

**BEYOND THE RHETORIC OF EMPOWERMENT:
SPEAK THE LANGUAGE, LIVE THE EXPERIENCE
OF THE RURAL POOR**

REBECCA NTHOGO LEKOKO and MARIETJIE VAN DER MERWE

Abstract – Growth in rural communities, along with attendant changes in social, economic and environmental conditions, challenges members of these communities to take even more responsibility for their lives than in the past. While there is a need to promote sustainable economic prosperity, it is important that developmental approaches should not compromise the potential of citizens to meet these challenges independently. The present contribution is based on a phenomenological study that explored approaches to community development in Botswana. One of the key findings was that these were dominated by a bureaucratized welfare scheme, as the government gave free food and farming implements to poor people in an approach referred to as *athama-o-je* (“open-your-mouth-and-eat”). The present contribution reflects on the consequences of using this type of approach, arguing that instead of bringing real hope to the rural poor, it generated counterproductive attitudes. In conclusion, the authors suggest alternative strategies that take account of the life experiences of the rural poor and render them less dependent on government intervention for their well-being.

Zusammenfassung – JENSEITS DER FÖRDERUNGSRHETORIK: SPRICH DIE SPRACHE, ERLEBE DIE ERFAHRUNGEN DER ARMEN IN LÄNDLICHEN GEBIETEN – Das Wachstum in ländlichen Gemeinschaften in Verbindung mit den begleitenden Veränderungen der sozialen, wirtschaftlichen und ökologischen Bedingungen fordert Mitglieder dieser Gemeinschaften dazu heraus, noch mehr Verantwortung für ihr Leben zu übernehmen als in der Vergangenheit. Während es notwendig ist, anhaltenden wirtschaftlichen Wohlstand zu fördern, ist es wichtig, dass Zugangsweisen zur Entwicklung nicht das Potential der Bürger kompromittieren sollten, diesen Herausforderungen unabhängig zu begegnen. Der vorliegende Beitrag legt eine phänomenologische Studie zugrunde, welche die Zugangsweisen zur Entwicklung der Gemeinschaften in Botswana erforscht hat. Eines der Schlüsselergebnisse war, dass diese von einem bürokratisierten Wohlfahrtsschema dominiert wurden, insofern die Regierung kostenlose Nahrung und landwirtschaftliche Geräte an arme Menschen in einem Programm unter dem Titel *athama-o-je* (“öffne deinen Mund und iss”) abgegeben hat. Der vorliegende Beitrag reflektiert über die Konsequenzen, die sich aus der Anwendung dieser Zugangsart ergeben haben, indem er darlegt, dass sie kontraproduktive Einstellungen erzeugt hat, statt den Armen in ländlichen Gebieten wirkliche Hoffnung zu bringen. In ihrer Schlussbetrachtung schlagen die Autorinnen alternative Strategien, welche die Lebenserfahrungen der Armen in ländlichen Gebieten einbeziehen und sie in ihrem Wohlergehen als weniger abhängig vom Eingreifen der Regierung betrachten.

Résumé – PAR DELÀ LA RHÉTORIQUE DE RENFORCEMENT : PARLER LE LANGAGE, VIVRE L'EXPÉRIENCE DES PAUVRES VIVANT EN MILIEU RURAL – La croissance dans les communautés rurales, en même temps que les

changements qui les accompagnent dans les conditions sociales, économiques et environnementales, mettent à défi les membres de ces communautés afin qu'elles assument une responsabilité encore plus grande de leurs vies que par le passé. Alors qu'il y a un besoin de promouvoir une prospérité économique durable, il est important que les approches développementales ne compromettent pas le potentiel des citoyens à rencontrer ces défis en toute indépendance. La contribution présente est basée sur une étude phénoménologique ayant exploré les approches en faveur du développement de la communauté au Botswana. L'un des résultats principaux était qu'elles étaient dominées par un schéma bureaucratisé d'assistance, du fait que le gouvernement distribuait de la nourriture gratuite et du matériel agricole aux personnes pauvres, au sein d'une approche appelée *athama-o-je* (ouvrez-la-bouche-et-mangez). La contribution présente réfléchit sur les conséquences de l'utilisation de ce type d'approche, arguant du fait que, au lieu d'apporter un réel espoir aux populations rurales pauvres, cela a engendré des attitudes contreproductives. En conclusion, les auteurs suggèrent des stratégies alternatives qui tiennent compte des expériences de vie des populations rurales pauvres et les rendent moins dépendantes de l'intervention gouvernementale pour ce qui est de leur bien-être.

