

# LEARNING FROM PRACTICE

## Empowering community organizations: A 'light touch' approach for long-term impact

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*Across the scope of Practical Action's programmes – from urban to rural contexts, farms to markets, and social to technological innovations – our work with community organizations is crucial. The process of communities coming together to understand their problems and take action, is empowering and can deliver pro-poor transformation. However, there are also many pitfalls. In working with community organizations, NGOs like Practical Action must proceed with care.*

*This paper draws on Practical Action's experience of working with community organizations, to derive lessons for success in catalysing sustainable change. Three key principles are important: facilitating empowerment and self-reliance; including and representing the poor; and meeting practical and strategic needs. To enact these principles, the paper highlights a number of processes and tools: foremost among these is 'light touch' facilitation that empowers community organizations to realize their own aims. But to be able truly to internalize these lessons, NGOs and donors must challenge their current ways of working. The paper ends with a call for dialogue.*

### Introduction

Working with community organizations is central to achieving Practical Action's aim to improve the livelihoods of poor and vulnerable populations. Over more than 40 years, we have amassed a wealth of knowledge and practice of engaging local communities and organizations of the poor. This document attempts to summarise some of the lessons learned from our accumulated experience – both successes and failures – and articulate our approach to this vital part of our work.

Given the complexities of different social and development contexts, there can be no rigid rules; each pointer expressed below will unavoidably simplify. However, insights from experience allow us to draw out principles, highlight useful tools, and raise some important questions for consideration, to drive how we set about collaborating with community organizations, and how we can increase the chances of success in future work. The document is intended for NGO field, management, and policy staff, and other partner organizations.

### *What do we mean by 'community organizations'?*

Community organizations come in such a variety of forms and functions, they are

difficult to delimit and define. Broadly, we might say they are organized groups or entities through which people in a defined 'community' (admittedly, an imprecise and contested concept) can come together to work for their common good, by pooling resources, time, skills, and knowledge. They are forums for collective action and decision, often oriented to enabling their members to overcome



**Facilitation in a community organization in Banke District, Nepal**

S. Bohora / Practical Action Nepal



**A community meeting on natural resource planning, Enamo, Kenya**

problems and escape poverty. They vary in degrees of formalization – some may be very informal, small gatherings of acquaintances, others more formalized, with written constitutions, elected bodies, and audited accounts – and in the extent of support and funding from external agencies.<sup>1</sup>

Community organizations can be categorized into two groupings (though these may be more a continuum than a dichotomy):

1. *Community-wide organizations*: These are community representative structures, for the purpose of community visioning, decision-making and community-wide change. Frequently known as ‘Village Development Committees’ they often conduct planning and strategy to address the causes of poverty in the community. They may be the lowest level of government (e.g. **Nepal**), traditional tribal structures, or sometimes be established with outside project support (e.g. **Sudan**). A large part of their purpose is to represent the interests of community members, particularly the poorest, to outsiders (and often vice versa, mediating contact of outsiders with the community), and to make decisions on their behalf.
2. *Interest groups or social institutions*: These are not fully community-wide, and are often formed for a specific purpose. Though voluntary to join, they may have restrictions on their membership, so they will not be representative of the whole community –

though they may be able to represent the particular interests of their members, e.g. women, youth, parents, fishers, farmers, blacksmiths, or labourers. This grouping may also include a range of other local development or social institutions (e.g. savings and loan groups, faith-based groups, cooperatives, small NGOs, or funeral savings groups), and groups formed to carry out a range of communal activities (e.g. seed bank committees, village disaster management committees, or water management groups).

These different types of organizations share many characteristics and can overlap – for example community-wide organizations are frequently made up of representatives from a number of interest groups in the community. The approach to working with each will be often very similar, except for two important areas of difference. First, community-wide organizations, because of their representative role, can be expected to fulfil certain obligations on representativeness and legitimacy in their make up and actions (even if this is an often delicate, not fully realized, issue); by contrast, interest groups whose aim is not to represent diverse community-wide interests, may have no such expectation. Second, interest groups can be more fluid and flexible. An interest group may be more effective in bringing about change in a certain area, e.g. agriculture or fisheries, or



in implementing time-bound activities, such as organizing a series of awareness-raising events. Investing in a broad range of organizational skills may not be appropriate. However, since Village Development Committees fulfil a long-term communal role, work with them may aim more explicitly to facilitate their organizational capacity and sustainability.

### **Why community organizations?**

Compared to individuals, organized groups of the poor have a better chance to improve their well being, access information channels, organize for collective action, redress disparities in power... and compel attention to their needs.<sup>2</sup>

Community organizations can be instrumental in ensuring that communities are empowered to analyse and understand the causes of their poverty, and able to take the lead in addressing them. This is fundamental to the development process, bringing about long-term, sustainable change and driving livelihood resilience. They can:

- help communities to deliberate, plan and take collective action to meet specific ongoing or urgent needs;
- enhance solidarity and social capital, helping to promote empowerment through grass-roots capacity;
- advocate for community interests, and give expression to the poor through representation and decision-making with government;
- deliver services, particularly under extreme circumstances (including violence and insecurity);
- mobilize and provide initial response before external support arrives in cases of emergency;
- help to manage situations of potential and existing conflict.

