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## **The Impact of Non-formal Education on Skills and Knowledge of Community Development Workers: A Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

The ultimate route to address the needs of the poor is through a community development process with projects as the main vehicle. The main role player to facilitate this process is the community development worker. This article focuses firstly on the role and importance of non-formal education in community development and, secondly, on the impact of non-formal education and training on the knowledge and skills of community development workers responsible for the facilitation of projects. The article is based on an evaluation of a non-formal education programme that was developed to enhance the knowledge and skills of community development workers involved in the planning and execution of community-based development projects.

### **Résumé**

Une voie ultime pour répondre aux besoins des populations pauvres passe par le processus de développement communautaire, avec des projets comme principal véhicule. L'acteur essentiel pour faciliter ce processus est l'agent de développement communautaire. Cet article met d'abord l'accent sur le rôle et l'importance de l'éducation non-formelle dans le développement communautaire et, en deuxième lieu, sur l'impact de cette éducation sur les connaissances et les aptitudes des agents responsables de la facilitation des projets de développement communautaire. Cet article est basé sur l'évaluation d'un programme d'éducation non-formelle conçu pour développer les connaissances et les aptitudes des agents de développement impliqués dans la planification et l'exécution des projets de développement communautaire.

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## **Introduction**

The focus of this article is the role and importance of non-formal education in enhancing the skills and knowledge of community development workers to execute participatory community-based development projects, to address the needs of the poor in the development process. In this article, the author reports on a research study that was conducted among development facilitators employed by World Vision in Malawi as community development workers (CDWs) and enrolled for the Certificate Programme in Development for Development Practitioners offered by the Centre for Development Studies, University of South Africa (Unisa). Although this programme has been running for a decade, no research has yet been conducted to evaluate the impact of this non-formal training programme on the skills and knowledge of community development workers to successfully design, plan, implement, monitor and evaluate community-based development projects.

## **Research Methods**

For the purpose of this research, two methods were used to collect data. The first method involved a questionnaire consisting of a combination of 15 closed- and open-ended questions (Babbie & Mouton 2001:233). The purpose of this questionnaire was to do a survey of the impact of non-formal education on the skills and knowledge as experienced by community development workers. Closed-ended questions were characterised by a limited number of options. Respondents did not have a 'neutral' option in order to force them to exercise a choice and give an opinion. The completion of questionnaires was anonymous and voluntary. Data from the responses on closed-ended questions was stated in frequency tables while data collected from responses on open-ended questions were analysed and summarised according to specific topics. The sample was extracted from a population consisting of 75 World Vision development facilitators working as CDWs in Malawi and enrolled for a non-formal education programme in community-based development project management. A total number of 36 questionnaires, which constituted 48 per cent of the total population, were received and analysed. The second method involved an evaluation form designed by the 75 World Vision employees enrolled for the programme. The purpose of this evaluation form was to give students an opportunity to decide for themselves which aspects of the non-formal learning experience and teaching process are important to them as CDWs and need to be assessed. A total of 73 evaluation forms, which constituted 97.3 per cent of the total population, were received and analysed. This evaluation form consisted of six topic areas which students had to evaluate indicating their opinion by choosing

from a limited number of options. Students also had the opportunity to give comments on 'areas of celebration' and 'shortfalls' relating to the training programme.

### **Role of Non-formal Education in Community Development**

The realities of the plight of the poor in underdeveloped and underprivileged communities require immediate action to enhance their position in society. The main route to address the needs of the poor is through community development projects. However, these projects are often ill-design and implemented in a top-down fashion, not based on active community participation and empowerment and do not take the needs of the intended beneficiaries into account. The potential of development initiatives can only be realised through people's participation in designing development policies and programmes and their active participation in community development projects. In this day and age with the MDGs closing in on us and the realisation that poverty, food insecurity, gender inequality and economic deterioration are out of control, it is time that we react to this changing world. We need to train and educate development practitioners as 'agents of change' who have the skills and knowledge to facilitate participatory sustainable development and not only as well-educated people within the field of development studies. Agents of change in the development environment must be able to work and operate in poor communities, as well as enhance community participation and should have a broad set of skills that include non-technical skills, such as, negotiation, listening, communication, facilitation, interpersonal, adaptive and problem solving (Hindes & Bakker 2004:77 & 79).