Resumen – TRAS LA RETÓRICA DE LA ADQUISICIÓN DE PODER: HABLA EL LENGUAJE Y VIVE LA EXPERIENCIA DE LA POBREZA RURAL – El crecimiento económico en comunidades rurales y los cambios que este crecimiento produce en cuanto a las condiciones sociales, económicas y ambientales desafía a los miembros de estas comunidades a asumir una responsabilidad por sus vidas mayor aún que en el pasado. Si bien existe la necesidad de promover una prosperidad económica sostenible, es importante que los enfoques del desarrollo no degraden la capacidad de los ciudadanos de enfrentar estos retos de forma autónoma. Esta contribución está basada en un estudio fenomenológico que ha explorado los enfoques de desarrollo de las comunidades en Botswana. Uno de los hallazgos clave es que han estado dominados por un esquema burocratizado de bienestar, puesto que el gobierno distribuía alimentos e implementos de agricultura gratuitos entre la población necesitada bajo una modalidad que se ha denominado *athama-o-je* ('abre tu boca y come'). Esta contribución refleja las consecuencias de esta clase de enfoque y sostiene que, en lugar de proporcionar una esperanza real a los pobres rurales, ha generado actitudes contraproducentes. En conclusión, los autores sugieren estrategias alternativas que tomen en cuenta las experiencias de vida de los pobres rurales y que no hagan tan dependiente su bienestar de la intervención del gobierno.

Резюме – ВНЕ ВОПРОСА ПЕРЕДАЧИ ПОЛНОМОЧИЙ: ИСПЫТАЙ ОПЫТ СЕЛЬСКИХ БЕДНЯКОВ, ГОВОРИ НА ИХ ЯЗЫКЕ – Рост бедности в сельских сообществах наряду с сопутствующими переменами в социальных, экономических и экологических условиях заставляет членов таких сообществ принимать на себя еще большую ответственность за свое существование, чем в прошлом. В то время когда существует необходимость содействовать устойчивому экономическому процветанию, важно чтобы пути развития не ставили под угрозу возможность граждан отвечать на эти вызовы самостоятельно. Данная статья основывается на феноменологическом исследовании, которое изучает пути развития сообщества в Ботсване. Одним из ключевых результатов является то, что сообщества находились под давлением схемы бюрократического благосостояния с лозунгом «открой свой рот и ешь», т.к. правительство давало бесплатное продовольствие и сельскохозяйственные орудия бедным людям. В данной статье обсуждаются последствия использования такого подхода и утверждается, что вместо того,

чтобы давать реальную надежду сельским беднякам, он породил контрпродуктивное отношение. В заключение, авторы предлагают альтернативные стратегии, которые учитывают жизненный опыт сельских бедняков и делают их менее зависимыми от вмешательства правительства в их благосостояние.

The plight of the poor was well documented and illustrated in the 20th century. This article explores some problems encountered by extension agents in Botswana as they approach rural communities in an effort to empower them. To use the concept of 'rural' here is to recognize the fact that unlike their counterparts in urban areas, rural dwellers are deprived on several counts: (i) Some development policies fail to recognize that the rural poor can identify and define their own basic needs, (ii) their lived experiences and future aspirations are hardly considered in development matters, (iii) they are increasingly detached from the majority by their poverty, low educational standards, and joblessness, and (iv) they might have been trapped in poverty long enough to have developed a learned helplessness and hopelessness. Thus, sensitive and responsive development strategies are needed to counter the apathy, frustration, and resentment that often render the rural poor hopeless. To borrow from Campfens (1997), one may describe the rural poor of Botswana as victims of the existing order and as members of an underclass that must be mobilized and empowered.