Whether enduring for a longer or shorter time period, it is important that the role of the community organization is clear, that membership and process is transparent, and that it provides some service – whether that be representation, planning, or practical support.

### **Opportunities and pitfalls**

Community organizations are important for their role in contributing to the development process and individuals' empowerment. For

this reason, they can be an important channel for Practical Action and our partners to work through to achieve sustainable change.

When working in a locality for the first time, local organizations act as a vital point of entry into the community. They can help us to gain better understanding, to know the history and context of a place, and identify the most important issues their community faces. They can help us to bring together diverse community interests in planning and managing activities, and to reach the most needy. Community-based approaches promote local ownership of processes of change, and so ensure better mobilization and management of knowledge and resources for implementing plans of action – and better legacy and sustainability of interventions long after external support phases out.

Experience suggests, however, that there can also be significant obstacles to mobilizing the promise of community organizations – problems of dependency, transparency, accountability, maintenance of hierarchies, ineffectiveness. Community organizations may be compromised by internal dynamics. For example, if a community organization no longer acts in the interests of its members, or is 'captured' by self-interested elites, it can lose the commitment and support of members. Moreover, heavy-handed external support can disempower, jeopardizing



**Members of a Slum Improvement Committee plan water infrastructure improvements, Jamalpur, Bangladesh**

community organizations' ability to function alone. In order to have long-lasting impact, we must learn to find ways of working that avoid creating conditions of dependency and that promote community organizations' self-reliance.

The following pages draw together some guiding principles and practical processes and tools to support the process of working with community organizations. Examples from experience aim to illustrate not only good practice, but also to recognize the many challenges that can be faced.

## Principles

People living in poverty should drive their own development. Practical Action concentrates on what matters most to the people with whom we work, respects their rights and supports their own efforts to improve their well-being.<sup>3</sup>

This quote, taken from Practical Action's values statement, encapsulates three principles for working with community organizations that experience has shown us are important. (1) For poor people to *drive their own development* requires facilitating processes that can empower. (2) To address *what matters most* to those living in poverty, the voices of the poor must be represented and heard. (3) To *improve well-being* requires community-driven action to meet practical needs. These overarching principles (outlined in this section) should guide our work with community organizations in practice (as detailed in the subsequent section).

### 1. Facilitate community empowerment and self-reliance

Many poor people lack power or capacity to bring about change within their communities, or to influence wider structures and decisions that impact on their lives. Through facilitation, our aim should be to strengthen community skills, knowledge, confidence, and collaboration. Part of this will involve enhancing the power and capability of community organizations to bring about long-term, sustainable social change.

Community empowerment can take several forms: it can mean building individuals' and community organizations' belief in their ability to undertake action; it can mean strengthening

a community's position in relations with other organizations; and it can also entail enhancing power of choice through increasing access to resources.<sup>4</sup> To achieve these forms of empowerment requires knowledge and control to be put into the hands of communities.

In practice, empowering community organizations requires a 'light touch' approach in facilitating change. Rather than NGOs and development professionals seeing themselves as being in charge, it is important to build on communities' own initiatives, putting energy and resources where they can best serve as catalysts for change. Whereas a community organization over-reliant on funding, ideas, or activity from outside can be unable to function alone once its backers leave – the 'orphan syndrome' – facilitation and training can enhance the capacity and power of community organizations to plan, better organize themselves, and realize their aims themselves. In so doing, communities can drive their own change.

### 2. Include and represent the poor

Marginalization from decision-making structures is part of what constitutes poverty. So it is important for pro-poor outcomes that the voice of the whole community, especially the poorest, is enhanced, that the poorest members should be included or represented in decision-making processes, and that their development interests in particular should be served.

Poverty outcomes and strong group member engagement require that all members have a voice in the processes of a community organization. Where direct participation by all is not possible (e.g. in large organizations and communities), this means nurturing representation of a cross-section of individuals, including the poorest members of the community – particularly for Village Development Committees, which claim a representative role. These representatives must create space for deliberative dialogue with members, draw up and promote members' prioritized agenda, and encourage collective action and reflection.

A pro-poor position cannot be enforced from the outside, but rather, genuine commitment based on the desire for community-wide improvements in well-being must be fostered. Yet there is an obvious challenge here to

reconcile the need for pro-poor representation with a light touch approach. This demonstrates the extent to which working with community organizations is a balancing act. Where existing community structures are not representative of the poorest or other excluded groups (gender, ethnicity, caste, etc.), dialogue can be used to raise questions of inclusion and shift the perspectives of those in leadership positions.

