GETTING ORGANIZED IN ILU AGA

The impact of ABCD on local associations



The community of Ilu Aga in south-central Ethiopia, which was introduced to the process of asset-based and community-driven development (ABCD) by a local NGO in 2003, has since seen the emergence of many new local associations.

The experiences of these associations show that growing incrementally from a modest start, at a pace that matches local capacities, is an important prerequisite to their success.

The success of community associations is also related to the ability of local NGOs to provide support in a way that is responsive to community interests and capacities.

Background

Ilu Aga is a community of about 7,000 people located 40 km west of Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. Similar to most communities in Ethiopia, traditional associations in Ilu Aga have promoted connectedness within and outside the community. They offer mutual assistance in labour-sharing arrangements, small savings groups, and rituals associated with births, deaths, weddings, and religious holidays. In recent years, with some direction from government and local NGOs, many newer, more formal, associations have emerged in rural areas of Ethiopia, including Ilu Aga. This story reveals the opportunities presented by the arrival of these new social actors as well as the complexity of bringing them all together for community benefit.

The Unfolding of the ABCD Process

In 2003, a group of approximately 40 Ilu Aga residents undertook a series of ABCD exercises facilitated by a local NGO named Hundee in partnership with Oxfam Canada and the Coady International Institute. This process was designed to trigger communityled initiatives through recognition of past accomplishments and existing strengths, an exploration of how the local economy works, and the development of an action plan aimed to address the community's priorities by making the most of its own assets, including local associations.

Between 2003 and 2008, the ABCD group in Ilu Aga designed and completed a number of projects relying primarily on their own resources. These included:

- reviving a traditional irrigation practice to improve potato and vegetable yields;
- installing new irrigation facilities to complement existing water supply system;
- starting a composting operation to reduce expenditures on chemical fertilizers;
- establishing a tree nursery;
- planting one hectare of trees in combination with terracing to reduce soil erosion;
- building three small wells and three boreholes;
- establishing a livestock fattening scheme to improve household incomes.

This flurry of activities necessarily involved the emergence of new leadership and relationships to carry them forward. It was not surprising, therefore, that an association mapping exercise undertaken in 2011 revealed a considerable increase in both the number and size of local associations since the start of the ABCD process in Ilu Aga. In addition to the traditional *Iddir* (burial society) and *Equb* (savings group), the updated list of local associations included potato and dairy cooperatives, an irrigation association, and seven self-help groups. Some of them, such

"Collective hands make the work light." as a multipurpose cooperative registered with the government, had hundreds of members. No less impressively, at a focus group including ten community members, every participant indicated that he or she was a member of at least four associations. When asked how these changes came about, one man noted that "collective hands make the work light" and another said, "If different people each bring a little money then we can make a bigger difference."

Achievements and Challenges

Some development workers have questioned the sustainability of associations that are heavily supported by government or NGOs on the grounds that they do not always take into account key community dynamics. Two examples from Ilu Aga help shed some light on this issue: a potato cooperative and a dairy cooperative. Both were inspired by community interests, but their engagement with outside actors led to different outcomes.

The potato cooperative was formed in 2008 to take advantage of the revival of traditional irrigation practices as well as the availability of nearby markets (thanks to a newly paved road). These factors encouraged farmers to expand their potato operations and organize for group sales. By complementing traditional water supply systems with foot pumps, they were able to further improve irrigation and boost potato yields. Increased yields allowed cooperative members to pool their resources and thereby reduce the transportation costs required to access larger markets outside of the village. Next, the members decided to construct a storage shed to keep potatoes fresh for longer periods of time. They built the shed walls, and Hundee provided modest funds to purchase corrugated iron sheets for the roof. The results did not take long to get noticed: as early as the second year of the cooperative's existence, its profits reached 27,000 birr (~2,000 US\$).

The success of this venture had much to do with the fact that it fit well with its members' resources and required only incremental build-up of their technical and organizational capacity. The way Hundee staff acted was also important: rather than leading the process, they maintained a facilitative role and provided support in a way that was responsive to the community's interests and capacities.

Whereas the potato cooperative represented a successful community-led initiative based on a realistic vision, the dairy cooperative represented the challenge of scaling up to a higher organizational and economic level. Although this initiative did rely on existing assets such as milk cows, availability of grazing land, and milking and butter making skills, major difficulties have persisted.

First, the newly-formed association received substantial funding from an external donor. Albeit well-intentioned, this donation appeared to overwhelm the group which did not yet have the appropriate expertise to manage large influxes of resources. Second, the members' experience, extensive as it was in the area of milk production, had little to do with marketing. They often pooled their milk with nowhere to sell. As a consequence, the dairy cooperative went bankrupt for several months. It is now up and running again, and its members are selling milk to the local market—the logical starting place from which the endeavour to reach larger markets can grow as opportunities arise.

This experience has provoked questions about how external organizations can have a more realistic understanding of existing capacities and the pace of change in the communities they work with. It has also highlighted the importance of starting small and introducing external resources in a way that allows community members to keep control over their activities without overrelying on outside expertise. Finally, it has led to the emergence of simplified value chain tools aimed to help Ilu Aga farmers understand markets when evaluating the profitability of income-generating activities.



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