Poor rural dwellers are not a homogenous group; they differ greatly and in many respects. For example, some have passively given in to a situation that makes them increasingly vulnerable. Others have become critical of, and therefore resistant to, certain development approaches; this resistance may also hold them back. Many of the rural poor have realized that they are unable to take control of their lives because of oppressive structural, economic, political, and cultural conditions. More than other segments of society, the rural poor must be mobilized and empowered.

The Government of Botswana takes the lead role in developing the country's rural communities. However, the overall task of community development is considered a joint effort, of the government and interested non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private sector groups, community-based organizations, voluntary organizations, and local communities. Empowerment activities rely on the capacity and initiatives of the relevant stakeholders to identify needs, define problems, and plan and execute appropriate courses of action. Participation in these activities leads to increasing confidence in community leadership and competence, and reduces dependency on state, institutional, and professional interventions (Campfens 1997).

A cordial relationship between community development agents and local community members is paramount. This cordial relationship, among other things, draws on genuine and welcome participation from the local commu-

nities. Their thinking and ideas must be respected, because they know best what their own needs are. There are instances where the thinking and actions of the poor may be undermined by interventions. In a phenomenological study by Lekoko (2002), interviews with community-based extension workers (CBEWs) revealed that some practices aimed to empower rural communities might actually work against empowerment. One finding of this study focused on criticisms of a strategy called *athama-o-je* (a Setswana phrase meaning 'open your mouth and eat'). The CBEWs believed not only that this strategy fails to address targeted problems, but also that it hardens attitudes against the process of empowerment. Approaches and policies which encourage *athama-o-je* thus contribute to the passivity of the poor, where the latter become dependent receivers without taking part in the development process. This may lead to negative attitudes, unwillingness to participate, a lack of trust, and resistance to change.

Historically, the use of the term *athama-o-je* was popularized in the mid-1980s when Botswana's fortunes changed considerably with the discovery and exploitation of significant mineral deposits. This new asset was managed well (Republic of Botswana 1990), and the country drew on significant budgetary surpluses and large foreign-exchange reserves to actively encourage and promote private enterprise ownership among its citizens. A Financial Assistance Policy (FAP) was thus launched to provide a series of grants to new and expanding productive businesses. The aim of the policy was to encourage economic diversification, and to assist businesses so that more employment could be created in industries other than the traditional beef and mining sectors. Grants were given to small-, medium- and large-scale business operations.

The phrase *athama-o-je* came to illustrate a critical view of the government's approach to national development through grant-making. Critics felt that the government was 'spoon-feeding' recipients of its grants, since the latter were asked to contribute very little. For example, grants to small-scale operations could constitute up to 90% of the initial investment and expansion grants could also be awarded after 12 full months of operation. Furthermore, individual small-scale projects could be awarded up to two consecutive expansion grants. It was in reaction to these practices that the phrase *athama-o-je* came into use. Some used the schemes properly, while others abused them.

There are strong indications that the FAP failed in key areas, for example, with regard to geographical diversification and increased efficiency among domestic producers. Reports noted that some employment opportunities created by FAP-financed businesses dissolved during their payback periods. Thus, these projects, with substantial dependence on government, arguably did very little to contribute to local development. In a nutshell, the FAP did very little to help local communities take control of their economic, social, and other pressing circumstances.

Against this background, *athama-o-je* is suggestive of practices leading to dependency, inactivity, and passivity; these attitudes cannot be tolerated if poor villagers are to be, or become, active partners in the development of their communities. Community empowerment is all about helping local communities gain understanding and control of their social, economic, and/or political assets as well as of the other challenges of their lives as per Kindervatter (1997). The view of these authors is that, if the aforementioned negative attitudes are left unaddressed, very little can be done to empower community members. This article discusses the expected consequences of the *athama-o-je* approach and calls for alternatives in the context of poverty reduction.

