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The Significance of Community Self-Help Activities in Promoting Social Development +

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ABSTRACT

Local self-help programmes (activities) have a significant role to play in promoting local and regional development, and in improving the living conditions of the people. Self-help activities can be instrumental in mobilising available community resources such as talents and skills, leadership, human energy, and capital and material resources. In addition to this, local participation in such activities will facilitate the process of need identification and sound decision-making regarding the goals to be pursued, and feasible programme design and implementation. The process will foster effective ways of tackling local problems, and as a result may enable the community to gain some degree of self-reliance. Furthermore, the local community may also acquire practical leadership and organisational skills from the process. Over time, both improvement in their living conditions and overall development in community capability may ensue. The two case studies presented here and others which are cited in the text clearly demonstrate that through proper guidance and encouragement local self-help organisations can accomplish such results.

Introduction

Historically, human society has always used some type of mutual aid or selfhelp social support system. This has been a common experience particularly at times of greater need, such as during emergency or disaster situations. Neighbours, relatives and friends help each other in times of need. At other times, the whole community comes together to work on common needs or problems which they may face. For instance, they may build local roads and bridges, schools, churches, or form a neighbourhood watch group to defend against intruders. In all of these efforts, the community tries to mobilise its own resources in order to address and tackle its needs or problems. Such practice is very common even now among rural communities in developing nations.

However, grassroots' contribution to the design and implementation of development projects have often been overlooked or neglected. More often than

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not, in large part this is due to the low esteem in which ordinary folk are usually held by development technocrats and policy-makers alike. This is rather unfortunate, because ordinary citizens or community members have a lot to offer and an important role to play in tackling and solving their problems. Sustained development cannot take place without active citizen participation or involvement in the development process. Thus, regrettably a potentially valuable asset has been overlooked and under-utilised.

The need to organise and take action usually arises either from experiencing an actual problem or from imagining the potential threat of the adverse effects of impending disaster. Thus, felt need creates the necessity for the community to get organised. Can this inherent characteristic feature of a community be exploited to get it organised on a regular basis so that it may be able to develop its capability and satisfy its needs more effectively? The purpose of this paper is to explore in detail these issues and those conditions which would foster effective organisation of self-help groups to promote social development at the local and regional levels. A few examples of some successful rural self-help projects from Ethiopia will be presented to provide concrete examples of the main theme of the paper.

The Significance of Local Voluntary Self-Help Activities in Fostering and Promoting Sustained Development

Active grassroots participation in development activities is necessary for the following important reasons. First, every community has some limited capability and necessary resources such as ideas, talents, skills, leadership, human energy, and financial and material assets, regardless of how little the available amount may be. Full and efficient utilisation of these resources will enable the community to tackle, at least some of its problems and thereby appreciate its own capability. As a result, it may gain some self confidence and subsequently may develop the motivation and the willpower to do more in the future. Second, this will progressively help to encourage more local initiatives, and as a result, reduce negative psychological inertia, such as apathy and hopelessness. Ultimately the community may achieve a relatively higher level of self-reliance. Third, fuller and more efficient utilisation of available local resources will enable the community to make similar use of external resources if and when they become available. This is quite important, for no amount of external resources will make the community effective unless it already knows how to manage efficiently what it already has. In short, sustained development will require the community to mobilise itself and make efficient use of its limited resources and appreciate its own capability before it looks for help from elsewhere. Then external assistance can be sought to supplement what it already has and to encourage local initiatives for undertaking and promoting development programmes.

Specifically and more importantly, the mobilisation of organised local self-help groups or activities is essential for the following fundamental reasons. (1) These are to:

- 1) foster local input in problem assessment and need identification
- 2) enhance sound and feasible decision-making
- 3) expedite proper programme planning and implementation, and
- 4) facilitate the development of community capabilities.

The Benefit of Community Involvement in Problem Definition and Need Assessment

Voluntary and active citizen participation in the process of problem definition/need assessment can facilitate proper problem diagnosis and a clear definition of the problem in a number of ways. Generally, the process would facilitate:

- a) the gathering of firsthand and appropriate data about local conditions
- b) expression of felt need and realistic assessment of the community's needs and problems, and
- c) adequate exploration and comprehensive assessment of various issues which may have some relevance to the problem under consideration.