### 3. Meet practical and strategic needs

To improve the livelihoods and well-being of the poorest, the practical needs of the community must be met. Moreover, experience has shown that community organizations can be most effective and sustainable in situations where they meet people's specific ongoing needs – where there are strong incentives for community structures to exist to overcome unmet problems. Otherwise, members tend not to invest their time, money or effort into an organization that brings no material or social benefit to themselves or their community. Group activities therefore need to centre around 'something with which people will identify, and which will justify the transaction costs of their participation'.<sup>5</sup>

Efforts to work with community organizations must therefore be directed towards meeting specific needs – as identified by the community members themselves. Here, it is important for NGOs to have the flexibility and capacity to 'seize on unanticipated possibilities'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, we can foster such flexibility in community organizations to be able to respond to new opportunities to overcome their identified problems.

Achieving a balance between technical assistance for specific needs, and building broader organizational capacity to address ongoing needs is a challenge. Donors and NGO practitioners both can be drawn towards fulfilling direct technical needs that produce prompt and visible impacts (such as installation of wells or technical training in agriculture) – over more long-term organizational strengthening, which can have profound effects, but requires extended time frames for less immediate material outcomes.

### Processes and tools

How to enact these principles? On the basis of lessons Practical Action has learned from experience in multiple places and contexts,

this section outlines a number of tools, possible courses of action, and case studies, to encourage successful and self-reliant community organizations.

#### a. Carry out institutional analysis

A thorough institutional analysis is an essential step in programme development, well before specific projects are designed. Gaining a broad understanding of the social, institutional and political 'landscape', assessing strategic opportunities for intervention, and anticipating potential difficulties that may arise, will lead to more appropriate planning and ensure sustainable impact.

Contextual understanding can identify:

- what community organizations and structures already exist within a community, as a basis for beginning dialogue and identifying potential partners;
- what challenges and unmet needs are faced by a community; and where Practical Action's facilitative role can 'add value' to ongoing community organization efforts;
- connections with outside structures, including government and external organizations, so as to avoid duplication and identify opportunities to facilitate networking;
- the extent of representation and inclusion of poor and minority groups in community institutions; and



**An urban slum in Nakuru, Kenya. Community organizations and the local authority can deliver electricity and infrastructure**



- the social and political context – both within groups and in broader society – which may present barriers to collective activity and effective group functioning.

The process of institutional analysis may take time to carry out thoroughly, working with the community, but it is an invaluable investment. In **Kenya**, in the provincial city of Nakuru, an inventory of community organizations conducted in 2005 was critical in determining an effective strategy. It highlighted opportunities to bring together an inclusive umbrella body of local community organizations, and to encourage the local authority to engage the wider community through this body, to deliver urban services. Until this point, the local authority was unaware of the extent of local community organization, and had not considered the option of engaging with them.

A failure to carry out institutional analysis can lead to problems later on. For example in a camp for internally displaced people on the outskirts of Gedarif, eastern **Sudan**, Practical Action facilitated the establishment of a democratically elected Local Development Committee. However, through inadequate scoping, this initiative failed to engage properly with strong existing tribal structures, or to sort out their respective roles and responsibilities. This led to conflicts, inaction, and a collapse in the capacity of the committee to take decisions or work to the benefit of the wider community.

Box 1 outlines key elements of an institutional analysis and possible tools to use. It is beneficial to involve stakeholders at the outset, so they both contribute to and own the analysis, and play a role in making any decisions about the strategy for engagement with the community and for organizational strengthening.

### ***b. Work with existing community structures***

Decisions about how best to engage with a community will be based on good institutional analysis. This will have identified whether representative community organizations or relevant interest groups to address key areas of need exist already, how they may need strengthening, or whether entirely new structures are required to fill organizational gaps.

### **Box 1. Practical tools for institutional analysis**

Institutional analysis (which may also be known as stakeholder analysis or power analysis) should ideally extend beyond an analysis of formal organizations, to include broader institutions and processes. For example, informal structures, politics, gender, culture and tradition, the policy and legal environment, etc. might all affect or influence the style or focus of intervention in a community.

A basic stakeholder analysis should cover the following:

- the different actors within a community, interacting with the community – and those that are lacking;
- their respective roles and responsibilities, and which groups they serve or represent;
- their capacity to perform the responsibilities they are associated with;
- the relationships between these different actors;
- the policies, rules and incentives that influence these different actors in performing their responsibilities.

Successful institutional analysis can use a variety of methodologies to appraise the possibilities and constraints presented by an existing set of institutions. These might include a range of formal or participatory tools, including brainstorming, key informant interviews, group discussions, stakeholder mapping and power analysis using Venn diagrams, or understanding opportunities and constraints with Force Field Analysis.

#### **Further information**

FAO. (2001) Socio-economic and Gender Analysis (SEAGA). 'Field Handbook'. <http://www.gdonline.org/resources/seaga-field-handbook.pdf>.

Useful publications from IFAD. <http://www.ifad.org/pub/thematic/index.htm#institutions>.

Practical Participatory Tools from Wageningen University – see particularly Venn diagrams. <http://portals.wi.wur.nl/ppme/>.