Theoretical framework

The poor sometimes need assistance in order to meet their basic needs. However where the poor are viewed as responsible for their own problems (Brutland, as cited by Freidman 1992), they are considered as unable to help themselves and therefore in constant need of assistance (Kroeker 1995). This expert-led approach is at times criticized for not presenting the poor as people who can think for themselves. Regardless of the economic status of the poor, community development agents should rely on the capacity and views of relevant local groups in the course of their work. Examples such as those of the Lentswe la Odi weavers in Botswana, the Aso-Oke textile industry in Nigeria (Wolf and Wahab 1996), the Yaa in Kenya (Linguist and Adolph 1996), and the Women's Family Gardens Co-operative in Nicaragua (Chamberlain 1993) showcase the empowerment potential of community members. Such people do not rely on expert advice, but use local knowledge and skills to initiate, engage in, and sustain projects for their own survival as well as for the good of the community. The Women's Family Gardens Co-operative in Nicaragua thus engages local women in gardening activities that provide food, better nutrition for their children, and collaborative work (Chamberlain 1993). The values embodied in this project have led to meaningful empowerment. Chamberlain (1993) observes that "it is not only what's being done that is impressive, but how – against the odds; and why – the motivation and the spirit that produces such a determination to succeed". The aim of empowerment is to change the larger social structures and institutions that keep people in positions of powerlessness and poverty. Empowerment activities are meant to help people to initiate, take control of, and lead development (Couto 1998). Societal empowerment implies that community members enjoy democratic participation in projects of collective interest; this type of empowerment fosters new attitudes toward authority and toward control of one's life circumstances.

Research design and methodology

This study followed a qualitative phenomenological research design, whereby interviews were conducted to obtain information regarding CBEWs' experiences in the course of their work. The CBEWs were in a strong position to talk meaningfully about experiences relating to collaboration and empowerment in community development activities. The participants (the CBEWs) were a combination of 14 social workers (48% of the participants); seven co-operative officers (24%); three agricultural officers (10%); three health officers (10%); and 2 rural area development officers (RADOs – 7%). The 29 CBEWs included 18 women and 11 men; 11 of them were Batswana.

Results

The CBEWs who participated in this study were aware that they “work for one government”, as one social worker said. The ideas that government employees take to the local communities have been in most cases conceptualized at government level. This top-down approach mainly relies on expert advice; for example, in many villages in Botswana, government-initiated teams including Village Development Committees (VDCs) and Village Extension Teams (VETs) are led by government officials. The findings of this study suggest that government officials view themselves as key players in the identification and resolution of problems faced by the rural poor. One rural area development officer (RADO) explained that “the problem lies with the attitude we bring to our work. Some of us see our role as problem-solvers and regard community members as spectators”. The RADO was supported in this view by other CBEWs, such as a social worker who illustrated his attitude as follows:

Community members do not trust or like community development agents because some officers go to the villages with the mentality that they know all, that they are educated and therefore are better positioned to make decisions than the villagers. So we just impose our ideas on these people.

Another participant lamented the situation by saying: “We are well-known for our approach of *athama-o-je*. We just say ‘OK! You need a vegetable garden. Do it. Do it this way, sell this share, and eat that share.’ Then, bring the cash after your sales so that we can assess your profits and if you gain this or that much money, you’ll be doing well.” CBEWs who participated in this study are aware that the *athama-o-je* syndrome is not a good approach to help rural communities cope with the problems and challenges of their lives. One CBEW commented that

We need to push other CBEWs into thinking that ‘spoon-feeding’ does not help the communities to develop on their own. We should be proud of being in a position to support, not force, ideas on the community.

