

Making a Difference in a Rural Farming Community

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Africa continues to be left behind in an increasingly globalized economy. In fact, globalization has drastically increased the divide between the developed and the developing world. Africa clearly remains the orphaned child of the world's geographical regions. Here is a continent whose natural resource base is as good as any other if not better than most, a continent with immense human resource but one that is quickly being decimated by HIV/AIDS and ravaging poverty.

Africa is said to be the continent that has old and tired soils that are deficient in the nutrients that plants require to grow. It is also said that run-off as a result of soil fragility and environmental stress has led to loss of top soils that normally support food plants.

The sixties was a decade of hope as a number of African countries attained their independence. The seventies was in fact a decade of growth, as some hailed the quality and maturity of African leadership.

The eighties was a decade of "*things gone bad*". In the agricultural sector, cracks started to be seen along the food chain. Seed quality started to be questioned, various farmer extension systems were tried, farmer support institutions started to crumble due to corruption and bad governance while grants diminished as the issue of loans started to emerge.

It has taken quite a while for Africans to realize that most funds being used to offer basic services, to enrich individuals and then run the government were in fact loans. Yet as this information emerged, the realization that our governments were receiving loans in the name of enhancing service delivery to their people, was a bit disappointing since such a process was not transparent. Further, people on whose behalf these loans have been taken have been left outside the of "box". They have neither been consulted on how the funds should be used nor have they been involved in seeking solutions to the problems and challenges facing them in life.

Many African economies have gone bad, the Green Revolution never took root in Africa, and conflict and drought precipitated famines have continued to dog the continent. With a globalized media, the pictures that enlighten the T.V screen about Africa include those starving, emaciated children and adults, not to mention conflict generated refugees, a situation that moves people away from their areas of production. Food crises are common. Food aid arriving late has become a common phenomenon. But again with globalization, we are now aware that local food production and processing is quite costly and often leads to higher prices of locally produced items than prevailing international prices of the same. So clearly, imports end up being cheaper than local products and unrestricted importation of certain key products clearly hurts local production. When it comes to world food trade, the developing world justifiably feels that the playing ground is not level.

All these issues and many more, and the fact of deteriorating nutritional status of Kenyan children and threatened livelihoods of the majority of Kenyans caused me to:

- 1) Make a decision not to take up an international job, and

2) Got me looking for funds to support intervention activities at the local level.

Kenya had, in the eighties, boasted of being self sufficient in the major food staples, and had in fact recorded an upward trend in child nutritional status in the 1978, 1981, and 1983 child health and nutritional status surveys. For the first time I started to see emaciated Kenyan children on the T.V screen while starvation deaths were even reported in the media. How could this be? I started to ask myself?

Project Rationale

I was lucky to get donor funding from the Netherlands-based Bernard Van Leer Foundation, who were sympathetic with my ideas and encouraged me to rationalize the project and articulate the problem I wished to address. I wished to undertake this project in my own home area, where I was married and which bordered my birthplace.

I recalled that during my childhood schooling years, we used to have a well-respected agricultural extension officer in *khaki* uniform and who would use a bicycle to visit farmers' homes to give individual advice most of the time.

His job also entailed identifying farmers to go for farmers' Field School Courses. I may not have grasped the full details of Mr. Harris' job portfolio, but I sure recall his good stature in the community. I recall too that under the colonial scheme of things every farm household was REQUIRED to plant cassava. In fact a man whose home did not have a cassava plot was liable to incarceration or some form of fine. Cassava was considered a hunger crop because of its unique characteristics of being easy to grow and tend, without much of storage problems as it was harvested when and if needed, and thereafter it could be preserved into a flour to mix with grains, or kept as dried chips.

Too much concentration on maize once it had been accepted by society, increased preference for wheat bread, and relaxed monitoring on the part of the government, led to the declining interest in cassava by farmers. Over the years, cassava has, regrettably assumed an image of a "*poor man's*" food crop.

ROP's Focus

As I went back to the community, many of these experiences were still lingering in my mind and I kept asking: "*what went wrong?*" I recall a famine during my childhood days when we had to eat sorghum-only *ugali* and this was red sorghum and so the *ugali* looked red as well; and when we had to look for any edible greens from the wild, mostly river banks, the older people in the community were mandated to confirm the safety of such vegetation. Now we hear of hunger-stricken communities eating tree leaves and we think this is completely absurd. Something else that I recall that has relevance to food security is that it was part of the extension officers' mandate to ensure that every home had a food store, with food in it. What this means is that the government has always played the role of guardian and protector, ensuring that farmers did the right thing for communities and parents stored food for their families.

A bit of all this was continued into post-independence Kenya, but as time went on, some of the erstwhile good government policies began to be neglected, changed or considered inappropriate. Now we are trying to bring back such crops as sorghum and cassava, with mixed success. Current efforts are going towards this promotion as industrial rather than food crops.