According to Hindes & Bakker (2004:78) 'higher education institutions perform well in the provision of the relevant multidisciplinary knowledge base, but falter when it comes to the development of the competencies essential for effective application of that to the world of work.' In pursuit of effective and relevant community development, educators, students and practitioners in the development field must be continuously engaged in a process where both the teaching process and learning experience address the realities and challenges of poor communities to make community-based development a reality through a process of participation and empowerment. It is within this context where non-formal education plays an important role in addition to formal education to enhance the skills and knowledge of community development workers to equip them to lead poor communities to empowerment and decision makers of their own destiny. AEGEE (nd:34) emphasises that NFE 'is essential to carry through any change that has to

do with peoples' behaviours and their interactions. Especially when it is about the most important values, like freedom, human rights, democracy, peace, respect, diversity or gender equality.' Human development (UNESCO 2006:37) involves a process where people's opportunities and choices are enlarged. According to UNESCO (2006:39) 'Non-formal education has always been part of the solution for marginalised and vulnerable population groups because programmes are based on an integrated approach that takes into account all the factors influencing the opportunities and life-chances of different population groups, and the role played by education systems themselves in the process of social inclusion and cohesion.'

UNESCO (2006:39) defines non-formal education (NFE) as a process of learning 'embedded in planned, organised and sustained education activities that are outside formal education institution, responding to education needs for persons of all ages. The purpose of NFE is to provide alternative learning opportunities for those who do not have access to formal schooling or need specific life skills and knowledge to overcome different obstacles. Non-formal learning is also intentional from the learner's point of view, as opposed to incidental or random types of learning.' Tight (1996:68) also expresses this notion and describes NFE as 'education, learning and training which takes place outside recognised educational institutions.' Non-formal education is associated with the following characteristics (Smith 2009:1):

- Relevance to the needs of disadvantaged groups;
- Concern with specific categories of person;
- A focus on clearly defined purposes;
- Flexibility in organisation and methods.

NFE consists of a wide variety of activities and programmes which include development initiatives to address the plight of poor communities. It is directly linked to the development process which is regarded as an educational process. Faundez (quoted in Smith 2009:4) explained it as follows:

The development process is in fact an educational process, or rather it should unfailingly be viewed as such. We cannot therefore conceive of development in the absence of education any more than education in the absence of development.

Development is about improving the standard of living and quality of life of people and therefore depends primarily on the community people themselves. NFE emphasises flexibility, responsiveness and localness and it is output-centred, environment- and community-based, participatory and learner-centred, and a self-governing, democratic process. NFE should be based on the interests of the learners and has as ultimate goal to empower the

learners (Smith 2009:4 & 5; AEGEE (nd):10). NFE is a planned programme of personal development aimed at improving the skills and competencies of people outside the formal education system (AEGEE (nd):10). AEGEE (nd:14) explains it as follows: 'Personal development refers to the improvement of one's own competencies. ... The outcomes of personal development are self-improvement and personal growth with the purpose of realising one's higher potential...' Competencies refer to attitudes (what we are), skills (what we can do) and knowledge (what we know) (AEGEE nd:14).

NFE makes it possible for development practitioners to enhance their skills and knowledge to take initiative and involve communities in making small steps towards improving their quality of life and addressing their development needs. According to UNESCO (2006:63) NFE has the ability to transform lives not only by improving the knowledge base of people but in terms of skills development and increased ability to respond to changes in society. Participants in NFE interventions gain different skills to 'generate sustainable livelihoods and to cope better with community-related issues. As a result, participants gain confidence and develop positive attitudes about themselves and their role in the community. ...learners develop very valuable "soft skills" such as interpersonal communication, teamwork, leadership, discipline, responsibility, planning, organising and practical problem solving.' The role and importance of NFE in development, especially where international aid can have a dependency effect, is clearly reflected in the following statement:

Through capacity building communities are learning to stand on their own feet. If people discover and develop their competencies – they build self confidence.... This process of empowerment can be successfully initiated with methods of non-formal education (AEGEE nd:35).

It is within this framework where NFE plays an essential role in the training of development practitioners for the facilitation of development projects aimed at improving the life of communities, addressing the causes of poverty, and empowerment and capacity building. However, it is reasonable to ask whether such NFE interventions have a significant impact on the competencies (attitude, knowledge and skills) of development practitioners taking part in such NFE training interventions.

