

Niger Delta Professionals for Development

.... creating safe space for peace and development action



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2010 in Review: Lessons Learned and Challenges



ENHANCING LIVELIHOODS

Lesson #1: Simple bookkeeping and basic business management training for illiterate smallhold

farmers and petty traders is an imperative element for any livelihood enhancement program. It produces quick, positive changes in income and level of personal debt.

Ogribi Onosakponome says that the training made her understand that her trading business was failing due to mismanagement and lack of proper record keeping. She sells goods that she obtains from suppliers. When she receives the goods, she normally pays part of the amount upfront and the remaining balance in her next supply. Often she has argued with the suppliers on how much she still owes on her previous balance and the number of items she received. After just 3 weeks of bookkeeping training, she received a supply of goods. When the boys asked her to pay the remainder of the previous balance, she discovered

that the amount demanded was 8,500 Naira higher than the amount she had recorded in her new cash book. The boys were surprised to see her working with bookkeeping records. They immediately apologized and said that it was their mistake. She says that she has made more progress in her business because of the training.

Alice Ekpe and her adult son took the bookkeeping training together. She says that this training is the answer to her prayers. She intended to close down her shop by the end of this year if the business was still in debt. After she and her son learned about income and expenditures and the use of the cash book, her son cried. He confessed that he and his siblings are the reason for their mother's failure in life because they usually take money or goods from her business for themselves or to entertain their friends. The son cautioned his siblings. Now no one takes money and items from the store.

Otuwede Queen says that she thought that overstocking goods was bad because it tied down capital. The training helped her to understand that sometimes, when it is done in the right season, stocking in excess helps to maximize profits.

Enhanced Livelihoods (continued)

Obarogbi Helen, who is illiterate, is most amazed by the symbols used for bookkeeping. When the training was announced, she was initially discouraged because she thought that it was only for those who could read and write. Through the use of symbols in the cash book, she finds the classes interesting and feels confident in recording her dealings.

Rhoda Ejoma is in the garri business. She buys cassava, fries it, then sells it. However, she never considered calculating the money paid for laborers, firewood and other miscellaneous expenses. With the help of the bookkeeping training, her profits have risen.

Lesson #2: Do not wait for financial institutions to offer bookkeeping training to community

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Lesson #1: One of the biggest challenges in any rural community programme is ensuring that the participants actually live in the community.

Even when every effort is made to ensure that project participants reside in the communities, you may later discover that at least 50% of them do not. If local authorities help to select the participants, you may find that he has selected only members of his extended family or those with whom he has a political interest. Sometimes illiterate community women will identify as their representatives in a programme those women who are better educated and more often than not live in the city. If your project truly wants rural or riverine women involved, do not make literacy a participant criterion.

If the project is to monitor community-level abuse of authority or lack of transparency, you might find that several of your participants are part of the problem you are trying to solve, such as corrupt contractors or officials who award contracts. In the participant application, explicitly ask if the applicant is involved in contracting or is a member of any other program or position that directly impacts the community.

Be willing to remove participants **immediately** after discovering that they (a) do not fill the participant criteria or (b) have no *true* interest in the project goals. If the training is to help create women leaders, for example, hold each woman accountable for identifying actions that demonstrate her own efforts toward that goal, then monitor her activities. If she is simply attending meetings, then remove her from the project and identify another participant. If the

members. Although micro-lending institutions state that they offer bookkeeping classes to borrowers, NIDPRODEV has found that in many cases such classes have not taken place. In addition, only a small number of community members are trained under such circumstances and the trainers are from outside the community. NIDPRODEV has trained 2-3 school teachers who reside in 10 communities to teach simple bookkeeping. In 13 weeks of classes (2 nights per week), over 660 community members have directly benefited. Many of the adult learners cried at the end of the training and requested that the classes continue and other adult education classes be offered. An additional 660 community members will be trained beginning February 2011.

NOTE: This training is sponsored by Oxfam Novib as part of a 2-to-5-year, comprehensive livelihood and good governance program, reaching 2,500 livelihood participants in two local government areas.

expectations of the participants are explicitly stated to them from the outset, the community will support your decision to replace participants.

If a project requires forming community committees, be explicit (in writing) about the terms by which committee members will be replaced, as well as the process for replacing them.

Lesson #2: Be explicit in identifying what the financial and other benefits are expected to be for community participants.

In writing, clearly state what the financial benefits are to be for participants. If participants are expected to act on behalf of their communities without payment, state this explicitly at the town hall meeting. Be clear about what you will and will not do financially, such as travel reimbursement. Raising expectations to get participants interested will lead to project disaster.

