

# Approaches in rural development on the move – a field experience in Nigeria

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Development is all about change; to bring about significant and lasting change for the betterment of the well being of people. There are key principles such as participation at all levels, a holistic view to development and incorporation of social, political, economical and environmental aspects, but there are many approaches to initiate a process for change, but “THE” right approach does not exist and it may vary based on the context and the resources available. This article describes the process of a NGO in Nigeria working in the field of rural development, searching for an appropriate approach to meet the challenges that were posed to the organisation in order to remain relevant and to offer high quality services<sup>2</sup>.

## The situation 10 years ago

In the mid-90ies a faith-based development organisation in the north-eastern region of Nigeria had to decide on how to proceed with its development activities. Despite of significant achievements and strong ties to rural communities, the continuity and sustainability of the programmes was at stake. The rural development activities were carried out through three independent components (Rural Health, Self Help Well Digging Programme and Rural Development Programme Agriculture). Each of the three programmes applied a sector approach, rendering services to the communities in their field of specialisation.

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<sup>2</sup> The understanding of services in this article comprises community mobilisation and animation as well as rendering technical and methodical support to communities.

### Box 1: Profile

The EYN Integrated Community Based Development Programme is a faith-based development organisation located in Mubi, Adamawa State, Nigeria. EYN stands for Ekklesiyar Yan’uwa a Nigeria (Church of the Brethren in Nigeria). The organisation is aiming at the empowerment of rural communities in the north-eastern region of Nigeria. The focus of the empowerment activities lies on strengthening the capacity of self-governance and poverty alleviation. The organisation consequently applies a community based and people centred development approach. Community felt needs are the focal point of any activity and therefore the initiative, responsibility and the resources originate to a large extent from within the community. The organisation takes the role of facilitating the development process. The organisation works on interdisciplinary basis with specialists on primary health care, sustainable agriculture, water engineering and generalists for the community mobilisation process.

Currently, the organisation has established cooperation among more than 130 communities in Adamawa and Borno State and has staff strength of 185 (technical and non-technical staff).

The Rural Health Programme was specialised in the training of Village Health Workers and supervising the village health posts on a monthly basis. Right from the beginning the communities were strongly involved in the process with clear responsibilities. This approach has been very effective in the 70ies and 80ies and brought even international recognition. In the 80ies the programme went into operating dispensaries in strategic locations rendering primary health care services to communities. In the 90ies private and public dispensaries were opened and as a result competition for health services increased. In times with economic distress people went for the cheapest medical service

even when they were aware that the quality of the services received was problematic.

The Self Help Well Digging Programme faced similar problems. The programme was incepted in the 70ies with the aim to reduce the occurrence of water born diseases and to improve the living conditions in rural areas. Despite of commendable quantitative results, such as the number of successfully dug wells, the programme increasingly faced difficulties to justify its' existence due to an unfavourable cost-benefit analysis. Similar programmes using a different approach, provided access to clean drinking water significant cheaper.

The Rural Development Agriculture Programme focused on increasing food production through introducing improved varieties. Soil and water conservation, tree planting and the promotion of a balanced diet were other key issues. The programme accounted for noteworthy successes and one significant impact which was not even planned. The production of soybeans was introduced with the aim of improving the diet of people and became a very important cash crop for the region.

In general it has been observed that the beneficiaries remained passive in terms of taking ownership responsibility for the projects. In the mid 90ties the funding agreement with the major partners expired and the organisation was forced to look for new partners or to renew existing partnerships and therefore to come up with a new strategy.

## The common issues at stake

Each of the three programmes used a unique approach to development but yet they had many things in common.

### **Institutional based versus people centred development**

With the exception of the services provided on preventive health care, the three programmes mainly applied an institutional approach under which the responsibility, initiative and resources were provided and controlled to a large extent by the programme. Evaluations

have shown that under this quite paternalistic paradigm of maintaining control, communities (beneficiaries) do not develop strong ownership ties towards the initiatives.

The programmes therefore moved towards a people centred and community based development approach. Another crucial feature of a people centred approach lies in the precondition that the beneficiaries set the agenda for any developmental activity within their community. The community development officers (programme staff) therefore had to take the role of a facilitator, animator and motivator.