Firstly, organised local self-help activities would afford the community members an opportunity to come together and discuss problems which they may have experienced. In turn, this will increase the chances for gathering a rich variety of valuable information by which the problem(s) can be properly assessed. That is, through free and open democratic discussion the community can generate wide varieties of useful data, including pertinent information about the origin and historical development of the problem. In the course of such discussion genuine and firsthand data about local community conditions, such as the environment, politics, culture, religion, economics, education, etc can be obtained. In addition to this, the community can help to provide correct and pertinent interpretation of the data, such that the problem can be properly understood and clearly defined. In other words, the problem can be studied more thoroughly and properly assessed from the perspective of those who have firsthand experience and knowledge about it. As a result, the danger of reading things out of context can be minimised. Thus, active community participation in the problem-solving process is imperative. This is quite important in light of the fact that just as the patient is an essential source of basic information about his/her ailment, so is the community about its problems.

Secondly, local community involvement in tackling local problems would facilitate proper identification of local need. It allows the citizens to express their felt needs directly as opposed to what others may perceive those needs to be (Avis, 1973; King, 1965). This is extremely important because unless the people can

express their needs as they see fit, there is little chance that their problems can be clearly understood and their needs directly addressed. The lack of community involvement in the problem-solving process often results in creating projects which others may perceive are useful to the community, but in reality may not directly address the community's problems and/or needs. Consequently, the project may not attract sufficient community interest, and may not receive the community's support, which is essential in order to sustain it. On the other hand, active and broad-based community involvement in problem assessment or need identification will help to put in focus both the nature and scope of the problem such that there is a clear understanding of it. How well this can be achieved is indeed a test of whether the programme serves the interest of the whole community or a narrow special-interest group.

Thirdly, local self-help activities which are designed to address genuine community needs have the potential for facilitating considerable community mobilisation to address such need(s). Extensive and active community involvement in such endeavours would, in turn, increase the chances for greater representation of various groups, as well as the expressing of divergent points of view so that a comprehensive assessment of the issues at hand can be made. An open and well-organised democratic public discussion would be a good vehicle to foster this level of involvement. Such discussion, if or when properly managed, can engender cross-fertilization of diverse ideas, which are potentially a source of creativity and innovation (Ryan, 1969). As a result, the participants may be able to learn from each other and gain a better understanding of the problem. This will enable them to make an informed decision which they can support. Subsequently, the chances for finding feasible and realistic solutions to problem(s) may increase.

Fourthly, the process may help to encourage cooperative and collaborative relationships among the community members, and in so doing may help to strengthen the degree of community solidarity. Consequently, there may be extensive community interest and sustained support for the projects which may ensue from the problem definition or need identification. Some evidence from developing countries indicates that local community involvement in project design and implementation has a favourable impact on project success. For example, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has implemented many successful rural development projects, such as soil and water conservation, village irrigation projects, rural women's production group organisations, etc., in Asia and subSaharan Africa. The organisation suggests that many of their projects were successful primarily because active grassroots participation was utilised in the design and implementation of the projects (Alamgir, 1989; Lineberry, 1989). Furthermore, successful implementation of rural development projects in Comilla, former East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), India, Kenya, and Ethiopia were largely

attributed to active grassroots participation in project design and implementation (Abatena, 1987; Kulp, 1970; Mayer, et al, 1958; Raper, 1970; Taylor, et al, 1965; Thomas, 1985).

The Role of Self-Help Organisations in Decision Making

Once the problem has been defined, the community needs to make some decisions regarding what goal(s) or solution(s) it would choose to pursue as an answer to the problem. Invariably, this would require direct community input. This is necessary because the choice of feasible solution(s) would require careful assessment of local community conditions as well as proper consideration of often competing alternative goals or solutions. With the added advantages of full knowledge about prevailing local conditions, ideas regarding the prospective solution(s) to their problem(s), and the commitment, or at least the predisposition, to actively seek solutions to these, local self-help groups are just what are needed for meeting this challenge.

In the process of considering alternative solutions, such groups may engage in lively debates and discussions between and/or among themselves and others. As a result, the chances for careful consideration of a range of alternative solutions from among which a feasible solution can be selected may increase. Thus, the process would generally tend to facilitate sound decisions and help to reduce conflicts in order to prevent the polarisation of the community.