Practical Action Peru

**After the earthquake: villagers come together to rebuild their school in Chinchá, Peru**

Where community organizations already exist, experience has shown that working with them provides a more sustainable basis for community activity than attempts to create new organizations. Existing community structures are more likely to have a clear purpose that their members identify with and that motivates them, better meeting the interests and priorities of the community; so they are more assured of continuing after the end of a project. One example comes from the province of Chinchá in **Peru** where, after a major earthquake in 2007, Practical Action allocated funds to supporting reconstruction in affected communities. In the village of El Señor De Los Milagros, three groups came together – the Village Development Committee, the Women’s Association, and the Parents’ Association – to propose that village members would supply voluntary labour for the reconstruction of a school, and would even make the materials (including bricks) themselves – at a cost saving of 40 per cent of Practical Action’s original budget. Not only was the school finished with great enthusiasm, but the community groups organized the building of a second new school with the remaining funds and their own pooled resources.

Equally, working with existing structures can avoid adding to the number of competing organizations in a particular location. For example, in Kathekani, southern **Kenya**,

several NGOs working in the region all created new community organizations as part of each of their projects. But these committees all drew from the same pool of local leaders and officials, who spent much time moving from one meeting to another. Community leaders began to demand payment for their time in meetings, and conflicts of interest emerged. Most of the organizations disintegrated when project funding ran out. Establishing new groups for project-funded activities may also create situations of confusion, resentment and conflict when other existing groups are excluded. And there is a tendency that the creation of new organizations can lead to relationships of dependence, ‘inhibiting members from identifying their own creative solutions and organizational strategies to address new problems as they arise’.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, in certain cases institutional analysis may identify gaps, where setting up new organizational structures may be the best course of action. In some instances, interest groups exist, but there is no community wide coordination. In rural areas of **Sri Lanka**, and in slums in **Bangladesh**, Practical Action has helped communities to form Village Coordination Committees where none previously existed. These are made up of representatives of all interest groups, to collaborate on community-wide issues and resource management. Working with communities in rural Darfur, Western **Sudan**, Practical Action found that organizational structures and capacity at the village level were negligible. With guidance, these communities therefore established new Village Development Committees and Women’s Development Associations. Practical Action invested considerable effort in building up the organizational capacity of the new associations, before initiating practical activities. They are now the conduit not only for Practical Action, but for several other donors, to channel support to these isolated Darfuri communities. Many have gone on to undertake their own initiatives without external input, enabled independently to gather resources to fulfil their growing ambitions. New community organizations may need several years to become fully established. These cases were successful because they responded to real unmet needs.

### c. Practise light touch facilitation

A light touch approach reaps greatest rewards in avoiding creating dependency. As part of this, facilitation is key to enabling what a community or group wants to see happen – helping them to better understand and analyse their own needs, articulate their vision for change, and then search and plan for their own solutions.

Facilitation means not directing or imposing, or telling people what to do. Instead, facilitators must ‘create the conditions for trust, be flexible and patient’<sup>8</sup> (see Box 2). It even means allowing people to reject advice, and potentially to make mistakes, as they make real choices; as such, facilitators should never come with ready-made solutions: ‘Ultimately, a community organization must “own” their plans, not follow ideas from outside’.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, facilitation can be a difficult, ‘messy’, and sometimes time-consuming process, because it is dynamic and not controlled. It demands great skill and confidence from facilitators, to adapt tools to the needs of a particular situation, and to guide process as well as outcomes.

Practical Action has observed two key challenges in particular for practitioners shifting to facilitation. First, practitioners can be driven by a desire to be seen by partners and communities as ‘doers’, perhaps motivated by a perception that this is necessary in order to remain in a location or protect jobs. However, this way of thinking can change over time. In Eastern Sudan, Practical Action saw a changing mindset in a project manager who now describes his role as a facilitator as ‘bringing all actors together and helping them find their own solutions... I see myself as a gear within a machine. I want to help others move.’<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, practitioners – both field staff and NGO management – can feel the need for ‘quick fixes’ and controlled processes to show results for donors, to ensure that project objectives and timeframes are met and funds are spent on time, forcing them to take matters out of the hands of community people and complete them themselves.<sup>11</sup> Yet such interference and taking control disempowers. A community organization that has not made real choices over planning can have no ownership of a project, undermining efficacy.

#### Box 2. Principles for facilitators

Skills in facilitative processes are crucial for productive, participative relationships with communities. Whilst tools for this approach can be learned through training; good community facilitation also demands the right attitude – a commitment to letting communities be in control. Some key principles to observe are:

- be neutral and be willing to *relinquish control* – limit your interference, have confidence in communities, and trust them to take decisions and own responsibility for them;
- build trust, respect and honesty;
- create an open and empowering atmosphere – create conditions for community members to ask questions and find answers themselves;
- empower everyone to participate – be proactive about giving those who may be excluded the skills and confidence to take part on an equal basis; and
- be flexible – use a variety of facilitation tools to encourage full participation, to help a group manage conflict, and to respond to the needs of particular situations; allow for ‘messy’ processes and mistakes.

#### Further information

Hope, A. and Timmel, S. (1995) *Training For Transformation: A handbook for community workers* (Books I, II, III, 2nd edition). Practical Action Publishing. Rugby, UK.