Women's Empowerment

Our program evaluations suggest that variation in the level of women's empowerment among different rural and riverine communities is influenced by:

- (a) the generation of education of the community -- for example, Ijaw are perceived to be in their 3rd or 4th generation of education, whereas Itsekiri are believed to be in their 7th generation;
- (b) male community leaders' perception that there will be direct, observable benefits to be derived from increased women's empowerment;
- (c) availability of models of, and mentoring for, women's collective, proactive behavior; and
- (d) building the capacity of women to believe in their right to greater involvement in community affairs.

Lessons Learned from our women's empowerment programmes highlight the critical importance, at the outset, of a well-articulated Comprehensive Communications Strategy, and a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan that commits to monthly monitoring of women's individual and collective activities following any training workshop. The program design should contain considerable flexibility, allowing activities to be adjusted following each monthly report, to incorporate lessons learned and to match the "real time" needs of the community women to the overall objectives.



Once women feel empowered by the training and mentoring, they will begin to guide which activities they want to "practice" those skills on. If the women do not begin to exhibit independent, proactive acts of empowerment, then the training and mentoring have not been effective and will not be sustainable.

Inter-community interaction stimulates activity. Following a Women-in-Leadership Conference in which NIDPRODEV brought together 20 communities of women (80 women) from 3 different ethnic groups (joining together women participants from both its USIP and Oxfam programmes), the proactive behavior of women within each community and among them increased. For example:



* Riverine women from Bayelsa State stated they were ashamed of their lack of activity compared to the rural women from Delta State and held their first quarterly meeting as an inter-ethnic association of Riverine Women. * Rural women from Delta State immediately went to their local Community Development Committee (CDC) and stated their desire to have women represented on the CDC. The CDC agreed, an election was held, and two of the women were elected to the CDC. * Rural women from Bayelsa State petitioned directly to the Chairman of their Local Government Area for cassava processing

machines for their communities. The women are now distributing the machines. * Riverine women from Delta State have demonstrated stronger voices within their communities. In the community that had the lowest level of women representation in the first town hall meeting of our program and the greatest dissatisfaction with being excluded from community decision making, the community leaders have created another gender-balanced team to accompany the USIP gender-balanced Community Monitoring Group in their visits to government officials.

At the end of the 5-day conference, the women formed WIND for Positive Change (Women in the Niger Delta for Positive Change), with Women Support Networks for four chapters (two riverine and two rural).

Project Sustainability: Lessons Learned from an NGO Consortium Arrangement

Project objectives cannot be reached or sustained without community commitment. No commitment, no community ownership. When the funding ends, participant activities will end. If you've done your M&E plan right, you should know long before the project ends whether there is commitment or buy-in.

For there to be community commitment, the project's objectives must be relevant to the **immediate needs** of community members or subgroups within the community. Community participation during your needs assessment should inform the project designer if its already-defined project is well suited for a particular community (a community selection issue) or it should assist the project designer in formulating a grant proposal to address a particular need of the community (a grantor selection issue).

Although there is much to do in terms of project sustainability during the project life-cycle, this brief article focuses only on the earliest phase of project implementation. The following "sustainability" lessons were derived from a 6-community project involving a coalition of 4 indigenous NGOs and 1 expatriate managing partner. Within the coalition, NIDPRODEV was responsible for monitoring and maintaining technical equipment in internet/computer centres and monitoring/mentoring resource persons and community-based management committees.