Local self-help groups can contribute to sound decision-making in various ways, such as by increasing the possibilities for:

- 1) exploring alternative solutions or goals
- 2) making practical suggestions regarding ways to improve upon the various, proposed solutions or goals; and
- 3) by voting to directly influence the decision.

An organised discussion among the community members will foster the free exchange of ideas and opinions. This may, in turn, help to increase their knowledge and broaden their foresight about a variety of important issues and options which they need to consider before reaching a final decision. Consequently, the process may help facilitate informed and sound decision-making. This is possible because the majority of informed citizens will not make wrong decisions often without recognising and correcting their mistakes (Borman, 1969).

Furthermore, in as much as self-help groups are usually organised to tackle local problems or needs, the membership of such groups is more favourably predisposed to suggest prospective solutions or answers to the problem. The various suggestions which the group may propose may potentially provide a database of a range of alternative solutions which the group may carefully consider.

Consequently, the chances for making a sound or an informed decision can improve considerably. Finally, community members can directly influence decisions by casting their vote. Their participation in the discussions which may precede the actual decision can influence their judgment and final position regarding the impending decision. In short, the process will help the group to make an informed decision which they can later support.

In addition to fostering sound decisions, organised local self-help groups can also help to build consensus and promote community solidarity. To begin with, such groups have certain inherent characteristics which will make this possible. They have common life experiences such as similar needs and problems, and similar customs, beliefs, and value systems. In view of the fact that these factors tend to influence and shape ideas, opinions, interests, needs, and perceived and/or real differences between and among people, their common heritage would tend to reduce the degree of polarisation and conflict among the community members, and in so doing may increase the likelihood of reaching consensus. In other words, local community groups are generally more favourably predisposed to work together to find solutions to their problems because they have a lot in common to begin with. This asset can be fully exploited by organising a public meeting in which the members can freely discuss the issues that may concern them the most. (2)

Systematic and guided democratic discussions would help the members to share ideas and learn something about each other. With some encouragement for tolerance of differences of opinion, the members may be persuaded to listen to one another with an open mind and change their own opinion whenever there are compelling reasons to do so. As a result, they may be able to reduce or narrow their differences, and in so doing increase the chances for reaching an agreement which would have broad-based support.

Besides, proper application of sound organisational principles and conflict resolution strategies can help the group reduce their misunderstandings and reach a mutually acceptable decision. These may, among other things, include:

- 1) a clear definition of problems or needs so as to facilitate wider and greater recognition among the target population
- 2) well-defined and widely recognised goals
- 3) clear and effective channels of communication, and
- 4) co-optation and utilisation of well-accepted and recognised leaders by the major groups and subgroups within the community.

These principles and strategies can foster cooperative working relationships among the members so as to achieve a greater degree of community solidarity and widely-supported decisions which can be fully implemented (Ross, 1967). Similarly, to reduce or to prevent conflicts between or among various groups within the community, they must be encouraged to:

- 1) develop an open channel of communication and constructive dialogue between or among themselves
- 2) refrain from engaging in activities which may portend real or perceived threat to others
- 3) develop a perception of mutual interdependence and mutual coexistence between or among themselves, and
- 4) seek pertinent information which may help to clarify issues and reduce misunderstanding and tension between or among themselves (Toseland & Rivas, 1987; Walton, 1974).

Careful and thoughtful application of these principles and techniques would enable the group to take a realistic look at the decisions which they have to make and, hopefully, narrow their differences so as to arrive at a widely supported decision. The task of making this feasible lies with the community organiser and community leaders. Effective leadership and proper organisational skills will be required to successfully accomplish this task.

Available evidence suggests that given the opportunity and proper guidance, people will ultimately decide to do what is good for themselves. Some case studies from Guatemala, Mexico, India, the Philippines, and Tunisia indicate that organised self-help groups among the villagers were able to identify local problems and take the necessary actions to implement community improvement projects such as street repair, construction of community water supply systems and sanitary latrines, design and implementation of village irrigation systems, and building improved housing units and temples, etc (Alamgir, 1989; Bagodion, et al, 1991; Cox et al, 1984; Cuructcheet, 1987; King, 1965). It seems that their participation facilitated shared decision-making to find sound and feasible solutions to local problems, and to implement the decisions arrived at.