The CBEWs also used the phrase *athama-o-je* as a form of self-criticism, believing that they have contributed to slowing the empowerment of rural community members. For example, in the words of one extension worker:

We tend to lead people. We think for the people instead of assisting them to think for themselves, and we officers spearhead every activity. Instead of organizing and providing some guidance, we do everything for them so much so that when we leave them they are helpless. They are dependent. We don't give them a chance to develop their independence.

Some of the CBEWs therefore did not appreciate the use of development approaches that present the poor as incapable of showing initiative, and saw themselves as one of the obstacles to community empowerment. They realized that imposing ideas on rural communities has resulted in some resistance to further participation in development projects. It should be noted that such resistance has nothing to do with inability to take care of one's own development, but rather with the empowerment approach used. When the rural poor endure daily stress and humiliation, and especially when they are looked down upon, they fight back. It then becomes difficult to ensure continued participation in development activities, as stakeholders fail to understand the process of development and its "intrinsic worth, its relation to their lives, and its capacity to lift them out of their uncomfortable lives" (Kincheloe 1999: 234).

Thus, the general conclusion was that for CBEWs to facilitate empowerment of the rural poor, their expertise should not form the core of their contribution. Rather, empowerment should start from a proper understanding of the needs of the poor and their working relationship with the CBEWs in addressing these needs. Empowerment should be a way of "learning from each other and taking actions together" (Chamberlain 1993: 31). Miller, Rein and Levitt (1995) argue that when local people are given the freedom to act on their own problems, they develop the self-driven collective actions necessary for their empowerment. One major conclusion derived from the CBEWs' responses was that the *athama-o-je* strategy has the potential to limit people's ability, and can also lead to other problems. The participating CBEWs remarked that some community members demonstrated negative and passive attitudes. Such attitudes beget other problems, such as lack of participation or unwillingness to co-operate. A case in point was reported by the CBEWs at village X, who were supposed to help in assessing and deciding on a site where government housing was to be built:

The villagers said that 'this is our village and we have the right to decide where the houses are to be built.' They then insisted that the houses be constructed on the outskirts of the village, making them the first houses to be built in the area. As we speak the housing unit has turned into a white elephant; no one wants to live away from the rest of the community!

This is a good illustration of the resistance that can develop among villagers if they view extension agents as officers who minimize and criticize their efforts. It becomes difficult for CBEWs to work in such conditions:

And when things become difficult for the CBEWs, they tend to forget that we are the same people who have turned the villagers into suspicious people; they don't trust us because of what we have done.

Conclusion

To bring about empowerment, Botswana's open-your-mouth-and-eat approach must be reconsidered as a one-off practice in response to specific, dire needs of the poor. Extension agents are challenged to look critically into how some social services, especially welfare services, can perpetuate the *athama-o-je* syndrome. This type of approach does not necessarily help rural communities to understand their situation, nor does it prepare them to face the challenges of their oppressive circumstances. Rather such approaches can lead to dependency, passivity, and a lack of interest or ownership. At an extreme level, agents using 'spoon-feeding' strategies can impose ideas on community members without their consent (Bergdall 1993). The rural poor must be empowered in and for *their* way of life; the cases discussed here reflect the fact that some practices of government officials do very little to help the rural poor achieve a sense of agency.

The *athama-o-je* type of approach can lead to problems, as trust can be destroyed by the mere fact that a development officer appears to look down upon community members' potential. Trust must be created between the extension workers and the community members if the latter are to view themselves as partners and facilitators in their own future. As one community development officer commented:

Community members need to know that our mission to the villages is to join hands with the villagers rather than coming to undermine or despise their effort. Community projects cannot take off and be carried out without community involvement; they are always there, whether we like it or not. Who will appreciate our efforts and make use of them, if not the community members?

Extension agents are therefore challenged to engage community members in active participation, which will lead communities down the path of empowerment. Participation may be encouraged by allowing community members (i) to identify their own needs and plan courses of action, (ii) to share their experiences and knowledge during interventions, and (iii) to evaluate and sustain their own development projects.