### **Single sector versus interdisciplinary approach**

The three components for rural development focused on remote rural communities. It happened that the three programmes were working to a high degree within the same community without or with only little coordination. The technical staff mainly used a single-sector approach. In order to avoid such unhealthy situations the programmes decided to use an interdisciplinary approach focusing foremost on the expressed community needs. The community development officers, public health promoters, and sustainable agriculture promoters were encouraged to work in an interdisciplinary team and to integrate all aspects of livelihood development which fits much better into the community's reality. It was anticipated that the coordination could be enhanced and the synergies of an interdisciplinary team could be capitalised.

### **External donor dependency versus sustainability**

The issue of sustainability was probably the biggest challenge for the programme. In the three components, there were more than 185 staff members employed. The rural health programme with 135 staff member was by far the largest component. In the Nigerian context, 185 staff members means 185 families and about the same number of extended families depending on the existence of the organisation. The termination of an employment on the basis of restructuring a programme is nearly impossible due to restrictive regulations in the Nigerian labour code; though laying-off staff was never an option. Therefore, any restructuring activity and new orientation of the organisation did go along

with the obligation of at least being neutral in staffing.

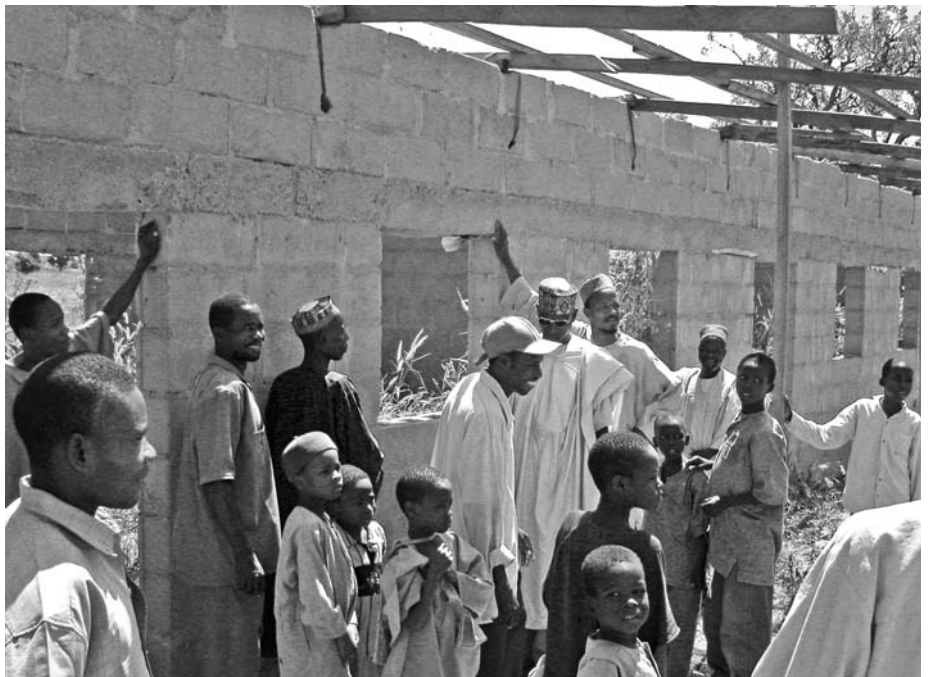
Over the years the existing partners started to emphasise the importance of internally generated funds for covering a substantial share of the current programme cost. The dependency on external donors should be gradually reduced. Other partners have started a process of phasing out the funding for the programmes. In this situation, the three programmes were forced to establish new partnerships and to explore possibilities for income generating activities in order to subsidise service oriented activities (community mobilisation and rendering technical and methodical support).

Another aspect affecting sustainability was the fact that the church as the main owner of the programmes showed weak ownership and did not provide resources for the operation of the organisation. This situation can be observed in many faith-based development organisations and other NGOs. It was seen as a future management task to create a sense of ownership among the major stakeholder.

In brief: the issues at stake were the sustainability, the future approach and the mission of the programmes. In a participatory reflection process among the major stakeholders (church, benefiting communities, staff and external partners of the programmes), the new approach, the methodology and the key features were developed.

### The emergence of a 'new' approach with a revised structure

After an intensive reflection process the change of paradigm (box 2) was initiated in 1998 while the structural integration was finalized by January 2002.