FAO. (2001) Op. cit. <http://www.gdnonline.org/resources/seaga-field-handbook.pdf>.

### d. Build capacity for collective action

To contribute to empowerment, an important role outside partners can play in supporting community organizations is to strengthen skills, confidence and efficacy: capacity building. This can involve training in practical managerial skills, and enhancing a group’s ability to analyse problems, vision aims, and implement solutions.

Practical Action can assist leaders and group members in the processes of



### Box 3. Community-based planning in Southern Africa

In Southern Africa, Practical Action has worked over a number of years to develop an approach of ‘community-based planning’: a process for coming up with plans that can be implemented, managed and maintained by local communities. This process empowers communities, including vulnerable socio-economic groups and their leaders, to demand and actively participate in development interventions that are relevant to them. The desired outcome of this process is to ensure that people influence resource allocation in their area.

Community-based planning draws on ‘Training for transformation’, which is a methodology rooted in participatory learning for local action, and challenges traditional ‘expert’-led methods. It aims to empower groups by raising their critical consciousness – stimulating and encouraging them to participate actively and take control of issues that affect their lives. The key to this is a shift of mindsets from being dependent (associated with chronic, transient and survival poverty) towards independence, liberation and interdependence (transformation).

The vision of transformation in community-based planning is about individuals, leaders and communities setting their own development agenda and making their own decisions while at the same time being open to others. It emphasizes that:

- identification, planning and designing of initiatives be driven by local communities while support organizations (NGOs) play the facilitation role. The communities should be in control of identified initiatives;
- communities take the lead in reviewing, reflecting and organizing events and platforms to share their lessons and identify celebrating points;
- communities should have a sense of ownership of the initiatives. Initiatives should not end as soon as support organizations stop supporting the initiative. There should be a shift from doing things for people, or to them, to working ‘by and with’ them.

#### Further information

Hope and Timmel. (1995) Op. cit.

Gumbo (2009) Community Based Planning Guidelines. Practical Action Southern Africa <http://portal-zw.practa.org.zw/aims/aim1/community%20based%20planning%20manual/CBP%20manual%20may%202009.doc>

community analysis, visioning and planning. Our experience shows that communities are best able to mobilize to resolve their problems when they are supported in articulating their vision and when enough space is given through careful facilitation. Much successful work in this respect builds on a ‘Freirian’<sup>12</sup> approach: this seeks to guide communities towards understanding the underlying causes of their own poverty, identifying their own vision for the future, and taking control over their local development process. ‘Training for transformation’<sup>13</sup> and ‘Community-based planning’ (see Box 3) are related methodologies which aim to empower individuals, groups and communities to analyse and resolve their problems autonomously. These skills need to be broadly shared so that the vision is not lost each time there is a change of leadership.



Community planning to reduce disasters, Dibyapuri, Nepal

NGOs can facilitate capacity building on practical managerial skills for key operating individuals or managers within a community organization, which can help ensure representation, accountability, effectiveness, good resource management, etc. Such skills could include, where appropriate, establishing a structure and constitution; writing proposals and reports; project, people and financial management skills; democratic decision-making and leadership (see Box 4); networking and influencing; and evaluation and performance assessment, etc. Encouraging good record keeping is important for internal accountability and external proof of effectiveness. These capacities can ensure the efficient functioning of the organization, and enhance members' ability to access ongoing financial support.

In the Cuzco region of **Peru**, Practical Action has trained community based extensionists (known locally as *kamayok*) since 1996 to support their fellow farmers and livestock producers. These extensionists were supported from 1998 to form a Kamayok Association to represent and support members on an ongoing basis. Practical Action provided guidance in organizational planning and obtaining resources, as well as how to carry out a fair selection of members for work opportunities in other institutions. Building materials were given to the Association, which they used to construct their own offices. A computer and a motorcycle were also made available to them. The organization has been successful in developing useful linkages with a range of public and private institutions, finding opportunities for members to provide technical assistance, and accessing new courses to advance their specialization.

A further crucial element for building capacity is encouraging confidence in taking action. For true empowerment, groups must grow self-belief from seeing their plans turn into actions that have impact. There is therefore an obvious role for providing, or facilitating access to, practical training on improved ways of working and innovation of technologies, e.g. relating to food security, disaster risk reduction, product processing, sanitation or construction etc. These skills can be delivered in empowering ways, e.g. using Participatory Technology Development<sup>18</sup> or exposure visits<sup>19</sup>, which encourage 'learning by doing' and a continual process of innovation

#### **Box 4. Building capacity in leadership**

Practical Action has found that effective, skilled leadership that fosters initiative, creativity and responsibility amongst group members can be transformative: 'the effectiveness of any organization is greatly determined by the quality of its leadership.'<sup>14</sup> And yet, providing appropriate support to leadership requires a delicate balance. Leadership 'is an exercise of power,'<sup>15</sup> and so must be treated with sensitivity – too much reliance on individual leaders and charismatic individuals can undermine group involvement, democracy, and so sustainability; there is the potential to reinforce inequitable distributions of power.

