing that we would undermine the empowerment thrust of our programme. We opted for a participatory approach that engaged farmers in generating similar information. At the end of the participatory exercise, we were amazed by the identity of the relative ranking based on the farmers' knowledge and experience and that based on the skills of highly educated professionals. Of course, the figures for relative profitability differed in magnitude. This outcome to the farmers was so energizing that they felt they had just awoken sleeping giants.

Identifying and training community facilitators to energize local capacity to propel a truly people-centred and sustainable development are the strategy that these two scenarios suggest. Such facilitators could use well-known empowerment techniques to, for instance, help interest groups in communities to discern development and policy narratives of their situation to engage effectively in influencing policy. This happened in Kalangala district, where in 1999 communities prompted the modification of a policy decision governing the use of conditional grants for infrastructure development. The strategy applies with equal force at the national level, given the rather pathetic situations facing policy makers and development administrators. No sooner would they have begun to internalize and apply what development partners believe is good for the country than they are asked to change. Yet with increasing external pressures from globalization, for instance, capacity-building initiatives that are not locally owned and led could do more harm than good. Empowerment for ownership and leadership, buttressed by adequate reward systems, could spur strategic capacity building for effective adaptation to exigencies of life.

Give us a chance simply reminds us as advocates of sustainable development to make genuine shifts from paternalistic methodologies to those that are consistent with our paradigm. The success of poverty reduction strategies similarly hinges on making this shift. So does the synergy between our downstream and upstream initiatives.