The Significance of Community Self-Help Organisations To Successful Programme Implementation

Normally, community input in problem definition and decision-making regarding the choice of relevant and feasible intervention strategies would pave the way for successful programme implementation. Appropriate programme planning and implementation, by and large, depends on the degree to which a problem has been clearly identified and defined, and sound and feasible solutions have been selected. So, to the extent that local community participation in self-help activities would facilitate the last two, it is reasonable to expect that it would expedite the former too. Thus, voluntary grassroots involvement in the implementation of self-help activities would be necessary to garner stronger and broader community support for the programme. In turn, this would help to facilitate:

- 1) initial programme execution or implementation
- 2) sustained programme operation or execution, and
- 3) further programme development and expansion.

Community self-help organisations are useful to the extent that they can expedite the process of attaining these goals or objectives.

The Role of Local Self-Help Organisations in Initial Programme Execution

Local self-help groups are generally committed to implement the decision which they have voluntarily made. In as much as the decision represents their felt need or desire to find solutions to their problems and/or needs, chances are they would do everything possible to achieve that goal. In other words, felt need tends to motivate people to implement decisions which they have willingly made compared to those which they were coerced into making. Various research findings clearly suggest that people's participation in democratic decision-making tends to have a favourable influence over the degree to which the participants are willing to implement those decisions. Coch and French (1948) have noted that garment factory employees' participation in decisions regarding new work procedures had a favourable impact on their readjustment to the new working conditions, and their performance. From among those who participated, the group with the experience of total participation was found to be superior to those who participated indirectly through their representative. Similarly, Trecker (1972) suggested that individuals who have willingly taken an active part in group goal determination have a tendency to make every effort possible to achieve such goals.

Furthermore, research findings from an empirical study of 36 development projects from Africa and Latin America suggest that local action is a significant predictor of overall project success (Morss, 1976). The findings specifically indicate that it is an important determinant of two success criteria, one of which was the generation of self-help capabilities among small farmers. Their involvement in the project identification, design, and implementation was found to be an important influence behind the project's success. This may be due to the fact that participation may ensure careful consideration of local social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental conditions, such that the design feature of local action projects can be sensitive to the prevailing community situations. This is necessary because lack of careful consideration of local conditions creates implementation problems which may ultimately result in project failure (Marson, 1971).

The Potential Effect of Community Self-Help Activities on Programme Sustenance

Often it is more difficult to sustain new programmes to the point where they can continuously provide useful services, than it is to start them. This, at least in part, seems to arise from a lack of sustained community interest and support. Firm community support is essential for continuous programme maintenance. Community self-help programmes tend to foster sustained community support in two ways. These are:

- 1) such programmes provide the people with an opportunity to manage and monitor the programme in such a fashion that it continues to serve their interest and as a result attracts steady community support, and
- 2) such experience would help the development of community capability to manage its own affairs and deal with its problems more effectively on a sustained basis.

Normally, organised self-help activities would give the community members an opportunity to be actively involved in the process of problem definition, decision-making, and programme implementation. This would in turn allow them to identify and select programmes which they feel would serve their needs and desires. If and when this is achieved, the programme is more likely to receive strong support on a sustained basis. The results of a study of personality determinants of the effects of participation indicated that persons who participated in programmes which are compatible with their personality make-up – ie their needs and desires – wanted their respective programmes to last longer, and they were more satisfied than those whose personalities were incompatible with the programme in which they participated (Vroom, 1960). From this, we can infer that community members would do everything possible to support and try to maintain the programme which they may have developed in order to meet their felt need. This is particularly the case if and when the programmes were selected and developed by the people themselves, and when they felt and believed that they had a legitimate role to play in the process.

Vroom (1960) noted that individuals who felt that their participation in an activity is legitimate and proper are influenced more favourably than those who do not hold the same or similar view. In other words, participation will most likely produce favourable effects when the participants freely take part in an activity with the conviction that it will be beneficial to them. One of the main reasons for this is probably that voluntary action will enable them to exercise some degree of democratic self-determination, including the choice of a programme that they feel will serve their needs. Therefore, the result of such action is likely to be psychologically more rewarding. That is, it may represent the fruits of their own

contribution, such that they may cherish it and do whatever is necessary to maintain it. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that local self-help organisations will do just that. Furthermore, local community participation in programme implementation will make it possible for them to closely monitor the programme and make timely corrections or changes whenever significant problems arise. Consequently, the programme would have a far greater chance to succeed and continue to serve the community.