### **Case Study**

This research is based on a case study of the impact of non-formal education on the skills and knowledge of development facilitators of World Vision International (WVI) working as CDWs in Malawi. WVI, founded in 1951, is an international Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation

(NGO) working on six continents. World Vision's purpose is to 'create lasting change in the lives of children, families and communities living in poverty' (World Vision 2009:1). Their mission is to help the poor and the oppressed by providing holistic interventions that promote transformational development, self-sufficiency and dignity through, inter alia, community development projects and area development programmes aimed at uplifting the living standard of poor communities (WVI 1989:4; WVI 1993:1; WVZ 2000:5). The main focus of these efforts is 'transformational development' (where communities are empowered through community participation in the project cycle of World vision development projects to take ownership of local development activities), public awareness, strategic initiatives and emergency relief (WVI 2009). World Vision explains the transformational process as follows (WVI 2009:1):

- Transformational development is the process through which children, families and communities identify and overcome the obstacles that prevent them from living life in all its fullness.
- World Vision partners with communities to improve lives.
- Through these partnerships, communities access the knowledge and resources needed to improve the well-being of children and overcome poverty.
- World Vision provides a range of interventions tailored to the context, including programmes in education, health, economic development, microfinance, agriculture, water and sanitation.
- By helping community members help each other, World Vision ensures that the process of positive change continues long after development staff have left.

According to Swanepoel en De Beer (2006:xiv & xv) development agencies and facilitators, such as World Vision, should fulfil an enabling and supportive role in the development process in order for communities to be empowered and capacitated to take responsibility for their own development through which their human dignity is enhanced. In this supportive role, an adaptive mode of administration should be followed implying that community development is a learning process through which the people become involved in their efforts to break free of the cycle of poverty (Swanepoel & De Beer 2006:33). Furthermore, the development process is political as the taking of power and decision-making process regarding the use of scarce resources are political acts and impact on the lives of the poor. The facilitator-community relationship challenges not only the power relations in the community, but also the traditional way of doing. The goal is to shift the traditional situation

and view of power and decision making so that marginalised social and cultural groups get the position of power and role of decision maker (Narsee 2004:90).

To achieve the above, CDWs are required to have the knowledge, skills, understanding, values and attitudes necessary to perform the development tasks and activities associated with development project management within a holistic and people-centred development approach which enhances participation and empowerment of the intended beneficiaries. World Vision, one of the largest international NGOs involved in development projects to address the needs of poor communities, realised that a vastly different set of skills and knowledge among their development facilitators are needed for the implementation of transformational development, successful development projects and enhancement of poor communities to become self-sufficient and self-reliant. In the light of this World Vision approached the Centre for Development Studies (CDS)<sup>1</sup> at the University of South Africa to develop a non-formal education programme specifically aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the organisation's development efforts in poor communities. Consequently, the programme in Development for Development Practitioners was developed by the CDS to equip World Vision development facilitators, working on grassroots level and involved in development project management, with the skills and knowledge necessary to design, implement, monitor and evaluate people-centred development projects. The objectives of the programme can be summarised as follows (CDS Annual Report 2008:8): to provide development practitioners with the necessary knowledge and skills in the planning, implementation, evaluation and monitoring of community-based development projects through participatory research exercises to contribute to successful and appropriate development initiatives amongst disadvantaged communities.

World Vision development facilitators are trained in poverty and development, participatory research methodology and development project management which consists of the following three phases: project planning for development, planning for implementation, planning for monitoring and evaluation. These are based on what is known as the 'project based approach'. It is also known as ZOPP (Ziel Orientierte Projekt Planung), Logical Framework Approach (LFA or logframe) and Project Cycle Management (Randel & Thaw 2003:11). Development projects are the instrument used to realise this planning method in practice and can be defined as interventions to address and solve development problems. The assumptions of the project-based approach are that a development project is a way of providing external support where it is needed and such an

intervention has as focus the sustainable alleviation of poverty. Furthermore, a project seeks to meet the needs of the people and not that of the outside agency's; the intervention must be well planned and managed; and lastly the intervention or project must come to an end. The aim of these projects/interventions is to bring about an ongoing improvement in the living conditions of people (Randel & Thaw 2003:16).

The instructional methodology used is based on the philosophy of popular education and includes residency training sessions, learning-by-doing techniques, participatory research methodology and open distance learning. Through the use of brain storming exercises, capacity-building workshops and peer-education, the programme fosters the training of development facilitators with the knowledge to develop a critical vision of reality, the skills to search collectively for solutions of identified community problems as well as to design, implement, monitor and evaluate community-based development projects.

