

SUSTAINABLE TRAINING AND LIVELIHOODS FOR RURAL POOR AND MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: A CASE STUDY

Professor Ramoshebi Moletsane (Presenter)

Vice-Chancellor

National University of Lesotho

email: rim.moletsane@nul.ls

Professor Gisela Prasad

Director

Institute of Southern African Studies

National University of Lesotho

email: g.prasad@nul.ls

Introduction

With advances in information technology open learning was expected to reach out to the poor and marginalized and offer them an opportunity to learn, acquire knowledge and functional skills. Instead the market-driven technologies serve mostly the urban rich and educated who can afford access to them. Sachs (1997, 291) argues that the development of the last forty years

has created a global middle class of those with cars, bank accounts and career aspirations. It is made up of the majority in the North and a small elite in the South and its size equals roughly that eight per cent of the world population which owns an automobile. They are beyond all national boundaries, increasingly integrated into the world wide circuit of goods, communication and travel.

Most of the poor are completely left out of this global circuit because they are not connected to basic infrastructures and appropriate facilities and can pay neither for the connection nor for the technology. The gap between the technology and knowledge accessible to the 'haves' and 'have nots' is widening rapidly. As a result the poor feel powerless and excluded by the global and local elite, thus developing dejected and negative attitudes. The formal school education, many rural poor have received has done very little to improve their livelihoods. It taught them to aspire western goods and material things, abandon and despise their own values and culture. It changed their definition of wealth basing it on purchasing power, the gross national product, the level of consumption and the creation of money as absolute and universal references (N'Dione *et al*, 1995). Only the westernised elite achieves this type of wealth and can compete in the system excluding the vast majority of the rural and urban population in the Third World. This reference system negates their own definition of wealth and categorizes them as ignorant and poor. Is it surprising that this education system, be it school or open learning has many drop-outs and push-outs?

Is there a chance that an open learning system can help to overcome some of the shortcomings of the formal education system and can connect interested learners in rural communities to the global information system in a meaningful way? Can it empower the rural poor and marginalized to gain access to information and education that they think is useful and enables them to create a vision of a better life in the village without migrating to the city and to act upon their vision? Can a two-way communication be established in which rural people make their voice heard and their needs felt? Can the experience of the Inuit (Eskimo) people in Canada be replicated in Southern Africa? The launching of the Anik (meaning brother in Inuktitut language) satellite in 1972 brought communications access to the remote and relatively undeveloped regions of Arctic Canada; the Inuit learned to use effectively radio, television, telephone fax, email, Internet and the World Wide Web to achieve their ends (Kenney 1998).

In Southern Africa in general and Lesotho in particular the major marginalized groups are retrenched miners and farm workers, unemployed youth who were never employed, herdboys, adults with 'irrelevant' education and 'graduates' from circumcision schools. In addition women are socially and legally disadvantaged. A married woman is a legal minor and she cannot undertake legal transaction on her own (Women and Law in Southern Africa 1998, 36). As a result her economic activities are largely restricted to the informal sector.

The progress of many Third World countries will depend on their capacity to make the culture, concern and needs of the poor and marginalized part of their training and research agenda in order to maximize the creativity and

ingenuity of all available human resources in their particular environment (Moletsane 1988).

Lesotho case study

A tripartite partnership between the community, the university and government/donor is formed to plan, set up and run technical and business skill centres in the ten districts of Lesotho, Southern Africa. The partnership for an individual centre will last seven years after which the community centre is expected to run independently or close down. Very close continuous evaluation and monitoring takes place.

Initially, one centre, the Taung Skill Centre in Mohale's Hoek District has started as a pilot project. The Taung landscape is hilly, dry and wind swept with scarce summer rainfall when crops are grown on small fields. The rural people live on subsistence farming supplemented by earnings from migrant workers who are employed predominantly in South African mines, firms and farms. Land ownership is traditional whereby the chief allocates land to the male head of household. Some land is set aside as common grazing land. With the increasing population not every newly established family receives farming land. Soil erosion is one of the major problems leading to very poor yields and extensive donga formation decreasing the quality and quantity of agricultural land. There is no electricity, no telephone and no central water supply. Life in these rural areas is not attractive and young people aspire to go to the towns and cities.

