

Collective learning: lessons from Ghana

A local-level approach to understanding and addressing environmental constraints is empowering a community to improve

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Learning by doing: the Charia community recognises tree-growing as a way of arresting land degradation and providing livelihood opportunities. *Photo: C. Dakubo*

THIS article reports on a community development project conducted in Charia, a small village located 8 km northwest of the town of Wa in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The village has a population of about 2 500 people, 70% of whom have no formal education and are mainly peasant farmers.

Like most rural communities in northern Ghana, the community in Charia faces persistent environmental problems, including widespread soil erosion, nutrient-poor soils, overgrazing, drought and desertification. The livelihood of the community is also affected by health, education, socio-economic and political problems.

The perception of many outside researchers is that communities like Charia lack the knowledge, skills and motivation to find solutions to their problems and must therefore rely heavily on help from governmental and non-governmental agencies. Such outsiders are often authorities in specific disciplines; they take it upon themselves to collect information, diagnose the problem, design a solution, prescribe it to the community and then, often, leave.

This sort of approach is only occasionally effective. It falls short of what is required in most community development and natural resource management situations; in particular, the risk is that it fails to teach the target community the processes of problem-solving and decision-making, thus creating a spiral of increasing dependence on external help.

Action research is one alternative to the outside expert approach. The action researcher focuses on the problem-solving process rather than on the substance of the problem itself. Community members and other stakeholders are recruited as co-researchers and participate actively in the

entire research process. Collectively, they decide the focus of knowledge generation, collect and analyse data, and take action to solve the community's problem (Deshler & Ewert 1995).

The study in Charia

This study was an attempt to carry out a participatory action research intervention in the Charia community. One objective was to foster learning within the community about events surrounding it and about the role of community members in influencing such events for a better future. The study also sought to help the community become self-sufficient in its ability to manage inquiry, problem-solving and decision-making processes. Community members and departmental heads of associated government institutions such as adult education, forestry, agriculture and community development were recruited as co-researchers and participated actively in all stages of the research process; participation was facilitated through the use of strategic planning, workshop and focused conversation methods.

Strategic planning

The strategic planning process is designed to assist groups in developing common goals and searching for a desirable future for a shared activity. It is designed to tap the knowledge base of participants in ways that capitalise on group dynamics and group learning. Spencer (1989) outlines five steps in the process:

- 1) *practical vision*: visualisation of the desired future the community wants to move towards;
- 2) *underlying contradictions*: recognition of those obstacles or blocks preventing the realisation of the desired future;

- 3) *strategic directions*: broad proposals that eliminate or circumvent the obstacles;
- 4) *systematic actions*: specific actions developed for each strategic direction; and
- 5) *implementation timeline*: an implementation plan that outlines all practical tasks of each action plan.

The consultative process in Charia took the form of a series of workshops involving community members, departmental heads and extension workers, and community leaders. A workshop was held for each step of the strategic planning process; 'focused conversation' techniques were used in conjunction with the workshops to help participants reflect on their ideas, put things into perspective and respond creatively.

Community workshops

Prior to the 'vision' workshop, participants were shown a documentary video on sustainable landuse and agroforestry practices adopted by some neighbouring communities. Using reflective dialogue, workshop participants discussed the contents of the video, the issues impeding their own community from undertaking similar activities, and what it would take to emulate their neighbours. Participants recognised that the community had once been blessed with fertile soils, abundant tree cover, sufficient food and healthy lifestyles, but that each of these indicators had declined in recent years. They agreed that the present, undesirable situation could be attributed to activities such as indiscriminate tree-felling and bush-burning and to a lack of enthusiasm in educative programs. They then envisioned some desirable elements they would like to see in their own community. These included improved agricultural practices, increased afforestation and agroforestry activities, improved health care, good infrastructure and financial self-sufficiency.

An analysis of the major roadblocks obstructing the realisation of this vision included land and resource use conflicts, poor agricultural extension strategies, unfavourable climatic conditions, disunity and a lack of commitment among community members. To address these obstacles, participants suggested broad proposals such as the need for more effective information dissemination strategies, streamlined conflict-resolution mechanisms, participatory environmental awareness campaigns and the initiation of self-help projects. A systematic action plan was developed and community members began to establish private woodlots and tree nurseries. They also participated in large-scale tree-planting exercises, began to organise regular community meetings and took keen interest in adult education and self-help projects. In addition, participants felt empowered and began to take responsibility for their own situation.

Workshop with departmental heads

Given the insights gained from the community workshops, a follow-up workshop was organised with community leaders and the local heads of government departments. They analysed the information gathered from the community workshops and discussed how they shared the community's vision of a sustainable community. They also devised strategies for pooling departmental resources so as to help the community realise its vision. There was general agreement among departmental heads to use more practical ways of disseminating information to people, and also to incorporate traditional knowledge in decision-making. They also agreed to place the locus of decision-making in the community and to use strategies that will provide members with the opportunity to participate actively in all stages of projects. Departmental heads agreed to hold regular inter-departmental workshops, coordinate their interventions in the community, and work together as a team.

Conclusion

The entire consultative process proved to be a great learning experience for all participants. The intervention served the dual purpose of teaching community members the processes of problem-solving and decision-making, and helping to solve practical community problems. Group facilitation tools such as the strategic planning process and focused conversation were effective in getting community members to generate ideas, discover common ground, define their own objectives and identify the paths to achieving and implementing such objectives.

Involvement in such processes allows for adaptive learning and development. By participating in the investigation and analysis of the problems facing them, people gain specific insights and new understanding about their situation, acquire new knowledge and gain the skills needed to solve problems. People are also more likely to be committed to the plans they make because the plans reflect their own thinking, thus creating a strong sense of ownership. If maintained, this approach can improve livelihoods and help maximise the benefits of external assistance.

References

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Security: an essential element for community-based plantations

Deforestation in the Philippines has been blamed for widespread land degradation, particularly in the highlands; the country faces a massive task in reforesting such lands. In 1995, ITTO Project PD 130/91 Rev. 2 (F) tested combinations of five site preparation treatments and four nursery fertiliser application treatments on 100 hectares of trial plantations. Subsequently, Project PD 21/97 Rev. 2 (F) began in 1998 with the aim of establishing and managing about 1 500 hectares of community-based forest plantations and a similar area of remnant natural forests. The results of the project will help inform policies to accelerate community-based plantation establishment and natural forest management countrywide.

The project's strategy is based on the notion that people will become able and effective managers of the forest lands and resources upon which they depend if they are given adequate control of those resources. With its links with government, the project has been able to facilitate the implementation of a Community-based Forest Management (CBFM) agreement. CBFM is a nation-wide initiative designed to give local people resource security if they undertake community forestry.

In 2000, an evaluation team conducted a mid-term evaluation to assess the project's achievements and shortcomings and to recommend what changes in implementation, if any, were needed. The review found that the extent and quality of community participation in the project was strong and potentially sustainable. It based this finding on two indicators:

- there were strong incentives in the form of: human resource development through training, workshops and cross-farm visits; technical assistance in nursery, plantation and protection operations; and socio-economic incentives in the form of secure land tenure and the equitable sharing of benefits from the project. All these have motivated farmers to become increasingly involved in project implementation; and
- the long duration of technical assistance and the long-term nature of the incentives under the CBFM agreement granted by government.

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