There are a range of styles and systems of leadership – from personalized authoritarian leaders, to 'enabling' consultative leadership, or 'collective leadership' made by a group of persons taking joint decisions.<sup>16</sup> It can be a challenge to promote empowering leadership and visioning in groups, whilst respecting the norms of community hierarchy in local contexts, and promoting accountability and participation. Traditional institutions and leaders may demand different approaches to more formalized organizations with established procedures.

NGOs can, however, support leadership skills of listening, and giving and receiving feedback, and providing support; we can encourage deliberative dialogue between organization leaders and the members they lead, to promote self-reflection and evaluation;<sup>17</sup> and we can work with key group members ('champions for change'), to build capacity for thinking critically, identifying problems, setting goals, and finding solutions collaboratively. This approach has worked well in **Southern Africa**. Throughout, it is important to plan for turnover of leadership, to ensure sustainability.



**Learning new crop skills in Pithauli, Nepal**

and adaptation of ideas and practices. Achieving some quick wins early should be encouraged: 'achievement is important because it builds confidence and makes the next steps possible.'<sup>18</sup>

#### **e. Support financial sustainability**

One asset that can significantly boost a community organization's capacity is financing. Whilst many community activities can be carried out using local resources, some larger activities, such as construction of flood defences, wells or buildings, can have significant associated costs. Lack of resourcing to carry out such plans can be frustrating and cause despondency. It can ultimately lead to community organizations 'giving up'. Furthermore, financial mismanagement and lack of transparency are frequent causes of organizational conflict and failure.

NGOs will tend to finance activities prioritized by communities where there is a fit with their own, or their donors', objectives and timeframes. Providing funds to meet practical needs in this way is important not only to directly achieve obvious poverty reduction goals, but also to build capacity and confidence for action amongst community organizations. However, when existing funding ends, or activities are outside an NGO's remit, further fundraising is likely to be necessary, and this requires a specific set of skills.

In northern Darfur, **Sudan**, Village

Development Committees and Women's Development Associations charge a membership fee which is reinvested in managing local activities. For larger project fundraising, Practical Action has provided support and training to networks that represent the Village and Women's Development Committees to help them submit proposals to other NGOs and international agencies. In 2008 the Village Development Committee Network secured funds for nine projects – including one funded by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization for the sum of US\$300,000, for the blacksmith association to produce agricultural tools for free distribution. The Network of Women's Development Associations reported having around 11,000 members and 8 funded projects (including goat restocking, sewing and food processing training) – ranging from US\$5,000 to US\$210,000. Whilst these two networks have clearly had considerable success, their capacity to continue unassisted is still weak. In particular, they face major challenges in securing core funding for office premises, electricity and internet connections.

In **Southern Africa**, Practical Action has found that there is often a mismatch between the availability of funds and the ambition of plans – sometimes funds are overwhelming, and at other times not enough. We have developed a process, termed *Resource Envelope Disclosure*, which is conducted early in the community-based planning process (see Box 3), whereby any support organization, including the local authority and the community themselves, reveals resources that are available over the next five or so years. This ensures that communities know what resources are available which they can use to achieve their desired vision and informs their process of analysing which organizations to work with.

Building capacity for fundraising and financial management are therefore important skills for community organizations. Whilst achieving financial independence may well be a significant challenge, for organization sustainability, it should not be ignored.

#### **f. Encourage strategic links**

Interdependence can be a crucial step for building independence.<sup>21</sup> Connecting with other stakeholders can achieve impact at larger scales, benefiting the livelihoods of many



thousands, not just the lucky few. An external partner like Practical Action can be well placed to facilitate connections, to help a community organization to network with other actors. Strategic networking can enable community organizations to achieve three important goals:

1. access external service providers and resources (both government and external funders): in this way they can become self-sustaining, independent of direct support from NGOs and donors;
2. represent members' interests in wider fora, so enabling groups to formulate common approaches to lobbying, and influence the policy and institutional environment for pro-poor change;
3. access horizontal peer support with other community organizations, to share experiences and ideas and learn from each other.

One example, which combines the first and third of these goals, is from Chimanimani district in eastern **Zimbabwe**. During an institutional assessment, Practical Action discovered that, in the context of little outside or government support, community self-help groups in three local wards had developed an excellent working model for enhancing the livelihoods of HIV/AIDS-affected households. Seizing an opportunity, Practical Action helped these few groups to initiate a district-wide dialogue to share their strategies. Their model



D. Kawanda / Practical Action

**Community organizations work to enhance the livelihoods of HIV/AIDS affected households, Chimanimani, Zimbabwe**

was replicated amongst groups in 20 further wards. As a result of links developed with local leaders and service providers, they became formally registered as community trusts, which enabled them to access independent resources.

An example from **Kenya** illustrates how groups can be supported to network to demand services and lobby for policy change. In Nairobi, the city's water company had long resisted providing water to the residents of informal settlements, considering them to be illegal. Over time, together with Practical Action support, small-scale water vendors from Mukuru informal settlement successfully joined forces to lobby Nairobi City Water. They persuaded the water company to uphold its responsibilities – and that a way could be found to bring water to the slums, by establishing meter chambers on the mains pipes nearby, and legalizing connections to water kiosks within the slum. The water company has since established a department for informal settlements, to work on water and sanitation provision in slums right across the city.

