



LEARNING TOGETHER TO PROMOTE CITIZEN-LED DEVELOPMENT

Coady International Institute at St-Francis Xavier University, Oxfam Canada and Comart Foundation

1. The Partnership

The Coady International Institute, based at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, had been testing and documenting the use of the “Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)” approach since 1999 and was interested in testing it in other environments to identify possible areas of improvement and to further refine its courses on this topic. As part of this effort, it formed a partnership in Ethiopia with Oxfam Canada which had its own office there since 1998.

They were joined by three Ethiopian NGOs - REST, Hundee and Kembatti Mentti Gezzimma – Tope Ethiopia (KMG) - long-standing Oxfam partners. Later on, Agri-Service Ethiopia (ASE) replaced REST as a partner based on a stronger compatibility and interest in this innovative partnership.

The Comart Foundation, a long-time supporter of community-led development initiatives, joined the partnership in 2006 and provided financial support for five years.

2. Ways of Working

Within an ABCD framework, external agencies support community-based organizations but do not drive the change process within the community. Their role is



STAFF FROM HUNDEE, OXFAM CANADA AND COADY INSTITUTE DISCUSS FINDINGS FROM COMMUNITY-LED VALUE CHAIN ANALYSIS IN ILU AGA, ETHIOPIA. Photo: Coady Institute

that of a facilitator and enabler, to help the community identify its past achievements, current assets and how they can best organize themselves to mobilize their own resources and gradually establish linkages with private and public sector organizations that are willing to invest in the community.

The ABCD approach involves community members and starts by mapping the various assets and capacities that exist in a community (human, social, financial, natural and physical), including formal and informal associations. This process draws attention to the



FARMERS SHARING LESSONS ABOUT LOW-COST IRRIGATION TECHNOLOGIES DURING A FIELD DAY WITH OXFAM CANADA, IDE AND COADY INSTITUTE. Photo: Coady Institute

resources that are available within the community that can be mobilized to achieve a desired goal. The group then lists and analyses its financial inflows and outflows, using a simple tool called the ‘Leaky Bucket’ to help with the identification of economic opportunities, either through the reduction of expenditures or an increase in income. The final step involves the identification of a desired change and of an action plan to achieve it. The community-based association uses its own resources and retains control of its activities throughout the process, being supported by local NGO partners to further their action plan. Oxfam Canada and the Coady Institute, as well as Comart who provides both financial resources and economic development insights, ensure that appropriate linkages are established between community groups’ experiences, between ABCD communities and external actors, and act as a catalyst for knowledge, ongoing evaluation and learning from the ABCD experience globally.

The collaborative processes implemented by the partners were enabled by mutual trust, common values and goals. Within this project, all partners acted as facilitators. The three Ethiopian NGOs facilitated community-led processes, Oxfam Canada facilitated the work of these three NGOs, the Comart Foundation provided financial resources and the Coady Institute supported the work of the partners through the facilitation of key learning processes and the production of knowledge for dissemination and integration into courses and publications.

The learning focus adopted by the partners was made effective through the integration of new knowledge into decision-making processes. A broad results framework was adopted by the partners at the onset of the project and refined as new knowledge became available on the outputs and outcomes achieved and, of course, on the relevance of the processes implemented to achieve sustainable results.

The main activities were implemented at three levels:

- **Community level:** organizational capacity development, facilitating access to small funds, training, technical support and learning opportunities, success story telling, asset mapping, local economic analysis, visioning and action planning.
- **Organizational level:** Ethiopian NGO partners were trained on the ABCD approach and how to integrate ABCD into their own approaches. A total of 34 Ethiopians completed ABCD training at the Coady Institute, 10 of whom were associated with the three main partner NGOs in Ethiopia. In addition, annual training workshops were held in Ethiopia for other members of the partner NGOs.
- **Partnership level:** regular, ongoing collaborative processes sustained implementation and decision-making including: bi-annual review workshops held in Ethiopia involving all partners including the Comart Foundation, various learning visits by Ethiopian partners to Canada and by Canadian partners to Ethiopia, engagement with communities to assess the relevance of the approach and internal evaluations conducted in 2008 (mid-term) and in 2011 (final). These processes were supported by ongoing exchanges and communication among partners via email, Skype, telephone and visits to Canada and Ethiopia.

Often time, the partners’ ways of working were not known in the beginning. But by spending the time to reflect and discuss with the participating community members, they were able to make the most of their learning and to adapt the program to respond to communities’ needs as ABCD groups evolved. For example, one group started a dairy cooperative and could not find, or understand, the market. This led to the development, by partners, of value chain tools that farmers could use themselves. The Coady Institute has incorporated these tools into its curriculum for their use in other parts of Africa.

3. Results

At Community Level: Mix of Tangible and Intangible Results

As of 2012, a total of 21 communities had applied the ABCD approach reaching 11,000 participants who were members of various types of community-based groups: farmers cooperatives, women's savings groups, local development associations. Some of the initiatives implemented as a result included: reforestation and irrigation to fight depletion of the natural environment, school building upgrading, road construction, livestock fattening, food production and marketing, saving and credit schemes. All communities reported improved physical, social and financial assets: roads and bridges were improved, springs were restored, wells were dug, production and marketing infrastructures were built, more land surface had become available for cultivation, new savings associations had been created and both households and communities reported having diversified their sources of income. There was also a significant strengthening of the capacities of community-based associations to organize and mobilize assets, as indicated by their increased and diversified membership, the emergence of new leaders reported by many of these associations and the diversity of activities and relationships that these associations developed with external actors.