Facilitators of non-formal education programmes and capacity building workshops, however, are often unaware of the shortcomings or the areas of excellence of their facilitation, contents and curriculum. According to Van Rheede van Oudtshoorn and Hay (2004:140) 'It is in the best interest of teaching and learning to study the perceptions of students in this regard in order to address possible areas of concern and success.' According to Whitaker and Moses (Steyn 2000:174) 'Being quality and service minded in education means relating to and carrying out the goals, needs, desires and interests of customers and making sure they are met.' It is therefore essential that the programme and the consequent learning process needs to be assessed to determine its impact on World Vision's transformational development efforts where communities are empowered through community participation in the project cycle of World vision development projects to take ownership of local development activities. Another reason is that students' perceptions of content and teaching are central to the evaluation of a non-formal education programme because 'the effectiveness of their learning is not related to the educators' interpretation of the course but to the learners' own experiences.' (Ramsden & Dodds in Steyn 2000:174). This programme also has a large distance education component that has the danger that the 'faceless' numbers of students may become invisible to educators and in pursuit of quality, students and lecturers must engage 'in a process of finding opportunities for improving the learning process, the quality of learning experience and the way it is delivered.' (Steyn 2000:174 & 175). The Centre for Development Studies, as provider of the programme, is concerned with the effects and impact of this non-formal teaching on World Vision's development



practitioners' learning experience and their work and actions to promote transformational development.

In light of the above, the author of this article, in her role as facilitator and lecturer on the programme, decided to study the perceptions of students enrolled for this NFE programme. Subsequently, the following secondary objectives were formulated for this article, namely:

- To determine whether or not students feel positive about the relevancy of the non-formal education Programme in Development for Development Practitioners for the training of development facilitators involved in community-based development projects
- If students feel that the non-formal education Programme in Development for Development Practitioners enhanced their knowledge and skills in the management of development projects
- Students' perceptions about non-formal teaching programmes as an important educational tool to supplement formal school education and/or post-school qualifications to increase practical skills and knowledge for the successful implementation of community-based development projects;
- Students' perceptions about the positive impact of the programme in Development for Development Practitioners for enhancement of community participation in development project management.

## Results

The main objectives of the questionnaire were to establish, firstly, students' feelings about the relevancy of the programme for the training of people involved in community-based development projects and whether the programme enhanced their knowledge and skills in the management of development projects; and secondly, their perceptions about non-formal training programmes as an important educational tool to supplement formal degree qualifications to increase practical skills and knowledge of successful development projects. A third objective was to determine their opinions about the impact of the programme on enhancing community participation in development project management.

It is clear from the questionnaire results that the programme is both highly relevant and highly suitable for the training of CDWs involved in participatory community-based development projects for transformational development. Out of the 36 questionnaires, 27 respondents (75%) found the training highly relevant while 25 per cent (8 respondents) found it relevant. No respondent found it irrelevant. A total of 24 respondents (66.7%) found

the programme highly suitable with the balance of 33.3 per cent indicating it as suitable. No negative response was given (see Table 10).

**Table 1:** Responses to the suitability and relevancy of the Programme for the training of people involved in development projects.

Highly Irrelevant	Irrelevant	Relevant	Highly Relevant
		8	27
Highly Unsuitable	Unsuitable	Suitable	Highly Suitable
		6	24

In response to the questions whether the programme enhanced the student's knowledge and skills for planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating community-based development projects, all 36 respondents indicated positively that the programme enhanced both their knowledge and skills. In response to a statement that the 'Certificate Programme in Development for Development Practitioners is an important educational tool to supplement formal degree qualifications to increase practical skills and knowledge of successful development projects', 24 respondents (66.7%) strongly agreed, 27.8 per cent agreed and only 5.6 per cent strongly disagreed.

On the positive impact of the programme in Development for Development Practitioners for enhancement of community participation in development project management, students answered as follows:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Community participation in project planning	29	7	0	0
Community participation in project implementation	30	6	0	0
Community-based development	29	7	0	0
Project ownership by communities	32	4	0	0
Community capacity building	28	8	0	0
Participation of beneficiaries in projects	27	9	0	0

In response to a separate question about the opinion of the contribution of the programme towards participation of project beneficiaries in World Vision's projects, 100 per cent of the students indicated that the programme contributed positively to beneficiary participation. It is clear from the above that the participants in this NFE programme are convinced that the programme is relevant and an important instrument to address the development needs of poor communities in such a way that it improves their living conditions. It has as point of departure the participation of communities in identifying, planning and executing relevant development projects. This participatory approach is supposed to enhance community empowerment and capacity for self-sustaining development, leading to self-reliant development as communities become more effective in planning, managing and using resources for community-based development. However, at the end of the day, it is not the opinion of community development workers that matters, but the opinion of the affected communities. Therefore, they should be included as respondents in the research process in order to determine whether NFE actually contributes positively to the skills and knowledge of CDWs to enhance community participation and self-sustaining, transformational development.