Description of technical and business skill centre

The Taung Skill Centre is patterned on the Bethel Business and Community Development Centre (BBCDC) which started in the mountains of southern Lesotho in 1991. BBCDC is a registered NGO and running successfully as a democratic community organization. The challenge of the new Taung Centre is that it is a community driven project, planned, owned, administered and run by the community. The students come from the surrounding rural areas. The regular student population is largely composed of marginalized youth and middle age people. Courses are being arranged for other groups upon request from the community. A short course on leadership and another one on adult education is being held in January 1999. The regular students attending the two-year course acquire reasonable physical and intellectual understanding of materials and structures, tools and equipment, forces and processes, biological systems and agriculture, and markets and politics by simply working. The centre instils an attitude of relying as far as possible on the human and natural resources of the area.

How will the centre contribute to give rural people control over their own economic growth? (after I.

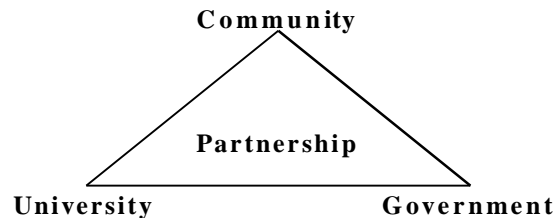
Yaholnitsky, Director BBCDC, personal communication 1997)

Lesotho is not likely to develop a mature economy in the very near future. There will be very little expansion of specialized career-type activity or new ready made civil service and parastatal employment. What is possible, however, is nation-building by Lesotho citizens that gradually augments the stock of private and public capital through diverse activity. As this stock of capital grows, productivity increases, and a fortuitous upward spiral establishes a steady momentum of economic and social progress. Diverse activity means that the primary engine of growth in an emerging economy is self-reliance and grass-roots co-operation. A possible future for a youth leaving the centre after completing two years of work and study is as follows: the odd part-time job, piece work, seasonal and intermittent work on field crops, some daily attention to vegetable crops, milking a cow in the evening, construction projects with the family (houses, poultry sheds, water supply, sanitation, etc.) repairs and maintenance around the home, landscaping, small-scale income generation, soil and water conservation, tree planting, co-operation with neighbours to build local infrastructure – roads, new class rooms at primary schools, etc. After a few years of hard work and saving, the individual can invest in tools and materials with economic potential and capitalize on his or her specific knowledge, experience and talents. A better road, school and healthy landscaping will produce substantial long-term benefits and the basis for a sustainable infrastructure. This is the path of growth that mature economies have taken.

The tripartite partnership

The partnership between the community, university and government/donor supports structures for the community to encourage reflection and learning processes on the road to empowerment and self-reliance; it establishes linkages and dialogue between the partners. The three partners support each other in achieving the set goals, celebrating success and overcoming failures and disappointments. Having three partners has the advantages of a safety net. Should one partner temporarily not perform, the other two can assist to fill the gap and give the failing partner time to reflect and to learn. Conflict resolution is easier among three than between two. Access to resources is greater. As important as financial support is moral support and the adoption and fostering of positive attitudes and respect for different kinds of knowledge, expertise and learning. The marginalized rural people are no doubt poor but they hold a considerable amount of local scientific and technological traditional knowledge which

individuals and communities evolved in adaptation to risk prone environments; recognition of this knowledge in development and education policy and practice could have multiple benefits (Prasad 1998). Open learning systems in these areas should make use of and build on this valuable knowledge and expertise thereby validating, conserving and sharing it with all those for whom it is useful. The intellectual ownership rights, credit and recognition must be vested with the people who have created and accumulated this scientific knowledge. Once these communities are connected to the global network they will add their own value for everyone else already in (Calhoun 1998).