The partners put a lot of emphasis on women's full participation in training and in the various economic development initiatives implemented at the community level. As a result, women's increased participation was reported by every participating community during the 2011 internal evaluation. Both men and women who met with the evaluators also indicated that men had a greater appreciation of women's contribution and that women seemed to have gained more influence in decision-making at household and community levels.

In some cases, the results were beyond what the participants seemed to have expected initially. Many participants reported feeling more confident about their own abilities and those of other group members. Some of them shared the changes that ABCD has brought to their life in short films produced by the partners. One woman said, "*It is not about money. I understand that my energy is my asset that I can put into use*" and one man said, "*It helps us to believe in ourselves and to transform our way of life*". According to one Oxfam representative, this new attitude represents one of the most significant and profound changes that had occurred

through the implementation of this program, "*...a profound, sustainable change in mind set.*", also referring to the fact that community members no longer saw themselves as passive recipients of donor funding but as active agents of their community's development.

At the Organizational Level: New Knowledge Utilized

The innovative ABCD practices are being used by the Ethiopian and Canadian partners in creative, new ways. The Ethiopian NGOs have been able to incorporate the ABCD approach into their programs and one of them, KMG, is in the process of establishing a training centre that will offer ABCD as a foundational course. Oxfam Canada is now using appreciative inquiry in other programming areas and the Comart Foundation is now introducing the ABCD approach to other organizations and initiatives that it supports in Africa.

The knowledge produced was disseminated broadly by the partners through various means: web pages, documents, short films, national and international conference presentations. The Coady Institute's website offers a Google Earth tour of the projects implemented in Illu Aga, one of the participating Ethiopian communities¹. It also incorporated the new knowledge into its ABCD course content and in various publications aimed at either the academic or practitioner communities. As one participant said, this project was considered an integral part of the "*Research and development of [Coady] educational programs,*" referring to the Institute's commitment to constantly refine its educational programs through systematizing the experience acquired by partners engaged in program delivery.

4. Innovative Practices: Strengths and Challenges

In this partnership, the external agencies positioned themselves as facilitators of the initiatives undertaken by the participating Ethiopian communities. This required the capacity to accompany each community as it evolved and undertook various types of initiatives at its own pace. It also required from NGO partners the capacity and willingness to live with unpredictability and uncertainty about outcomes and results and to offer to communities the appropriate type of support in a responsive and timely manner. This approach increased the relevance of results for the Ethiopian communities, their confidence in themselves

and their ownership about local development, which are likely to lead to long-term sustainability.

Another innovative feature of this initiative is the central role of learning. The partners adopted an approach to knowledge production and dissemination that was clearly aimed at individual and organizational learning. They viewed the co-production of knowledge by all of those involved as a way to learn about effective ways to implement the ABCD approach. This meant that multiple perspectives on knowledge were valued and taken into consideration. At all levels, the partners engaged in critical review processes aimed at assessing the adequacy and relevance of the chosen course of action. On the basis of the collective learning, changes were made to the processes implemented in collaboration with the communities.

The main challenge identified by the partners resides in the high transaction costs inherent in this collaborative approach, which requires ongoing communication and much discussion and exchange. The individuals and organizations involved must be fully committed to such collaborative ways of working. The commitment of the Comart Foundation to fund «*a process rather than pre-determined results*» (Director of the Comart Foundation) and its active participation in the review processes was certainly key in allowing the partners to overcome these challenges. It allowed them the required time to determine the most relevant course of action and space to introduce changes to the planned activities if required.

5. Looking Forward

As indicated above, this partnership achieved results at individual, community and organizational level. The multiple evaluation processes implemented by the partners and funders have produced convergent evidence of a wide range of tangible and intangible results. In particular, the results with respect to the empowerment of community members and those related to improved organizational capacities point to lasting changes.

The partners' efforts to develop appropriate methodologies to identify the results achieved allowed the production of relevant and useful knowledge on a wide range of development cooperation issues that extend beyond the implementation of ABCD programs. These include: the nature and complexity of change and appropriate methodologies to identify and measure it; how to collaborate with communities within a framework that involves risks and iterative processes based on learning; how to explain and attribute change within a flexible results framework and how to open space for genuine and transparent communication among stakeholders while remaining within a context of mutual accountability. Having a university partner involved allowed partners to formalize this knowledge for its transmission through educational channels and to make the most of it through a wide range of dissemination activities.

In 2010 the Comart Foundation, convinced by the evaluation results that showed the significant changes in the lives of the Ethiopian participants, renewed its commitment to provide financial support for another three-year period.

The Oxfam, Coady and Comart representatives have shared their experience with great pride at having supported Ethiopian communities to reclaim their own development. As a result of their dissemination efforts, the experience of local staff is in demand in many other parts of the world such as South Africa and Kenya. One large American foundation recently invited Oxfam Canada representatives to share their experience with its headquarters' staff. The Ethiopian staff has co-facilitated ABCD courses with Coady in Kenya and South Africa and they are now receiving a high level of demand from these countries to visit Ethiopia in order to learn from this experience. Looking at these various expressions of interest for the partners' approach in implementing ABCD, there is no doubt that their experience contributes to the utilization of new and useful knowledge for the benefit of the broader development community.

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¹ To access it please visit: <http://coady.stfx.ca/work/abcd/explore/index.htm> (Last accessed March 4, 2013).