*Community members of Kirbutu (Borno State) present their community school building which is under construction.*

Three independent programmes became a single entity with the components (a) community empowerment (b) rural health (c) sustainable agriculture. Under the component community development the aspects of community mobilisation and rural water supply were combined. The component rural health comprised primary health care (training of village health workers and supervision of village health posts) and the curative aspect (health care services rendered at the dispensaries). The component sustainable agriculture comprised the promotion of sustainable agriculture as well as the commercial units such as poultry farm, tree nurseries/orchards, and distribution of farm inputs through retail stores. The aim of restructuring was to ease interactions as a precondition for an interdisciplinary approach as well as to cut down administrative cost and increase efficiency. The structure was again reviewed in 2005 with the result that the commercial units were outsourced with a suitable structure and business plans. The commercial units operated as profit centres were aiming at decreasing the dependency on external donors through generating funds. Hence all the community based subprojects were combined under the community empowerment compo-

ment (community mobilisation, rural water supply, sustainable agriculture, public health)

### Box 2: Change of Paradigm

The change of paradigm meant to put people first. The focus is on people, their expressed needs, their resources as well as their knowledge, skills and attitudes. This is based on the conviction, that rural people can solve their problems by themselves. But people need to be stimulated and motivated. The responsibility of the programme remains to facilitate the process of community mobilisation. To encourage people's participation also means to empower people. A participatory approach, is aiming at giving a voice to the underprivileged people in the society.

The organisation adopted the participatory learning and action (PLA) approach. The beneficiaries were taking the lead in the situation analysis, prioritisation of felt needs, project planning, monitoring and evaluation. The process orientation and the focus on participatory learning are key features of the approach which were also applied within the organisation.

## Insights gained

In 2005 the programme accomplished a participatory evaluation with insiders and outsiders, assessing the achievements made so far under the new structure (since 2002) and with a new paradigm (since 1998). The main insights are:

### 1. Management and structure

The management of such a large and diverse organisation (185 staff members, 3 major programme components, and several sub-projects) is challenging. In order to reflect a participatory approach within the organisation, a management team was formed including the Director (Coordinator), the heads (Deputy Directors) of the three components, the programme accountant and staff representatives from each component and female staff on rotational basis. The aim of this structure was to ensure free information flow and transparency at all levels. However, the persistent communication

problems affected negatively the smooth operation of the programme.

The financial management of the organisation has been assessed as inadequate due to the fact, crucial information about the financial situation of the organisation were not always at hand when needed, which hindered pro active decision making.

Several management policies are yet to be introduced (procedure handbook, in-service training policy, promotion policy and employment policy). The effectiveness and efficiency of the board of governors is below the expectation. The sense of ownership among the major stakeholder is not well established.

### 2. Results and outcome

The promotion of sustainable agriculture was found to be still at its infancy stage. To combine the two aspect of promoting sustainable agriculture and at the same time operate commercial agricultural venture as income generating unit, created an unsolvable dilemma and proved to be incompatible. There were conflicting interests within the same programme component. The management of the service oriented activities on one side and the commercial activities on the other side were not clearly divided. Service orientation (rendering services to communities at no cost) does not provide in any case an enabling environment for successful entrepreneurial ship. The incentives (e.g. sales targets with bonus) for doing successful business transactions were missing.

The community mobilisation activities were found to be effective especially in those communities with a long term working relationship (4 years and more). The capacity for dealing with challenges and problems at community level has significantly improved. Community development committees were established with the responsibility of steering and facilitating developmental activities.

Community initiatives have been started mainly along the line of fulfilling basic needs of the community. Expressed by a ratio of all community initiatives, access

to primary health care services is on the first position (35.8 %), followed by access to clean drinking water (23.3 %), access to primary education (16.5 %), improvement of access roads (14.2 %), and the formation of women's groups/cooperatives (10.2 %). On average, 74 % of the members of the community development committees are men, while 26 % are women. The demand for trainings for village health workers was higher than the trainings offered and the communities assess the health services offered by the programme as highly relevant and of good quality.



*In-house training: An interdisciplinary team of community development officers and public health promoters work on a group assignment.*

### 3. Working on interdisciplinary basis

Merging three programmes with a different organisational culture and leadership style, and different developmental activities is a challenging task. It is therefore obvious that a special effort is required in order to establish a common ground. Evidence for synergies as a result of an interdisciplinary approach were seen but there is room for improvement. The interdisciplinary approach at community level was found in its infancy stage and the different approaches were still visible. Information flow among the various sub-projects and teams was limited. A guideline on how information should be shared among the teams and components is yet to be elaborated and a common understanding on which information is valuable to be shared has to be reached. The programme has introduced formal platforms for teambuilding and information exchange which are highly appreciated by the staff members. There is evidence of synergies resulting from the integration (crosscutting projects e.g. in-house trainings, mobilising communities and training of Village Health Workers). A higher level of interaction and co-operation between the major components of the organisation can be recorded.