1. If physical assets are to be transferred to the community at the end of a project, a Memorandum of Understanding about those assets must be signed by all stakeholders **at the beginning of the project**.
2. If a Management Committee is formed to oversee the physical assets and any revenue generated by the assets, the Memorandum of Understanding must be explicit about (a) the composition and length of term of the Management Committee, (b) the conditions by which a Management Committee member might be involuntarily removed, (c) the process for selecting new Management Committee members, and (d) the process for a transparent and accountable income and expenditure system, if applicable. A Financial Oversight Monitoring Group should be formed among stakeholders who are not members of the Management Committee. The Memorandum of Understanding must be explicit about the rights of the Financial Oversight Monitoring Group to information from the Management Committee.
3. From the outset, the implementing NGO(s) must have in place **a comprehensive communications system (that folds into the M&E Plan)** that ensures that no more than 3 weeks go by without contact between stakeholder representatives and project staff. Project monitoring for efficient use of resources and "tweaking" of activities to achieve project objectives can only occur if consistent contact is maintained. Bulk SMS texting to all participants on a regular basis is an excellent way to remind participants that you are thinking about them and helps to maintain the momentum of participant and NGO activities.
4. At the end of any training workshop, participants should prepare an individual and group activity work plan and be alerted that the NGO will be contacting the individual or group representative within 3 or 4 weeks of the training to assess progress on the work plan. Activities must be relevant to the existing lives and livelihoods of the participants. **The NGO must be explicit to participants about its role in the project** and the role and expectations of the participants.
5. Identify community members who exhibit acts of positive deviance or pro-active efforts on behalf of project goals. Build on the existing strengths of those individuals and their groups. As the project progresses, include those individuals in the design and implementation of any project training or activity. Listen and respond to their needs in a timely manner.
6. Do not allow politicization of the project. Be sensitive and vigilant (see Item 3, above) to how political leaders in the community might be using aspects of the project to heighten their political stronghold and to silence dissenting voices. If allowed to go on with impunity, community members will view the project as "owned" by an individual community member and will show no interest in future participation.
7. If the project is led by a coalition of NGOs, no more than one week should go by without a project update emailed to all parties. Each NGO's activity reports must be consistently circulated among the coalition. In addition, if each coalition member is responsible for a particular function, it is imperative that the actions or inactions of one coalition member do not lead to a community's loss of faith in all coalition members. As a result, community members themselves will not believe in their own ability to work together to sustain the project.

Community Mobilization Challenges



1. Be sure to dispatch invitation letters to community leaders or members in a timely manner to ensure full participation of all relevant stakeholders. Text invitees the day before a mobilization to remind them again.
2. Stay alert to the possibility that community members with a financial or political interest in the status quo may sabotage the NGO's efforts.
3. Recognize that the community may have a pre-existing apathy to requests to gather for town hall meetings based on "meeting" fatigue from numerous NGOs that performed assessments that did not lead to community benefit.
4. Expect that community members may anticipate a financial reward for attending meetings. Farmers during the farming season and most people following festivals are in greater need of and make greater demand for reimbursement for their time. The project implementer must clearly articulate at the outset what direct and indirect benefits the community members can expect from their participation.

5. Anticipate that community members, as well as town hall facilities, may be engaged by other activities on the day you arrive, such as weddings, funerals, celebrations, elections, and livelihood endeavors. Be sure to explicitly ask community leaders about any potential conflict with community members' time on the day you plan to visit.
6. Recognize that it is often more difficult to mobilize people in an urban or semi-urban setting than a rural one.
7. Expect at least two hours in a community attempting to gather people together before your activity can begin.

Community Mapping and Selection: Experiences and Lessons Learned from the Selection Process for 120 Niger Delta Communities Across 3 Geopolitical Zones

by Joel Bisina, NIDPRODEV Executive Director

"I cannot give information about communities in our Local Government Area without Chairman approval. What if I give you names of our communities and you use it against us? How can I explain that to the Chairman?" These were the words from the person saddled with community development issues in Ahoada East LGA. Before this time, I did not know that communities were the properties of the Local Government Chairman. I thought they are entities that exist in a particular geographical space that anyone who has an interest can decide to just visit without seeking permission from any government officials. But that seems not to be the case in Ahoada East LGA.

Development work in rural, riverine, semi-urban and urban communities in the Niger Delta is a very challenging and exciting experience. The process of our selecting 120 communities for the Niger Delta Citizens Report Card project sponsored by the European Union has taken me to well over almost 100 communities in the Imo, Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa and Ondo States in the last four months.

A day before the re-run election in Ilaje LGA, I arrived at the Secretariat located in Igbokoda to inform and sensitize the LGA and to have a meeting with some community contact persons. At 10 a.m. when I arrived at the Secretariat, no senior officer had resumed work for the day, largely because of the heavy politicking that was going on as political gladiators and their loyalists put in last minute strategies and plans in place to win the election. I was told that officials of the Local Government were busy outside their offices finalizing logistics for the elections.