Opinions differ about whether it is best practice to *formally* register community organizations with official governmental agencies. In some cases, e.g. **Nepal**, registration with government has been beneficial for community organizations to access support, training, and networks. In **Bolivia**, the government promotes the participation of community organizations, enabling them to contribute to decision-making, and gain funding and training. In other cases, however, formalizing structures, especially where funding is available, may lead to political influence and corruption. In certain parts of **Sudan**, government recognition may potentially leave a community organization vulnerable to violence. Careful political analysis is required here as part of institutional scoping, to determine the best course of action.

### **g. Check for processes of inclusion**

If poverty reduction goals are to be achieved, through strong group processes and inclusion of the poorest in decision making, assessing the extent to which a community organization is representative, inclusive of, and accountable to its constituents is vital. Entrenched

power structures are often played out in institutions: 'collective action and [community] organizations inevitably reflect local divisions and inequalities and tend to be controlled by local elites.'<sup>22</sup>

Barriers to inclusion may be as simple as procedural issues – like the language in which meetings are conducted, or the time, place and accessibility of meetings. For example, in one village in southern **Sudan**, an otherwise highly effective women's organization had difficulty recruiting members from the very poorest levels. They found that their small membership fee and time of meetings (in the afternoons when poorer women had to go out and do paid work) were important obstacles.

Practitioners can work in a decentralized and facilitative manner to raise questions about representativeness (e.g. of gender, religious, poverty, or ethnic groups, see Box 5), and to help community organizations to analyse and acquire skills for inclusivity and accountability. Organizations can be guided in conducting self assessment, to monitor their inclusiveness and the extent of representation. This might include cross-checking the relative poverty status of the organization's participants using participatory rural appraisal 'wealth ranking' methods. It should also be recognized that inclusion has costs (e.g. slower decision-making processes, opportunity costs of participation in meetings). It is important to be aware of those costs and the benefits; to analyse the barriers to and incentives for participation; and to seek strategies for addressing them.

#### ***h. Plan for an exit strategy***

To achieve the long-term sustainability of initiative and autonomy of group action for which Practical Action aims, requires that community organizations are left strong and able to cope independently when NGO involvement inevitably ends. Howes<sup>23</sup> suggests that total disengagement is difficult to achieve, and must happen incrementally, once independent management capacity and material self-sufficiency has been reached. This means that successful withdrawal requires concerted planning; community organizations must have clear expectations of the process, and viable plans and capacity to fulfil the functions vacated by the outside agency, including replacement of equipment, coping

### **Box 5. Gender inclusion**

Women are very often marginalized in community organizations. Community organizations can be supported to include gender issues in the following ways:

- help identify any barriers to gender-appropriate project implementation (gender analysis);
- encourage organizational rules and procedures that reduce barriers and facilitate participation;
- provide training on gender awareness;
- include gender-specific indicators in monitoring and evaluation systems. Collect disaggregated data; involve both men and women in monitoring and evaluation; and
- demonstrate value for incorporating both genders in community structures by highlighting contributions made by women and men separately through assessment and survey reports.

A combined approach should be taken, including all of the above. Merely to insist on female members on committees may result in 'token' representation, rather than genuine inclusion.

#### **Further information**

FAO. (2001) op. cit. <http://www.gdonline.org/resources/seaga-field-handbook.pdf>.

Two IFAD resources: 'Incorporating Gender Into Rural Development Projects' <http://www.ifad.org/gender/tools/gender/index.htm>; 'Memory Checks For Programme And Project: Gender and food security' <http://www.ifad.org/gender/approach/gender/mem.htm>.

with changing membership, and capability to know where to access information, materials and support when needed. Forming such exit plans should be carried out collaboratively through joint participatory planning, with clear milestones.

Our experience suggests that such exit planning is not an add-on at the end of the project, but should be an integral part of effective intervention: good facilitators need to exit before they enter. In other words, a

successful exit has to be built into strategy from the very early stages of idea identification and design. This informs the light touch approach, and has implications for everything that we do – how we invest the resources available to us, the way we think and project plan, and the way we interact with community organizations and stakeholders.

Finally, an exit strategy should involve learning lessons from experience – particularly from the process of working with community organizations, and the extent to which empowerment, inclusion and practical needs have been met. Honest consideration of empowerment and inclusion processes, and their impacts, is very often lacking in NGO evaluations.

### **New ways of working**

The principles and suggestions outlined above may sound simple or even common sense. We know they can work, because Practical Action has seen them implemented, to varying degrees, in several of our (and others') programmes. Nevertheless to truly pursue an approach of *sustainable, light touch, facilitative partnerships* with community organizations throughout all our work, will pose significant challenges to the way that we, other NGOs, and donors, currently operate – raising a number of questions for discussion.