The Potential Contribution of Local Self-Help Organisations to Programme Expansion and Development

From the preceding discussions it will be recalled that local self-help organisations usually foster the process of problem definition, sound and feasible decision-making, and proper programme implementation. Such initial successful experience will raise the group's self-esteem and boost their self-confidence. Consequently they are more likely to be motivated to take bolder initiatives in the future. This would mean the expansion of the existing, and development of new programmes. In other words, initial success will build self-confidence and breed the desire to succeed more and more (King, 1965; Kuip, 1970; McClelland, 1961, 1964, 1971; McClelland & Winter, 1969). Therefore, initial successful accomplishment of a modest community self-help project can unleash a chain reaction of further community improvement projects with the resultant progressive development in community capability. For instance, successful implementation of initial rural development projects, in small village communities in Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Kenya, Mexico and Pakistan have led to the development of other projects over a period of time (Abatena, 1987; Cox & Annis, 1988; King, 1965; Raper, 1970). In all of these projects, the villagers played an active and significant role from the beginning to the end. In short, the work of well-organised and guided voluntary community self-help groups in local action programmes may not only ensure successful implementation of such projects, but may also help to build their self-confidence to the point that the members may be motivated to take additional initiatives. As a result, there may be greater prospects for the development of viable local organisations and institutions.

The Cumulative Effect of Local Self-Help Activities on the Development of Viable Community Capability

From the process of active participation in self-help activities, the community can gain a valuable learning experience which may ultimately lead to the development

of its capability to deal with local problems effectively. That is, the experience gained in the process can enhance social learning at the individual and group levels and eventually lead to the development of community capability.

Community members can acquire various kinds of knowledge and skill from their involvement in local self-help activities. For instance, they may be able to develop:

- 1) communication skills or the art of self-expression
- 2) skills in managing normal interpersonal relations or sharing of ideas and experiences
- 3) skills in listening, information processing and comprehension
- 4) tolerance of and/or respect for others
- 5) the ability to see things from different perspectives
- 6) the ability to understand the relationship between freedom and responsibility, and
- 7) skills in performing various tasks in social action programmes.

Furthermore, the group setting within which local action programmes take place will provide rich and practical learning opportunities from which the members can gain other valuable knowledge and experience. As a result, there can be some changes in values, attitudes, personalities, and behaviour. In other words, people learn from their environment through the process of sharing their life experiences (Dunn, 1971). They learn by actually sharing real life experiences with their fellow friends and neighbours in the process of working together on real life problems which may commonly concern them. The cumulative effect of this could be growth and development in the personal capacities of the participants', and subsequently an overall improvement in the condition of life in the community they represent.

At the group level, local self-help activities will help the community members to gain a living experience about cooperative undertaking from working together towards the fulfilment of group goals and objectives. Such experiences would contribute positively to the development of local organisations and community capabilities such that local needs or problems can be tackled more effectively. The experience may particularly facilitate:

- 1) cooperative and collaborative undertakings and the development of team spirit
- 2) joint decision-making and responsibility
- 3) effective mobilisation of community efforts and community resources
- 4) acquisition of better organisational and management skills
- 5) development of leadership skills, and
- 6) development of a capability to initiate and accomplish a task.

As a consequence, significant structural transformation can take place at the community level. That is, social system learning (social system change and

development) takes place when social learning (experience acquired by individuals in a system) is achieved through problem-solving situations involving social actions. In other words real change in social system comes about as a result of real life experiences involving problem-solving situations wherein individual members within the system jointly work together towards the fulfilment of system goals and objectives (Dunn, 1971).

From the process of working in organised self-help activities, the community can acquire various kinds of knowledge, skills and capabilities. These may include, but are not limited to:

- 1) better knowledge or increased awareness of existing community resources such as talents, skills, leadership, and financial and material resources
- 2) better knowledge and skill in how to mobilise local resources
- 3) better knowledge and skills in identifying and mobilising external resources,
- 4) efficient utilisation of available resources, and
- 5) better knowledge and improved skills in self-management.