Results from the evaluation form which was designed by the students themselves also confirm that the programme and its contents are relevant for the training of CDWs. The largest majority of students are of the opinion that the NFE Programme is excellent in content and relevancy with regard to planning (83.6%), implementation (84.9%), and monitoring and evaluation (82.2%) of development projects. A total number of 48 students (65.8%) indicated that the programme is excellent for improving the skills of development facilitators while the rest (34.2%) indicated that the programme is good for improving the skills of development facilitators. The largest majority of the students gave very positive comments under 'areas of celebration'. These include the following:

- Acquisition of knowledge, skills and expertise on how to do community-based development work;
- Whatever we have learnt is very relevant to our work;
- The content has really helped to open the mind to face future challenges;
- The material is very relevant to our work;
- Be able now to plan well for programme activities and will manage to facilitate development;
- Course content relevant for distance learning

- Modules covered are relevant to the work which we do on the ground
- Capacity enhancement on project planning implementation and management;
- The modules have broadened our horizon regarding development work in rural communities;
- Skills acquired on project planning was great;
- Planning for monitoring and evaluation;
- Have now knowledge in programme/project management;
- The course content and group work;
- The course modules are just very good and an eye opener for the well-being of my job.

The largest majority of students did not have any comments under 'shortfalls'. The few comments that were received had to do with either the venue where the training took place or the short duration of the training which lasted three days. Based on the evaluation done by the students and their comments received, one can conclude that the programme in Development for Development Practitioners is successful in achieving its primary purpose, namely, to provide CDWs with the necessary knowledge and skills in the planning, implementation, evaluation and monitoring of community-based development projects to contribute to successful and appropriate development initiatives amongst disadvantaged communities. It should be noted that this paper focuses on the relation between NFE and developing the skills and knowledge of CDWs. Therefore, in light of the perceptions and evaluations of the respondents, it can be concluded that NFE did contribute towards capacity building among CDWs. It is however ungrounded to make the assumption, based on the opinions of the respondents, that NFE enhances the involvement and participation of local communities and beneficiaries in the design of development projects through their meaningful participation, control and inputs in the development process. It also does not substantiate that the acquiring of skills and knowledge through NFE contribute to transformational community-based development.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has evaluated the impact of non-formal education on the development of skills and knowledge of community development workers. It is clear from the case study that non-formal education could be one of the most effective instruments to train development facilitators and community development workers in a practical way to master the skills

necessary to manage development projects efficiently and in a people-centred manner. From the study it is clear that the respondents are of the opinion that they (1) experienced a learning process through this NFE Programme and (2) increased their knowledge and skills to implement development projects that enhance the participation, self-reliance and empowerment of poor people. This research article reflects the students' positive perceptions of content and teaching and the effectiveness of learning as related to the learners' own experiences. One can thus conclude that the programme is successful in training CDWs with relevant knowledge and the necessary skills to perform development activities and facilitate development projects. However, it is necessary to expand the research study to include members, stakeholders and beneficiaries of the communities involved and affected by the community development efforts of these development facilitators. This study does not provide any evidence that transformational development of poor communities has taken place. Neither does it prove that non-formal education of community development workers promotes holistic, people-centred and sustainable community development. The question that should be answered is whether non-formal education of CDWs has a positive impact on grassroots level and the lives of vulnerable groups. Only when all stakeholders are involved in the research process can one make an objective ruling about the impact of non-formal education on the skills and knowledge of CDWs in the facilitation of community-based development projects.

### Note

1. The Centre for Development Studies (CDS) was established in 1993 with the specific aim to address not only the shortage of skilled development practitioners but also the need for non-technical skills among development practitioners (development facilitators, community development workers, government officials) to respond innovatively and actively to the increasing demand for community development training and capacity building. The CDS is committed to 'supporting training needs, enhancing development skills and promoting a process of participatory, people-centred, sustainable development' through non-formal education programmes (CDS Annual Report 2008:3).

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