

The Road to Self-Reliance – ABCD

Lucie Goulet

In the Horn of Africa, Oxfam Canada is pioneering an exciting new approach to building self-reliance that is becoming a model for others in Africa and around the world. By focusing on a community's strengths and supporting a process called 'Asset-Based Community-Driven' development, or ABCD, tremendous advances are being made.

Too often, the traditional approach to development has shone a spotlight on a community's weaknesses, highlighting all the things it lacks and all the things it needs. Using this approach, the community is encouraged to look outside to seek solutions, relying on others for answers, for knowledge and for resources.

Oxfam is turning this approach on its head, working with partners to help communities identify and build on their assets and capacities – what they know, what they do, the resources they can tap. The process starts with a detailed mapping of the community and its environment engaging the whole community in drawing up an inventory of its assets – knowledge, skills, tools, livestock, land, water, access to markets or services, local associations and institutions. They list everything from their labour to the stones that line the seasonal streambed, to their livestock to their water source and to the grandmother who teaches young girls to sew.

They also look to see where assets are lost to the community – where their limited money goes, whether they are losing skilled workers, whether they could increase the return on their labour if they processed the things they produced.

By recognising these assets and then mobilising at the community level to build on them, a process of change is set in motion.

In the community of Holeta in the central highlands of Ethiopia, work on ABCD began in 2002. The community was very poor, with most families living on less than \$1 a day. Hunger and meagre diets undermined people's health; few girls attended school.

As part of their inventory of assets, the community recognised they were efficient producers of millet. But the price they commanded for their crop was barely enough to cover their costs of production. This was due in part to selling into the market at the same time as all other producers, when prices were at their lowest. One reason they were selling at that time was they needed cash quickly to pay back loans they had taken out to buy seed, fertiliser, pesticide and herbicide.

They determined first that if they pooled their crop and waited until prices were higher, they could get a better price and hold back more for their own consumption. So, they established a 'cereal bank' into which producers 'deposit' their harvest and from which they draw corresponding payments.

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Several years later, they now enjoy a reliable store of grains year round, sell into the market when it is advantageous and no longer need to buy seed, instead relying on their own stock. The bank is operated by a group drawn from the producers with women filling a majority of the executive positions because they are more knowledgeable about the quality of the cereals and more trusted in handling the collective's cash.

Because the community knew all about raising oxen – used to pull their ploughs – they decided to apply those skills to raising cows and cattle. Dairy cows are smaller, cheaper and most important, produce milk with high fat content, allowing them to make butter, an important staple in the Ethiopian diet. Starting small, they purchased a few cows and gave them to the poorest women in the community, most of them raising families alone. These women agreed the second-born heifers from their cows would be passed on to other poor women in the community, thus enlarging the number of households who benefit from this initiative year by year.

The cows have made a tremendous difference to the household economy, and are often the first assets the women have held in their own names. By producing milk which is daily churned into butter and then sold in nearby markets, the cows give the women a small but regular daily cash income. This gives them greater independence and diversifies the family income, making them less vulnerable. It also helps diversify the family diet, improving nutrition and health. Over time, bulls are replacing oxen in their fields. Most importantly, with their increased income women are able to pay school fees for their daughters. Since this programme began, the number of young girls starting school – and staying in school – has increased markedly.

Another innovation grew from conversations with elders who told of traditional farming techniques that had been abandoned, as the area grew more arid. The techniques of terracing farm fields to retain rainwater and diverting small streams to irrigate garden plots were resurrected, and the community began to grow vegetables, again diversifying and improving their diets and providing a ready cash crop that could be sold in local markets.

Noting they were paying out good money for fertiliser, the women began to compost animal dung and household waste, producing enough organic nutrients to meet their community needs. It is lots of work but it reduces their costs of production – and their exposure to chemicals. They are also looking at ways to capture the rainwater that falls on their roofs and to make the best use of the trees they have planted around the community, trees that are helping change the microclimate, increasing moisture and limiting erosion.

While the community isn't waiting for outsiders to meet their needs, they aren't letting the government off the hook either. Capitalising on their construction knowledge using traditional materials – mud, stone and wood – they built a series of new classrooms to accommodate the increased number of students and demanded the government provide the teachers. They built a new health centre and demanded the government provide a doctor. They improved the road to the local town and demanded the government improve transportation services and send agricultural outreach workers more regularly.

All these initiatives built on their strengths, increasing their resilience and reducing their vulnerability. They drew on skills and knowledge held by some in the community who shared them for the collective benefit. The initiatives were respectful of the natural environment and each helped to strengthen the social fabric of the community, increasing people's self-esteem.

One of the most important measures of change was the impact on women and girls. In fact, many of the innovations the community introduced added to the already heavy burden on women: work in the cereal bank; tending the cattle and churning and marketing butter; composting; terracing and tending vegetable gardens; building the schools and clinic. This in a culture where women do most of

the productive and reproductive work: ploughing and harvesting the fields, building their homes, tending for their children, the ill and the elderly as well as cattle and household animals.

The women of the community acknowledge the increased work but they also value the cash income that flows from it, with its attendant power and increased independence. They value the fact that in stark contrast with only a few years ago, almost all their daughters now attend school. They note the increased recognition of their leadership, not just within their homes but also in formal community structures: they cite newly adopted community laws that prohibit early marriage, the abduction of women and female genital mutilation.

All of these changes – to the economic, social, political and legal status of women and girls – point to a fundamental shift in the community, a change that will be sustained over the long-term.

What was Oxfam Canada's role? Oxfam provided funding to a local Ethiopian NGO – in this case, the Hundee Grassroots Development Initiative – to work with the community to map community assets and the seepage of resources from the community economy, and to help identify ways to build on strengths and reduce losses. Working in collaboration with the Coady Institute in Nova Scotia, Oxfam also provided training in the ABCD approach and helped the local partner link to other Ethiopian communities where Oxfam supports similar processes. Beyond the mapping exercise, Oxfam supported civic education, extension workers, and an action research project to document and share this experience with other communities and agencies around the world.

In the coming years, Oxfam Canada will continue to promote ABCD as an innovative and effective approach to development and an example of 'best practice' in the global effort to end poverty and injustice. The encouraging experience of the people of Holeta show that given peace, some control over their resources, a modest level of support and the opportunity to build on their strengths, communities have considerable power to make the best of their circumstances and make a real difference in their lives.

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Lucie Goulet is Coordinator of the Horn of Africa Programme at Oxfam Canada.

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