While waiting for government officers, I decided to have a meeting with the community representatives in one corner of the premises. Supporters of various political parties were all over the place within the Secretariat. While I shared information about the project to the people who had come to the Secretariat in response to my invitation, there was this group of people who were close but did not appear to be listening to our conversation. After the discussions and the question and answer session, the local resource persons from the various communities demanded money from me to cover their boat hire to enable them to travel to the communities as an advance party to our assessment visit to sensitize their people about the project. Suddenly I was surrounded by the passive crowd within the premises who clearly had been eavesdropping on our conversation. While I tried to explain my mission, a man in his mid-40s introduced himself as the Youth Chairman of Ugboland. He said that *he* was the legitimate authority I should deal with and that the community representatives I had meetings with were mere impostors (even though I had vetted them from the Secretary and the immediate past Chairman of Ilaje Regional Council, which was established with funding from Chevron Nigeria Limited). The "young" man's statement ignited anger and led to pitched shouting. Clusters of different parties began to emerge, and people began to take positions in support of and against the claim of the self-described "Youth Chairman." There also were hushed but persistent voices by my side asking me to ignore all that was happening, and to explain to *them* what I

was doing in the Local Government and how they can be part of the action. To convince me of his position as the man in charge, the “Youth Chairman” made a few phone calls. Within minutes, large groups of young men riding on motorbikes surrounded me and starting demanding from their “leader” what was going on. Some of them turned to me demanding an explanation for what was going on. The challenge in this kind of situation is how do you deal with the different interests and positions in such a way that you will not be seen as taking sides. How do you de-escalate the conflict situation and cool down frayed nerves? It is also crucial to monitor the way you manage your own emotions so as not to become part of the problem. This particular moment tested the elasticity of my patience and required me to deploy all my facilitation, negotiation and mediation skills. After about one hour, the situation was brought under control.

In Oguta Local Government area, the Chairman of the Town Union in Ejemekuru listened to me patiently as I delivered my “sermon” about the project. Feeling very tired and exhausted from driving through bumpy roads, under very heavy rain, I pulled myself together to discuss the project with him as we sat by a small beer parlour/restaurant that appeared to be the only one in the community. As soon as I finished my sensitization and awareness description of the project, he paused for a while, and then responded in a tone that clearly showed deep emotion. Almost in tears, he declared “you are God sent.” He told me that Ejemekuru is like a forgotten community in the Oguta Local Government Area. “My brother, you see, Izombe and Obudi are our neighboring clans and they are oil producing, but they do not share benefits with us. Ejemekuru does not belong to any clan; we are just alone and because we are alone, even the government at the state and local level have forgotten us.”

For those thinking about starting programmes in the Niger Delta, it is also important to understand that not all that is being said about the attitude and behaviour of people in the communities we are working in is true. Stereotypes of “those young men” in the Niger Delta that say that they will not do anything without money is an overstatement. Men and women, young and old, they all showed great hospitality, support and care. From place to place someone would get into our vehicle and on our boat to show us the way to various communities and to serve as interpreters for us. Even though there may be an expectation for some financial benefits, they never put it forward. It only came at the end of the assignment.

We were warmly received in most communities; in only a few communities were we turned away. I witnessed hope and hopelessness, joy, sadness, despair, frustration and helplessness in the voices of community people as they listened and shared their own stories about government neglect, deprivation and abandonment. Our team represented different things to different people. To some I was part of the elite, to others I was a messiah. I also felt their suspicion of me as an insincere NGO man. Over and over, I heard people lament that “many other NGOs, government people and oil company people have come here and promised us so many things... They collect information from us, take photographs and go away. We don't see them again. How will this--your project--be different?”

I witnessed the collage of abject poverty, lack, want and scarcity and the massive display of wealth, abundance and plenty. I was hosted in magnificent edifices and in shanties owned by community leaders in different communities. I witnessed among community leaders the show of power, wealth, influence, deception and arrogance; I also witnessed powerlessness, poverty, honesty and humility. I witnessed peace and tranquility in communities. I also witnessed factions, disunity, anxiety and fear. I witnessed the dynamics that exist in community leadership. I saw communities where the youth have taken over leadership-disbanded Town Unions and Community Development Committees. I also saw communities where youth groups and their activities have been disbanded. I faced the challenges of coordinating and setting up meetings with groups from various segments of societies in communities where one group had taken over power from another. In all of these, the women were very passive. In all the communities where I met with CDC and town union leadership, none had women in attendance.

I observed ethnic diversity in the Niger Delta. I spoke to Ijaws, Itsekiris, Urhobos, Ilajes, Apois, Ikwerres, Ekepeyes and Ibos. One thing that was common to a number of communities, especially in the oil producing communities, was the large presence of young, unemployed youth roaming the streets or gathered and drinking in the early morning hours in beer parlours.

I observed farmers struggling to harvest as much of their crops prematurely because of scourging floods. I also observed farmlands and crops washed away by floods as local farmers watched helplessly. I witnessed the remains of communities destroyed and devastated by communal and tribal conflicts.

I offer these observations to others who might be responsible for selecting communities in the Niger Delta for various development programmes. For further information or feedback on community selection planning and implementation, please contact NIDPRODEV at office@nidprodev.org