At the Skill Centre the people of the village create knowledge contributing their traditions, wisdom, and values. They are creating a new and more comprehensive paradigm in which practical rationality merges with academic ratio and where the means to produce knowledge and enhance community achievements and togetherness are seen to be as important as those of material production. Such a transformation of the grassroots, as well as the academic level will result in a participatory type of community (Fals Borda 1983).

The role of the university

The university having access to and understanding of the world wide communication and donor system can link the village to the opportunities of globally available information and funding. Tapping the global system and transferring that knowledge and funding into appropriate action contributes to harnessing education, science and technology for the progress of the poor and disadvantaged. The university facilitates access to these systems through satellite connectivity. The university plays a mediator role and interprets government structures and donor intentions and procedures thus empowering the community to access these resources.

So far, the university has identified one suitable village and community for the pilot project. The basic selection criteria are a community ready and committed to build up a centre for which effective leadership is essential. The chief has to allocate a building site and an agricultural field in order to demonstrate field cropping and for self-sufficiency in basic foods. Water has to be available for initial construction. The community leaders explained and discussed the project idea with the community and they agreed to participate and fulfil the conditions. The University in consultation with the community and the donor/government wrote the project proposal and submitted it to funding agencies. Funding for a one-year pilot project has been received.

It is advantageous to persuade university staff members who have roots in a village and who are committed to their original community to be part of the research team. The chief of Liphiring village where this project is located is a member of the university staff and part of the research team.

The role of the community

The role of the community is to plan, set up and run the technical and business skill centre in their village. So far, the community planned the project together with the other partners. The chief in consultation with the community allocated a building site and a field. Two community members donated two fields. A water source (dam) initiated and constructed by the community is nearby. In the Taung area the Basotho tradition of co-operation and communal work (Setsabi and Moloji, 1991) is kept alive. It is apparent that the older community members see the new Skill Centre as their co-operation venture for the training and development of the younger generation.

The community had selected four trainees, two women and two men who were sent to a one-year training-for-trainers course at the already established BBCD Centre. During their holidays in July 1998 the four trainees came home to demonstrate their newly acquired skills by building a small village post office. In October 1998 they came home to stay and form the core staff of their Centre. They put the final touches to their new Centre building. The materials for the Centre building were donated and the community paid an honorarium to a builder from the nearby town and constructed the building under his supervision. Villagers with masonry skill also volunteered to participate free of charge.

Equipment was ordered and received by the new staff and income generation - fitting of burglar bars in clients' houses – started. At the time of writing the community is interviewing and selecting the first 15+ students who are beginning their two-year course at the Taung Skill Centre in January 1999.

The role of government/donor

The government was persuaded to give financial support for the recurrent expenditure. Donors are supporting capital investment. The current introduction of local government in which the university is involved is an opportune moment to lobby for support for rural self-help initiatives and viable rural development models.

Another role of government is to facilitate the communities' understanding of and access to government services. In turn the Skill Centre creates a local manpower pool through which local government can deliver its services.

Conclusion

The men and women trained at the centres are likely to stay in their rural area to support the continuing education process at the village level where their new skills can create and improve their rural livelihoods. They will form the critical mass of entrepreneurship and appropriate skills to transform the village into their centre of development and learning. They acquired the vision and confidence to act by increasing their own capital (house, crops, livestock, education etc.) as well as that of the community (roads, water supply, schools, training and business centres, etc.). It is expected that this will create potential for self-employment in the village and identification with village life and thus prevent alienation from the rural home and the resulting migration to the cities. The village will become an attractive place to live, earn a living and stimulate others towards greater responsibilities and communal well being. Satellite connectivity opens access to telephone, e-mail and Internet. An economically sustainable infrastructure for open learning and distance education is set up and is owned by the community. The tripartite partnership for progress between community, government and university stimulates sustainable human development through continuing appropriate education and training generating economic growth with equitable distribution. This development regenerates the environment rather than destroying it. It empowers people enlarging their choices and opportunities and providing for their participation in decisions which affect them rather than marginalizing them.

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