References

- Bergdall, Terry. 1993. *Methods for Active Participation: Experience in Rural Development from East and Central Africa*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.
- Campfens, Hubert. 1997. Introduction to the International Study. In: *Community Development Around the World*, ed. by Hubert Campfens, 11–46. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Chamberlain, Arthur. 1993. Learning from Each Other – Inspiration and Examples from Nicaragua. *Community Development Journal* 28(1): 31–37.
- Foster-Fishman, Pennie G., Deborah A. Salem, Susan Chibnall, Ray Legler, and Courtney Yapchai. 1998. Empirical Support for the Critical Assumptions of Empowerment Theory. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 26(4): 507–536 .
- Freire, Paulo. 1973. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: The Continuum .
- Friedman, John. 1992. *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Kinchloe, Joe. 1999. *How Do We Tell the Workers? The Socioeconomic Foundations of Work and Vocational Education*. Oxford: Westview Press.
- Kindervatter, Suzanne. 1979. *Non-Formal Education as An Empowering Process: Case Studies from Indonesia and Thailand*. Amherst, MA: Center for International Education.
- Kroeker, Caroline J. 1995. Individual, Organizational, and Societal Empowerment: A Study of the Processes in a Nicaraguan Agricultural Co-operative. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23(5): 749–764.
- Lekoko, Rebecca N. 2002. *An Appraisal of Botswana Community-Based Extension Workers' Work and Training Experiences: Towards Enhanced Service Coordination*. Upublish.com.
- Linguist, B. J., and David Adolph. 1996. The Drum Speaks – Are We Listening? Experiences in Development with a Traditional Gabra Institution – the Yaa Galbo. In: *Indigenous Organizations and Development*, ed. by Peter Blunt and Michael D. Warren, 1–20. London: Intermediate Technology.
- Mayo, Marjorie, and Gary Craig. 1995. Community Participation and Empowerment: The Human Face of Structural Adjustment or Tools for Democratic Transformation. In: *Community Empowerment*, ed. by Marjorie Mayo and Gary Craig, 1–11. London: Zed Books.
- Miller, S. M., Martin Rein, and Peggy Levitt. 1995. Community Action in the United States. In: *Community Empowerment*, ed. by Marjorie Mayo and Gary Craig, 112–126. London: Zed Books.
- Mooka, Maitthoko G. K. 1995. The RECC's Perspectives on Implementation Strategies to Improve Coordination. In: *Improving Coordination, Supervision, and Monitoring in Extension Services*, ed. by B. Chilume, Gaborone: Government Printers.
- Republic of Botswana. 1990. *Report of the Presidential Commission on Economic Opportunities*. Gaborone: Government Printers.
- Wolf, Norma H., and Bolanle W. Wahab. 1996. The Importance of Indigenous Organizations to the Sustainability of Contemporary Yoruba Strip-Weaving Industries in Iseyyin, Nigeria. In: *Indigenous Organization and Development*, ed. by Peter Blunt and Michael D. Warren, 220–227. London: Intermediate Technology.

The authors

Rebecca Nthogo Lekoko received her Ed.D. in Adult Education from Pennsylvania State University, and is currently a Lecturer in the Department of Adult Education, University of Botswana. Her research focuses on adult education, extension work, and community development; her doctoral dissertation explored the challenges of community development and the training of community development agents. She is involved in the provision of short extension training courses, and is engaged in a study exploring rural communities' perceptions of their own empowerment and the role of home economics extension agents.

Contact address: University of Botswana, Private Bag 00702, Gaborone, Botswana. E-mail: lekokorn@mopipi.ub.bw.

Marietjie van der Merwe is currently a Lecturer in extension in the Department of Home Economics Education, University of Botswana. She and received her MA in Consumer Science from the University of Stellenbosch. She works closely with extension workers in the government sector in Botswana, and is currently pursuing research on the capacity enhancement of Botswana's extension workers.

Contact address: University of Botswana, Private Bag 00702, Gaborone, Botswana. E-mail: vandermerwe@mopipi.ub.bw.