

# COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT IN BALE SALKA

## Reviving the tradition of collective action



***From the very beginning, the ABCD group in Bale Salka decided to forgo the “low-hanging fruits” and focused on ambitious activities to improve community infrastructure.***

*Bale Salka is an ethnically and religiously diverse community in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia, largely made up of migrants who were relocated to this area as part of the national government’s response to the drought and famine of 1983-1985.*

*In 2007, a local NGO called Hundee, which works to improve the resilience of rural communities in the Oromia Region, engaged a group of Bale Salka residents in a process of identifying and building on their strengths, known as “Asset-Based Community-Driven” development (or ABCD).*

*The ABCD process has reinvigorated the community’s pride in collective action and yielded impressive results, including the expansion of the local school and the rebuilding of a washed-out road.*

### **Background**

The community of Bale Salka is nestled on a high plateau in Ethiopia’s Bale Mountains some 500 km southeast of Addis Ababa. Its 10,000-strong population consists mainly of immigrants from the Somali Region, who were moved to this area in the mid-1980s under the nationwide resettlement program purporting to combat famine and improve

agricultural productivity, initiated by the military-socialist Derg regime (1974-1987).

The population is diverse, including Somali, Oromo, and Amhara people who adhere to Islam, Orthodox Christianity or traditional religious beliefs.

In 2003, Oxfam Canada, in collaboration with the Coady International Institute and three local partners, set out to pilot an ABCD approach in Ethiopia. As part of this initiative, one of the local partners, an NGO called Hundee, introduced the ABCD process to a group of 50 Bale Salka residents in 2007.

### **The ABCD Process**

Hundee initiated the ABCD process using appreciative interviewing, whereby separate community groups (youth, adult women, adult men, and the elderly) were asked to share stories that highlighted significant community accomplishments in the past. In particular, Hundee facilitators sought to bring out those achievements that involved little or no external support from either the government or NGOs.

Recalling such stories was a fairly easy exercise for the Bale Salka ABCD group. The resettlement program often brought people to places where government services were virtually non-existent, so the migrants had to work together in order to survive. This area also had few NGOs the community could turn to for assistance.

One important story that Hundee learned from this exercise was that Bale Salka residents had been able to raise 350,000 birr several years earlier (~50,000 US\$ at the then prevailing exchange rate) for the installation of 4.5 km of power lines to deliver electricity to the community. Reflections on this episode had a positive motivational impact on the community members as well: if they could leverage their assets for a common cause once, why not do it again?

*“Nobody is responsible for the road except the people.”*

Other exercises were then used to map natural resources and physical infrastructure, local associations and institutions, and individual skills, and to identify the inflows and “leaks” in the local economy. These exercises provided the ABCD group with an inventory of their own assets that could be used to meet their development priorities.

### **Resulting Developments**

At the next, action-planning stage, the Bale Salka group—despite being encouraged to focus at first on the so-called “low-hanging fruits” (modest tasks that could be fulfilled without any external support)—immediately prioritized a number of ambitious projects.

One of these was to rebuild the road linking Bale Salka to the outside world. The old road had largely washed out and became impassable during the rainy season, limiting the ability of Bale Salka residents to sell their farming produce in outside markets, which is their main source of cash income.

The road rebuilding required not only large sums of money but also technical know-how and the ability to negotiate good deals with contractors. This level of contribution and coordination was not typical of newly-emerged ABCD groups in other parts of Ethiopia, most of which had decided to start small and grew more ambitious over time. However, the Bale Salka group was determined and collected as much as 470,000 birr (~50,000 US\$) from community members in just one year. Using this sizable sum as leverage, the group was able to attract further investment from Oxfam Canada. With community labour, coupled with the technical expertise provided by the government, the vital road was restored.

Upon completion of the road, one community member was asked about the role of external support in the project. He acknowledged its importance, but stressed that “nobody is responsible for the road except the people of [Bale Salka]”—a clear sign that community ownership was central to the project’s success.

Perhaps an even more important outcome of the ABCD process in Bale Salka has been the expansion of the local school to include a secondary section. Prior to its upgrade, the only high school available to local children was in the town of Robe, about 30 km away. The combined costs of tuition, transportation,

and lodging were beyond the means of many Bale Salka families, thus preventing a large proportion of the community’s youth from obtaining secondary education. Determined to resolve this critical issue, the community raised 200,000 birr and provided the labour and materials to spruce up the existing school facilities and construct nine new classrooms.

### **Converting Challenge to Their Advantage**

When the school expansion was completed, the community hit a roadblock. The officials said they could not provide a secondary-level teacher to Bale Salka as this would result in exceeding the number of high schools that the district was allowed by law to have. The leaders of Bale Salka responded by sending groups of youth, women, and elders to speak to the government about the great lengths the community had gone to in order to secure a high school. After over a year of discussions, not only did the government appoint a new teacher, but it also contributed various school furnishings amounting to 50,000 birr. Further on, the government—apparently convinced of the community’s potential—has recently granted Bale Salka municipal status. In theory, this should provide it with access to a wider range of government services. Time will tell.

Bale Salka has achieved some of the most striking results among the 25 communities that have been introduced to the ABCD process in Ethiopia. Its success is due entirely to local citizens who owned their development from the very outset. The role of the ABCD process in Bale Salka consisted as much in providing the practical tools that helped its residents bring about the changes they wanted to see as in reviving the tradition of collective action that has been there all along.



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