As a result of these, the community may be able to develop a capability to tackle its problems and satisfy its needs more effectively. If and when this happens the community will develop confidence in itself, and subsequently will have the motivation to undertake bolder initiatives towards the realisation of its needs. That is, the experience would engender growth both in individual and group capability, which would ultimately lead to the development of community capabilities such as leadership development, increased community initiatives, and eventually to the development of effective institutions within the community. In short, guided community involvement in purposefully-organised self-help activities would allow the members to work together collectively towards the realisation of group goals and objectives. As a result, they can make positive contributions to the development of local organisations and community capabilities to deal with local needs or problems more effectively. Thus, grassroots self-help organisations can be the object as well as the instrument of development. The extent to which this can be achieved will, in part, depend on certain essential conditions which are necessary for self-help projects to succeed.

Essential Conditions for Self-Help Organisations to Succeed

There are certain essential conditions for grassroots self-help organisations to succeed in promoting development. First self-help organisations must involve voluntary grassroots groups or active citizen participation in activities of interest to the group. The participants should be organised on their own free will or should be encouraged to do so with the ultimate decision left to them. They must not be coerced in any way to do something which they neither believe in nor have an

interest in. Second, the members must actively participate in all stages of the problem-solving process, including problem diagnosis/need assessment, decision-making, project design and implementation, and evaluation. In all of these stages the group must have democratic freedom to manage their own affairs.

Third, the group must be encouraged to make maximum feasible mobilisation of local (its own) resources before any attempt is made to obtain external assistance. The object here is to encourage the group to make efficient utilisation of its own resources, however limited that may be, before looking elsewhere so that they may gain some self-confidence from realising how much they can accomplish on their own. This experience also will help the group to learn how to make efficient use of any external resource when it becomes available. External assistance shall be sought only after it is determined that such a resource cannot be mobilised from within. The primary object (purpose) of seeking external resources must be to supplement internal community resources. This must be obtained in a form or shape that can be put directly to productive use, with little or no chance for abuse; and it must be obtained at the right time. Furthermore, every effort must be made to make the right mix of internal and external resources such that self-reliance can be encouraged and dependence on external sources can be minimised.

Fourth, there must be some technical guidance and encouragement for the group. That is, there must be an enabler or a catalyst to guide the group in taking responsibility for itself, such that the group will, over time, develop its own capability and become relatively independent.

Two case studies from rural development projects in Ethiopia are presented below to provide practical demonstration of the application of the central theme of this paper. The two case studies clearly show the significance of grassroots self-help organisations in promoting progressive growth in community capability in order to bring about sustained local and regional development. It is instructive to note here that both cases heavily relied on mobilising internal community resources in order to initiate their respective projects. (3)

The Case Studies

In the following section we will present two selected case studies to illustrate the development of viable communal self-help organisations. The cases are: 1) the Tula Community Self-Help Project; and 2) the Gurage Community's "From Alemgana to Walamo-Sodo Road Construction and Transportation Association". The first represents a locality-based rural organisation which, perhaps, derives its origin from strong community solidarity – a rather homogeneous and cohesive community with charismatic leadership and an egalitarian and democratic social system. In sharp contrast, the second is an urban association which emerged from strong ethnic solidarity and extensive experience in small business enterprises, thrift associations, and entrepreneurship.

Tula Community Self-Help Project

Tula is a small village community of about 50-70 households, 20 kilometres (12.5 miles) from the city of Awasa in the Sidamo Governorate General, and about 290 kilometres (181 miles) south of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The people in this community have long depended on the city of Awasa to obtain basic household supplies such as table salt, coffee, cooking oil, kerosene, etc. In order to procure these supplies, the residents had to walk about 40 kilometres (25 miles) round-trip. Thanks to a fortunate unfolding of events and the leadership of the community, things started to change for the better in 1962-63. A community development trainee from the nearby Awasa Community Development Workers Training and Demonstration Centre was assigned to work with the community as part of his internship training. One of the projects he started to work on was the small community household supply store. Through a dialogue with community leaders, an idea was presented about the possibility of opening a small consumer cooperative store to stock basic household supplies which the community needed. The idea instantly caught fire as the leadership was readily receptive to it. (4)