So as I ventured into the community, I had all the past experiences in my head, I had what I had read in Richard Chambers' writings about participatory community development and I had experiences of some best practices in certain Kenyan communities where I had the privilege to serve, and I was aware of the prevailing situation in the communities where I wished to work. It

looked like a huge challenge. I felt, however, that I had the necessary inputs to turn things around for the better, for my people: donor support, my desire and good will to go back and make a difference, and a community that would welcome my initiative with open arms, and a government which would be happy to see its technical officers engaged in constructive extension work instead of sitting in offices for lack of transport to visit farmers.

The five years (instead of 3), the project lasted was just a hurdle. There were many challenges. In fact, opposition and detractors would emerge unexpectedly, and clearly, I had not prepared for this.

There were bright moments but not too many. There was clearly more negativity than positivity. I will attempt to highlight some of the challenges:

1) My own institution and colleagues were not very excited about action research. They did not understand it even though I attempted to educate them, and to involve them. They just saw it as a populist project designed to give me publicity in preparation for some future political assignment. Of course so far I have proven them wrong. University bureaucracy and lack of support delayed project progress and also made it difficult to argue for continued support.

Challenging instances included:

- (a) Delays in accounting procedures, delays in releasing cheques and vehicles, and giving excuses for last minute turning down of invitations previously accepted; the project vehicle was just taken over without proper ceremony and is now attached to one of the Deputy Vice Chancellors for daily use, yet this was provided as a field research vehicle. My conclusion here is that African universities at both management and scholarship levels need to continuously examine their mandates to ensure they stay on course, and that they realize who their constituency is, because it is the constituency whose problems they should help to solve. It is also human nature that some people will feel threatened by innovativeness and potential success; but then such attitudes create an environment that is not at all conducive to innovation and discovery.
- (b) Growth of agricultural research in Africa and especially at universities has been hurt by peers' perception of field work as something less than intellectual. African scholars will often pride in debates or talking about laboratory or desk review work but very rarely of field work. My view has always been that universities have generic functions, for example furthering of knowledge, but that specifically, they should attempt to address the problems of the society in which they live. For Africa, and Kenya in particular, where over 80% of the population access livelihood from agriculture and allied sectors, it does not make sense that our agricultural scientists are not focussing their research at this level.

There are many publications which can publish such work internationally, so long as the research design was sound. Unfortunately now with dwindling resources for agricultural research, field activities which tend to be costly are probably the first to be compromised. The whole notion of "*on-farm*" research, spearheaded by national agricultural centers has constituted quite a shift in paradigm. The new approach involves the farmer right from the start, and carries the farmer along, and is clearly beneficial to women farmers who, most of the time are unable to leave their homes to go elsewhere for training. An added advantage of on-farm research and one which should be exploited fully is the farmers' indigenous and acquired knowledge. It would then be important to appropriately acknowledge this aspect.

- (c) Community acceptance

This we cannot take for granted. We cannot assume just because farmers have problems, they will accept us with open arms when we appear potential solvers of their problems.

Maintenance of human dignity through working in a civilized manner and in respect of the other person's circumstances should be at the core of interactions with people we may perceive to be poor and helpless.

Far too often, professionals have gone into a community with an arrogant, boss-knows-it-all mentality and clearly we fail. This way we put ourselves in a situation where we are neither able to impart knowledge nor to receive it. Mutual respect and recognizing our interactions with the farmer as a level partnership are success factors on which you just cannot go wrong because it establishes and fosters TRUST. The minute the farmer becomes suspicious of you as a professional and of your methods, that is the end of the story.

One of the *mottos* of our organization has been to help our partners help themselves, and to enable our partners to help each other rather than appearing to arrive with a package of solutions.

- (d) Few donors come to the field to appreciate how slow development is. A field visit truly corrects many myths and transforms an individual. There is no substitute for field visits. Problem solving is slow, because of the many stakeholders involved. Compounding factors could be of a political nature or just lack of the right people to work with, the community dynamics which need to be sorted out and the fact that change cannot always be measured visibly.

I had gone to the community with an already prepared proposal and the project having been funded. Shocked but not surprised, I had to change course and ended up constructing an animal health facility- a cattle dip- instead of a pre school resource centre. "*Who told you we do not take good care of our children?*" was the question that left me dumb-founded.

The Researcher(s)

The researcher and especially the principal investigator has a lot to do in convincing all the stakeholders about the project and maintaining contact with and dialogue among all key stakeholders: government, community, parent institution, the donor and any others. One has to ensure also that motivation of the personnel and research assistants is maintained. As a matter of principle, remember, you have to determine your support systems and maintain a healthy relationship with them. You also as a principal investigator, have to deliver what is required of you, such as submitting papers and progress reports, in a timely fashion.

How have we succeeded in extension:
All our projects are linked.

We discovered after a while that we could use water to enter a community. The water project we undertake, protection of springs, is cost effective (requires US \$ 300 only to protect a spring that will serve anywhere from 30-60 households or families). There is plenty of water where we work but it has been polluted and oftentimes is a mosquito breeding ground. We use this activity to gain community acceptance, and to get men and women working together. The technology to protect springs has been around since the colonial days and it is still appropriate and works. This has been a winner. We have had dedicated donors for this activity.

