

Asset-based, community-driven development:

Involving multiple stakeholders in 10 years of action research in Ethiopia¹

Beginning in 2003, the Coady Institute collaborated with Oxfam Canada and local NGOs in Ethiopia to test an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach with multiple stakeholders, including community groups, five local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), two international NGOs (INGOs), five government departments, one private-sector agency, and several donors. These multiple stakeholders invested time and effort, and took the risk of trying an approach that shifted attention away from problems and needs to assets and opportunities. Action research was conducted throughout in order to refine the approach and steer the collaboration towards livelihood activities that could be sustained over time.

Facilitators of an ABCD approach use popular education tools so that community members uncover capacities, assets and opportunities in the community, including the organizational capacity – evident in associational life – that puts those assets and capacities to use. This mapping of assets and opportunities typically generates ideas about new activities groups can organize to achieve without external assistance. These are referred to as “low hanging fruit.” Over time, these ABCD groups gradually build links with private and public sector organizations that recognize their organizational capacity and respond with various forms of

support. In this way groups take on more and more ambitious projects. The principle that underlies an asset-based approach is that people in communities, despite their livelihood constraints, can be agents of social change if their strengths and capacities are recognized and if external organizations play a responsive rather than directive role. In turn, the action research process has to be consistent with this principle.

An emergent research design

The action research design used in this project evolved over a ten-year period from 2003. Initially, the Coady Institute and Oxfam Canada staff led the design, but since 2008, local NGO staff and community members have gradually taken on more responsibility and initiative.

In 2003, Oxfam Canada piloted an ABCD approach in five communities in different regions of Ethiopia. “Low hanging fruit” that emerged from the asset mapping and community planning included composting, improved irrigation, tree planting and terracing to combat soil erosion. Routine reflection and feedback in the communities, and among participating NGOs, showed that communities had had to organize in new ways to carry out these new livelihood activities and that NGO staff members had learned how to work with communities in a more responsive way, rather than playing the directive expert role.

¹ This case is summarized and adapted from: Peters, B., Legesse, S., & Mathie, A. (2013).

By 2008, the number of ABCD groups had increased to 24 groups as the NGOs became more convinced of the value of using the approach. By this time, more ambitious projects were being undertaken. Examples included the construction of a road to access markets, the establishment of a grain and seed bank, a sheep fattening operation and a small-scale trade store (Peters, Gonsamo & Molla, 2011).

At this point, an evaluation phase of the action research took place involving 400 community members, together with government officials and NGO staff. A mixed-method evaluation design was used in order to accommodate the different information needs of all stakeholders — community members, NGOs, and the donor. The design included many of the same tools used for planning in 2003, such as the “leaky bucket” economic analysis tool and various asset maps and inventories, but in this case, the tools were used to indicate the changes that had occurred. The Most Significant Change (MSC) storytelling technique was also used. Triangulating different methods and involving different team members added to the trustworthiness of the results. Also, the use of tools and methods that encouraged community members to construct their own version of the changes they had witnessed, and to reflect on them, publicly reinforced the learning and affirming aspects of the evaluation; in fact, the process reinvigorated community activity and stimulated ideas for further action. The data generated was vast, and the process of analyzing it was time-consuming, to the extent that NGO and Coady staff ran over-budget. However, the rich detail fed conversations among all stakeholders that were highlights of this process. The ongoing process of testing, debating, arguing, accepting failure and adapting for success is rarely acknowledged as an integral part of healthy development and research activity.

This process was repeated in 2011 and 2013 with a multi-stakeholder team including staff from Oxfam Canada, Coady Institute, and local NGOs, as well as an external evaluator, who conducted her own separate analysis of the learning and changes since 2003, using complementary but different participatory tools. The research team used participatory research activities over a three-day period in each

of the seven communities. First, the MSC technique was used to facilitate discussion and evaluation of the changes taking place in the communities. The team then used qualitative and quantitative participatory tools to elaborate and assess some of these changes in more detail. Because many of these evaluation tools were similar to those used in the initial asset mapping and mobilizing phase, community members not only identified the changes that had occurred since the baseline, they could also begin to take ownership of gathering the data for routine self-evaluation purposes.