A general meeting of the community members was called and the idea was presented to them. The group discussed the issue, decided to go along with the idea, and explored various possibilities for raising the initial investment capital. As a result of this discussion it was decided that selected and representative young and adult members of the community should go and work on the nearby Awasa farm (a large-scale public commercial undertaking) for a couple of days and earn wages to raise the necessary capital. This was implemented and the essential capital was raised. Subsequently the store was stocked with essential supplies and opened its door to the community. (5) The operation of the store was jointly supervised by one of the community leaders and the community development worker. The worker initially helped to set up the bookkeeping system and trained the store worker to eventually take over.

Although the price of the commodities sold to the community members was reasonably low, it became a profitable venture for the group. As a result of this successful experience, the group's motivation became stronger to explore further community improvement projects. Subsequently, they decided to build a community hall to accommodate their meetings and other public gatherings. After a successful completion of this project, they embarked on a cooperative house building project. An agreement was made to build a house for each of the community members that needed such housing, to be funded through joint resource mobilisation. Thus, while the individual family provided the necessary materials according to its capability, the community provided the rest plus the labour. The order in which a house for each of the members was built was determined by the meeting of the council of

community elders, conducted according to the local Gada System. (6) One of the major criteria the elders used to determine the order was the families' need. This project was successfully implemented. Furthermore, the council had the responsibility to formulate policy, to provide guidance, and to settle disputes among the community members (Hamer, 1987).

The next project that the community undertook and implemented was the cooperative organisation of the local cottage industry – which was mainly weaving cloth for local uses. In addition to this, the community decided to borrow the necessary capital to purchase a flour mill which would be run by a diesel engine. The mill was badly needed because each household had to walk, carrying their grain long distances to the nearest privately-owned mill. The community development worker, in consultation with the Department of Cooperatives in the Ministry of National Community Development and Social Affairs in Addis Ababa, helped the group draw up the project plan and prepare the loan application. The latter was submitted to the Agricultural Development Bank which carefully reviewed the application and then approved the loan. The engine was purchased and installed, and the project was successfully implemented. The venture was so profitable that the community was able to pay back the debt within a few years. They then expanded the business, constructing a second mill. The operations were registered as a bona fide cooperative society undertaking, operated and managed on a self-reliant basis with little guidance from the community development worker and the regional cooperative supervisor. The mills primarily helped to significantly reduce the burden of carrying grain long distances for milling, also providing the members with new capital assets and employment opportunities. Finally, the community established a local drug store and a clinic.

This case is a success story about how local community organisations can gradually evolve and grow over time to make the community relatively self-reliant. It takes the right kind of leadership and community solidarity, willpower and commitment, and proper encouragement and guidance by a technical agent to succeed in such an endeavour. Given this set of conditions, the replicability of this experience somewhere else is unquestionable (Abatena, 1978; Biddle & Biddle, 1965; Dey, 1964; Raper, 1970).

The Gurage Community's "From Alemgana to Walamo-Sodo Road Construction and Transportation Association"

This is a self-help mutual aid association of an ethnic community of the Gurages who live in Addis Ababa and other major cities. (7) A few elderly leaders of the community felt the need to organise in order to address some of the serious problems their kin were facing as rural residents. Thus the association was borne

out of a felt need, and organised to undertake various kinds of self-help activities designed to promote local and regional development. The major goals of the association were:

- 1) to develop transportation and communication networks in the region
- 2) to promote education, health, and welfare
- 3) to promote economic development in the region
- 4) to control crime and promote peace and tranquillity; and
- 5) organise local groups for initiating self-help activities. (8)

The association had a very well-defined organisational structure consisting of the board of supervisors, executive officers, and volunteer work teams or task forces. The board of supervisors, some of the executive officers, and work teams are all made up of volunteers selected or recruited from among the community members at large. One of the distinctive features of the association was the tapping and utilisation of skilled local talent, with as little cost as possible. The task forces or work teams were organised to undertake different kinds of activities, such as data gathering and research, programme planning, budgeting and fund-raising. The community members were encouraged to give as much financial assistance as they could afford, and volunteer their time freely when needed, to regularly attend the weekly meetings of the association and take an active role. Part of the association's revenue was eventually generated by various business activities, such as a regular public transportation service operated through a self-managed system. Other achievements include the construction of an all-weather road of about 250 kilometres (156 miles), and of regional elementary and a secondary schools, the opening of local clinics and basic health care facilities, and the eradication of local bandits who used to menace the community. All in all, the programme is considered to be a success. This is attributed to the unity, commitment, dedication, leadership, and the pooling of entrepreneurial talent which the association was able to tap from among its membership. In fact, it became a model for many other regional ethnic self-help associations which emerged in its wake.