### **The challenge to NGOs**

Project proposals are often written to meet donor and NGO interests, rather than to respond directly to community identified priorities. They are frequently written in a rush, without time for substantial local institutional analysis and consultation, in order to meet deadlines. Even when time is available, funds tend to be lacking to cover the cost of pre-proposal appraisal. Projects are typically funded for a period of three years – where proposals have already committed the implementing agency to a set of pre-agreed activities and milestones for implementation. There are tight pressures on project managers to deliver activities and achieve targets. This is the reality for most NGOs. The consequence is that short-term, project-based interventions may take precedence over community empowerment, ownership and facilitative processes.

It remains an open question: how can NGOs, including Practical Action, prioritize a

## **Summary of key principles and processes**

### **Principles**

1. Facilitate empowerment and self-reliance.
2. Include and represent the poor.
3. Meet practical and strategic needs.

### **Processes**

- a. Carry out institutional analysis.
- b. Work with existing community structures.
- c. Practise light touch facilitation.
- d. Build capacity for visioning, planning and managing collective action.
- e. Support financial sustainability.
- f. Encourage strategic links.
- g. Check for processes of inclusion.
- h. Plan for an exit strategy.

more process-oriented approach to community development within the constraints of the traditional project-based system?

One important response is for NGOs to prioritize organizational strengthening as a key element within any programme or project proposal – and to build in the requisite time and resources from the outset. NGOs need to ensure that staff working in communities have the necessary skills, flexibility and incentives to pursue the light touch approach. Staff should be recognized and rewarded for these efforts, as much as for delivery of more tangible objectives. The outcomes in terms of community empowerment should be monitored, to ensure continual learning and improvement. More strategic use can be made of evaluation processes to feed into new programme development.

In addition, NGOs can invest in having longer term strategies in particular regions, rather than working on a project-by-project basis. Longer term programme strategies would build up in-depth contextual understandings and relevant institutional relationships in an area, which can be drawn upon to propose multiple project bids.

Finally, it is important for Practical Action



and other NGOs to feed back to donors the importance of strengthening community organizational capacity, its relevance to long-term sustainable poverty reduction, and the ways in which donors can make this easier to achieve. It is possible to engage donors and challenge approaches, rather than simply to accept them and work within them. This is best achieved through illustrating the benefits of better ways of working.

### **The challenge to donors**

Many of the barriers to implementing a light touch approach to strengthening community organizations emanate from the expectations and constraints of donors. Driven by a reasonable demand for accountability of funds, donor approaches often don't support the longer-term engagement that is necessary for good institution building and bottom-up facilitative processes. The requirement for highly detailed project proposals with predetermined activities and timetabled milestones and budgets can constrain the more flexible, community-led approaches they may wish for. There can be a temptation for donors to 'measure success in poverty reduction and community development by the number of new organizations that are formed and the number of group training courses and other support given'<sup>24</sup> – negating the requirement for working with pre-existing organizations and facilitating capacity and visioning processes for sustainability.

The challenge to donors is to pursue these more organic 'process' (not project-based) approaches. Their funding must allow for the flexibility to facilitate, respond to community needs, build community confidence to articulate their priorities and act, and enhance community organizations' capacity and networks to deliver after the project ends.

Partnership agreements between NGOs and donors can support more flexible working, and are becoming more commonplace. This means that donors support a broader strategy of work in a particular sector, or across sectors, and the work is reviewed at intervals, and on this basis funding can be extended. Allocation of resources to proposal development processes is another strategy that supports communities and other local institutions to participate in local analysis, priority setting, and planning before funds are allocated. Donors can



**Community-based fish culture reaps rewards in Gaibandha, Bangladesh**

recognize and encourage efforts to strengthen community organizations by requiring reporting and feedback on these processes. This in turn can help donors and other NGOs to continually learn from experience and improve practice.

### **Conclusion**

When it comes to working with community organizations, Practical Action's journey to adopt pro-poor light touch facilitation is just beginning. We have much experience to draw from, and many lessons to learn.

This document has summarized for ourselves, for donors, and for fellow NGOs and practitioners, the key benefits and strategies of a light touch approach to working with community organizations to achieve long-term, sustainable poverty reduction. But it also raises the challenges which these strategies imply. It calls for new ways of working to be able to overcome these challenges – on the part of ourselves, of donors, other NGOs, and ultimately of individuals working in the field. More discussion, debate, collaboration, and learning will be needed, to fully negotiate new ways of working; but the goal – empowering poor and vulnerable populations – remains essential.

## Acknowledgements

This briefing was written by Robbie Blake and Katherine Pasteur, both members of the Reducing Vulnerability Team at Practical Action. The content is based on ideas and case

studies from a wide range of international and UK office staff, too many to mention by name. Thanks to all of them for their inputs.

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Practical Action is an international development agency working with poor communities to help them choose and use technology to improve their lives for today and generations to come. Our work in Africa, Asia and Latin America is in partnership with poor people and their communities, using technology to challenge poverty. We work with poor people to build their capabilities, improve their access to technical options and knowledge and help them to influence the social, economic and institutional systems for the use of technology.

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