### 4. Staff welfare and capacity building

The staff in general identifies themselves with the aims of the organisation but it remains a general problem of staff at all levels that the qualification does often not meet the job expectations. Staff development through in service training became a major strategy.

### Lessons learned

- Community Development on a participatory basis takes time; quick results cannot be expected. A participatory process is not always straight forward. Depending on the set up and the social structure of a community, the time for defining common interest and prioritising felt needs may differ.
- PLA as a methodology, applied in a very hierarchical and tradition based society, questions the power structure within a community and therefore community members may undermine the process. This can result in a dilemma between acknowledging traditional power structures and promoting a more participatory and democratic way in decision making at community level.

- To restructure an organisation and to fine tune a development approach in order to fit the context and to remain relevant for the beneficiaries takes time. Internal resistance to change should be addressed immediately by creating a forum where staff can voice out their fears and take part in the visioning and planning process. A clear communication strategy in such a process is extremely important.
- It is one thing to apply participatory tools in the process of community empowerment but another in applying them within the organisation as a management tool. Programmes may use PLA tools in facilitating a community development process but do not fully internalise PLA principles in their organisational management.
- Ownership responsibilities such as monitoring and proactive steering of non-governmental organisations are often delegated to foreign donors.
- Women play a key role in community development. Cultural practices may hinder active participation of women in a developmental process. Dealing with culture and traditions are highly sensitive and

constitutes a potential for conflicts within a community which may lead to a withdrawal attitude.

- Community empowerment may have limited impact if the political, socio-economic and infrastructural situation in a certain region is unfavourable. The north-eastern region of Nigeria is one of the poorest regions in the country. The main roads are in poor conditions and the road density is very low. Transport companies charge extra fees and prices of certain inputs are therefore higher. Reliable communication systems are still not available, though the coverage has most recently significantly improved. There are large regions which are only accessible by bicycle, motorcycle or by trekking. Communities are unable to transport their produce to markets the time when prices are high. Due to the distressed economic situation in Nigeria, the market in rural areas for farm produce and other locally produced products is very limited. An increase in production may lead to a decrease in price to an unprofitable level. For example a poultry farm with a daily production of 500 to 600 eggs was complaining of having the sales store full of eggs. The main consumers of the eggs were encountering economic problems and could no longer afford to buy eggs

because of the government's failure in paying salaries for several months. In an economy which is extremely fluctuating, communities may not engage in other income generating activities in order to keep the risk for economic failure low.

- Access to capital for impoverished farmers is highly difficult, in many cases impossible. There are no incentives to take up a loan under unfavourable conditions (high interest rate, collaterals).

- Community development on "soft" issues (e.g. local governance) may not have a prominent



*A group of farmers in Kwarhi (Adamawa State) assist each other in threshing soybeans.*

rank on the community's priority list as long as basic needs are not fulfilled.

- A NGO working on rural development cannot replace government and take up the responsibility in creating an enabling environment for development. Liaising with government agencies is highly important as well as empowering the civil society and to enable them to advocate for themselves.
- Funding partners play a crucial role in the process of restructuring and refocusing development activities. NGOs are tempted to please donors' interest and underestimate the importance of getting the backing from other partners and beneficiaries.

*"We felt highly neglected because the Government never dared to assist the community, but now as you are here our community regained strength because we know that people care about us." Community Member of Hizhi Gweram, Borno State, Nigeria*

## Conclusion

In the North-Eastern region of Nigeria, where governmental development agencies as well as NGOs are scarce, faith-based development organisations play a crucial role in addressing poverty and inequality in a holistic manner. Under the current situation a participatory approach on an interdisciplinary basis, viewing development as a process of creating an opportunity for people to improve their livelihood, seems to be most appropriate. The instable political and socio-economic environment is a major challenge for any development organisation and influences to a large extent outcome and impact of development intervention. In the ongoing democratization process, effective liaising and collaboration with the government and its development agencies becomes increasingly important. The restructuring and refocusing of a development organisation absorbs a significant part of the organisation's capacity and therefore needs to be well planned and implemented. Internal resistance for change has the potential of paralysing an organisation and therefore requires a sensitive facilitation in a participatory manner. Despite of all the efforts during the last decades in the North-Eastern region of Nigeria, the addressing and fulfilment of basic needs remains a major challenge. The creation of an enabling socio-economic and political environment for development cannot be overemphasised.