Summary and Conclusion

The preceding discussion and the two case studies generally indicate that given proper leadership, technical guidance and encouragement, and an appropriate forum for the expression of felt need, local communities are capable of tackling their problems effectively and satisfying their needs. The main reasons why this happens seem to be that participation facilitates:

- 1) realistic problem definition
- 2) appropriate need assessment
- 3) sound, and feasible decision-making to determine relevant and attainable goal(s), and
- 4) sufficient local interest in, and firm support for the project.

The process facilitates effective mobilisation of local community resources to tackle local problems, appropriate programme design, and successful programme implementation. Subsequently, growth in personal and community experience and reasonable progress in the level of material well-being can be attained. The experience from Tula is a case in point. This case vividly demonstrates one of the strong virtues of bottom-up development or effective mobilisation of grassroots communities in the development process. Thus grassroots participation in the development process is an imperative that can no longer be ignored. A society cannot develop unless and until the majority of its people are actively involved in the development process. Development is basically a learning experience which accumulates over time. This is simply because novel ideas and innovative experiences have to be diffused and assimilated within the existing culture base in order to send deep roots to grow and bear fruit. (Ryan, 1969). Local self-help activities would provide the opportunity for community members to work together and in the process acquire a meaningful learning experience. Consequently, growth in personal and group capability is bound to take place. Ultimately this will result in the development of community capability.

The two case studies described in this paper indicate that indigenous local and regional organisations in Third World countries can be viable vehicles for community involvement and participation in proper project design and implementation. The process provides a valuable learning experience for the participants, such that growth and development can take place both at the individual and community level. As a result, sustained development can be attained.

NOTES

- (1) The theoretical framework for this paper is based on previous work by the author. See Abatena, H, (1978) **Grass Root Participation in the Development Process: An Empirical Study of the Problems of Rural Development in Ethiopia**, Ph.D. Dissertation, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.
- (2) A well-publicised and well-organised public meeting consisting of members drawn from a broad cross-section of the community would be a good vehicle at the initial stage. Later on, an executive committee and/or a task force, which is made up of a broad representation of the community, can carry on the responsibility.
- (3) The two cases are reprinted from a previous article: Abatena, H (1987) "The potential contribution of indigenous self-help and mutual aid organisations to the socio-economic development of Ethiopia", in **Journal of Rural Cooperation**, 2, pp 89-107.

- (4) Interview with Ato Alebatchew Aberra, a village-level community development worker who organised the group and worked with them.
- (5) Interview with Ato Waqo an influential leader in the community, and Ato Aberra. Most observers believe that Ato Waqo's wisdom, leadership experience, and dedication were instrumental in achieving progress and improvement. At the time of both of these interviews, this author was teaching at the nearby Community Development Workers', Training and Demonstration Centre in Awasa, Sidamo, Ethiopia.
- (6) The Gada System is a traditional social and political organisation of local community leaders among the Oromos of Southern and Southwestern Ethiopia. The system operates according to certain democratic principles. Membership and status in the organisation are determined according to age grade, and experience. For more detailed information about the Gada System see Legesse (1963) and Hamer (1987).
- (7) The Gurages are an ethnic community of people who live in the southwestern part of South Central Ethiopia, mainly the southwest part of the Governorate, General of Shoa. Although the groups have somewhat similar cultural traits, there are distinct clans and subcultures, ie there are seven different tribes or clans. Some of their main characteristics are self disciplined behaviour, hard work and industriousness, and a strong entrepreneurial predisposition. Most of them are engaged in private business, commerce, and trade. For more detailed discussion of the Gurages, see Gadamu (1970) and Shack (1966).
- (8) Interview with Ato Brook, a knowledgeable community member.

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