Who learned what?

For Oxfam Canada, the key learning was that several innovations had occurred at the community level. For example, new ways of organizing were emerging and more women were participating actively than before. ABCD groups were saving and channeling funds into several new community activities. Also, local NGO partners had adapted their programs to build on indigenous resource-management practices, and had introduced a funding mechanism for innovative community-defined initiatives that fell outside of their organizational mandate. Change was evident in the practice of NGOs, and especially in the attitude of fieldworkers, not just in the actions of communities.

For the donor, an important lesson was the importance of investing at the pace of community change and only providing support when it would not undermine community ownership. For the Coady Institute, the extent of diversification of income and livelihood streams was the most surprising and exciting discovery.

The ‘timeliness’ of research and action was an ongoing issue among all partners, but particularly for local NGO staff. While they were dedicated to participatory research processes, they were also accountable to donors who expected to see results at specific times. All partners had to think about how to produce research outputs in a timely way to feed into their own decision-making and satisfy the diverse information needs of a range of stakeholders.

Over time, community members demonstrated an increase in their power and voice as a result of feeling valued for the knowledge they contributed. They learned to be more forthcoming with the NGO partners rather than just guessing what NGOs wanted to hear. They learned how to track their own progress, and how to move forward as members of a household and as members of a group. The systematic learning pauses ended in key decision-making moments. For example, community groups explained that while they understood agricultural production and productivity very well, they were not accustomed to thinking about markets and were often exploited by brokers and investors, and consequently received reduced

income. In response, the Coady Institute and local NGOs collaborated with farmers to develop tools to help communities understand product value chains and find points where they can negotiate or exert influence on market actors further up the chain. Producers have also formed cooperatives to sell and buy in bulk, accessed micro-credit to own more of the production process, and increased their incomes.

As this and other examples prove, research and the action are intertwined and both build the capacity of all stakeholders.

Questions for discussion

1. Research always needs more time. Or does it? While in 2003 rich data was gathered at the community level and with other stakeholders, sometimes this generated more data than could be managed in a timely manner for all concerned. In 2011, fewer resources meant a much more streamlined research process was followed. If the goal is methodological rigour, active participation, learning and influence, how would you balance time with the community, time analyzing data, time discussing this with the community and other stakeholders, and time building capacity for ongoing research?
2. This case illustrates how research and action converge, and how action research and participatory evaluation are difficult to separate. In this case, is there a clear line between research and action? Is there any difference between action research for social change and participatory evaluation?
3. Discuss the learning that came out of this process. What do you think were most the significant learnings, and what do you think are the implications of that learning?

References

- Peters, B., Gonsamo, M., & Molla, S. (2011). [Capturing unpredictable and intangible change: Evaluating an asset-based community development \(ABCD\) approach in Ethiopia](http://coady.stfx.ca/tinroom/assets/file/OP10.pdf). *Coady International Institute Occasional Paper Series #10*. Retrieved January 16, 2015 from :<http://coady.stfx.ca/tinroom/assets/file/OP10.pdf>
- Peters, B., Legesse, S., & Mathie, A. (2013). Testing an asset-based, community-driven development approach: 10 years of action research in Ethiopia. Presented at *Research for change: What is "research excellence" for civil society organizations and their academic partners?* IDRC / Coady Learning Forum November 12-13, 2013, Coady International Institute. Retrieved January 16, 2015 from <http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/handle/10625/52708>

Further Reading

Mathie, A., & Peters, B. (2014). Joint (ad)ventures and (in)credible journeys evaluating innovation: asset-based community development in Ethiopia. *Development in Practice*. 24(3), 405-419.

Peters, B. (2013) *Applying an asset-based community-driven development approach in Ethiopia, 2003-2011: Final internal evaluation report*. Antigonish, NS: Coady International Institute. Available at: <http://coady.stfx.ca/tinroom/assets/file/OP10.pdf>