After the men have completed excavating the ground, it takes 3-4 days to complete the job and in such a short time, people move from drinking visibly dirty water to drinking visibly clear and potable water. Within a month, they start to tell you how disease incidence in general and communicable diseases incidence in particular has gone down. Men have commented to me. "*You see our women are clean and laughing again!*" There are a lot of such springs in western Kenya where we operate and so far ROP has protected more than 100. The community knows how to prepare themselves before they submit an application for assistance. They have to get ready about 25% of the material required, they have to be maintaining the unprotected spring and

they have to constitute a gender-balanced committee to oversee maintenance and proper usage. Ensuring maintenance and proper usage guarantees consideration for subsequent support. The community and our partners are aware of this. Cost-sharing is designed to get the community to feel a sense of ownership, responsibility and to ensure self monitoring for any future collaboration.

Tied to this project has been health education on proper sanitation, personal hygiene and environment protection. Nonetheless, we have been let down from time to time.

We have had other projects thereafter which we have linked to successful water stories and these have included:

- Improved toilets for primary schools
- Training of traditional midwives and community health workers
- Food production and nutrition activities in schools and for community groups most of which are women

Under food production, we have:

1. Dairy Project which enables us to get a high grade dairy cow into a home through the woman of the family. This project is expensive from the point of view of cost, but it too is a winner. It has increased milk availability in this community and thus enhanced the animal food component in diets; this is particularly important for children and women; it has, after sensitization, given the otherwise idle men something meaningful to do as they assist with taking care of the animal; and it has elevated the status of the women at family and community levels. Further, when there is no glut of milk, families are able to generate some income through sales and now their children do not have to be chased from school for lack of school fees.
2. Indigenous Vegetable Project. There are six types of African leafy vegetables in this community, known for their nutritional and intrinsic value. These vegetables are a woman's crop from seeds acquisition, through land or plot preparation, tending the crop, harvesting, preparation, selling, and consumption. We had to involve our agricultural researchers for the first two years to sort out the crop husbandry side, to make sure it is scientifically sound. Now in its fourth and final year, the farmers have restored these vegetables into their diets. We (ROP) purchase seeds from contracted farmers, clean and preserve the seed and sell it – we have a community seed bank for these seeds; farmers now prepare organic manure for the vegetables and plant seeds in proper rows instead of broadcasting. The community, including the men, would rather have these vegetables instead of exotic Western type ones, to eat with their *ugali*. There are further examples but for the purpose of this presentation, given examples will suffice.

So what can one recommend? My recommendations here are based on personal experience in a particular context and truly might not apply to every situation. Some people have said that tiny farms are not economically viable. How tiny is tiny and how about the small-scale farmers in Asia who were able to multiply their yield manifold during the Green Revolution?

For us at ROP, important factors have been:

1. TRUST – establishment of mutual trust between all the partners is of critical importance. How to go about it to ensure its continuance will depend to a large extent on a particular culture and environment including the politics of the day.
2. CONVINCING THE DONOR to ensure long sustained funding because it takes time to establish trust and to demonstrate visible impact. Donors normally want to see visible impact and quickly. Sudden stoppage of funding usually erodes whatever trust the researcher might have fostered with the community.

3. UNDERSTAND THE CULTURE and the gender dynamics and use methods which recognize and utilize the varied skills that exist in the community without necessarily *“rocking the boat”* as that would be counter productive. Dialogue and gradual and invisible persuasion can realize long-lasting positive change.
4. IDENTIFY AND UTILIZE existing skills, within the stakeholders including the beneficiary group and government. This approach ensures wider project acceptance, fosters a sense of ownership and keeps down costs associated with use of outside consultants, and personal emoluments for independent personnel; the savings can be either minimized or channeled to the actual activities. Communities are often very resourceful and identification and use of farmer’s indigenous knowledge is usually very much appreciated by the community.
5. PROJECT IMPLEMENTORS should avoid being high-handed. They should skillfully play a passive but effective role.
6. MAINTAIN OPEN COMMUNICATION without misinforming or creating false expectations. Once you let down a community it is difficult for you or anyone else to go back to the same community.
7. LET THE COMMUNITY UNDERSTAND that their destiny is in their own hands and that you will not always be there. But also as an implementor, donor dependency should be discouraged.
8. KEEP OUT OF LOCAL POLITICS while recognizing the power dynamics within the community. Listen only to constructive gossip and act after constructive consultation. There will always be those who will want to cause havoc so that you can fail. Have loyal lieutenants who can keep their ears on the ground for you.
9. DO NOT GET ENTANGLED in a relationship that you can not get out of when you want to.
10. RECOGNIZE that small-scale resource poor farmers are human beings with numerous needs. Address effectively that which you can. For these farmers to succeed, however, they require constant, regular visits, timely support and to be listened to. You may need to get markets for them for their produce and you need to be visionary and pre-emptive about this. It will be 10 years next year, of real challenge in the field for ROP.

BUT, I still go to bed every night, able to sleep, feeling satisfied that at the end of the day, I have made a difference in somebody’s life.