

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer Bottom-up versus export-led development

In a column a couple of years ago we shared the ideas of William Easterly who has spoken out against the process of expert-led development that is being carried out in the name of “fighting the global war on poverty” (<http://tinyurl.com/zevra4r>). We see the problem Easterly was talking about in the reaction of Bolivia to the offer of the Gates Foundation to provide them with 100,000 chickens. Bolivian President Evo Morales was insulted, noting that the country “already produces 197 million chickens annually, and has the capacity to export 36 million” (<http://tinyurl.com/zr5n4rr>).

That is not to say that raising chickens is not an effective strategy for improving nutrition levels and reducing poverty. The problem with expert-led development, as exemplified by the offer of chickens, is that it fails to recognize the autonomy of people to make their own decisions. Human beings generally put high value on their own ability to make decisions and react negatively when their autonomy is violated.

The perception of the people involved would be quite different if they identified chicken raising as a strategy they wanted to implement in their village and then contacted the Gates representative or Heifer International as a potential sources of baby chicks. The difference is between a top-down development strategy and bottom-up development strategy.

We have seen the results of, and Gates Foundation has written about, the failure of the top-down (or expert-led) development strategy. Developing countries are littered with equipment used in long-ago projects that has fallen into disuse for many different reasons. There are reams of stories in the literature about communities reverting back to traditional methods once a project is over, the money has been spent, and the experts have returned home to write their research papers.

So what would bottom-up development look like and why is it not more generally put into effect? Over the last three years, Harwood and his colleague in Senegal Dr. Ousmane Ali Pame, a professor in the English Department at Chiekh Anta Diop University and former mayor of his home village of Guédé Chantier in the Senegal River Valley have wrestled with those questions and have come up with some answers.

Foundations and other organizations that provide the money for development projects have a fiduciary responsibility to see that the money they provide is not wasted. To ensure that, they require the identification of a “deliverable:” an improved tool, a better means of weed control, a more ecologically sound way of growing crop, and the list goes on.

There are two problems with this approach. First, any input from the community is minimized because the nature of the project and thus the deliverable is

identified ahead of time and is often tied to the skills and research agenda of the academic or project manager involved. Second, the funding for the leadership is tied to the funding for the implementation of the project.

A bottom-up alternative is to fund a team that specializes in leadership development and strategic planning. The team would respond to invitations from local communities that want help figuring out how to tackle problems and take advantage of opportunities that they live with on a day-to-day basis.

The team would use a leadership development/strategic planning model that goes by many names and has been used by groups in the US and around the world for over half a century. Some call it the cycle of innovation while others use the acronym of the steps involved: ERDA (Evaluate the needs and set goals; Research various strategies to achieve each goal; Decide which goals and strategies are most important; and put into Action the chosen strategies followed up by beginning the cycle all over again with Evaluation).

In this bottom-up model, the deliverable is the process that the development team uses to help the community members establish goals and implement strategies. Some of the strategies may involve identifying external resources while other strategies may only need to tap existing resources in the community.

If the goal is to repair mudbrick homes or walls in the community, the need for external support may be minimal. A community that wants to improve its chicken flock may want to contact Heifer International or the Gates Foundation chicken project or they may purchase chicks from a neighboring community.

The key elements are that the goals are ones that have been set by the community and that the community members have developed a strategy to achieve those goals. When the goals are community goals, community members are more likely to persevere when setbacks are encountered.

As we have seen, the role of the development specialist is to use a process to develop and strengthen community leadership and help them work through a strategic planning process that can be used on an ongoing basis. Once learned, community members can initiate the process anytime a group identifies a goal it would like to tackle. The other role the development specialist fulfills is to serve as a resource to find information or a person with skills that may not be readily available in the community.

A key element of the process is that development specialists bring their personal and professional skills—like leadership development and strategic planning—with them any time they meet with members of the community. Likewise the members of the community come with their own personal and pro-

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fessional skills—knowledge of local weather, soils, crops, animal care, customs, and food preferences. Thus the specialists and members of the community meet as equals with a common goal and a wide range of knowledge and skills that can be applied to the goals and strategies that are identified by community members.

For the process to have long-term impact, the strategies must be environmentally and economically sustainable within the resource base of the community.

As community members experience the leadership development/strategic planning process, they are learning skills that they can share with friends and relatives in neighboring communities. Thus the process has the potential to become spontaneously replicable. Neighboring communities also have the opportunity to learn from the strategies adopted by others.

At this time Harwood and Ousmane are in the process of identifying organizations that would be willing to support a bottom-up development process in the Senegal River Valley.

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