

# Community empowerment in Botswana: The practitioners' perspective

Marietjie van der Merwe,\* Lois R Mberengwa & Rebekka N Lekoko

## OPSOMMING

Dit is uit die literatuur duidelik dat die term *bemagtiging* dikwels gebruik word om 'n ontwikkelingsprogram of projek goed te laat lyk sonder dat dit werklik bemagtiging meebring. Die verwagting is dat, wanneer lede van die gemeenskap bemagtig is, hulle beheer van hul lewens op mikro- (individuele), interpersoonlike (organisasie) en makro-(gemeenskaps-) vlak kan neem en dat ongelykheid in maatskaplike stelsels oorkom word.

Een so 'n groep wat verantwoordelik is vir die bemagtiging van lede van die gemeenskap in besondere omstandighede, soos armoede, is huishoudkunde voorligtingsbeamptes (HVB's) in Botswana. Die hoofdoel van hierdie artikel is om vas te stel hoe HVB's in Botswana die term *gemeenskapsbemagtiging* verstaan en hoe hierdie definisie hulle praktyke om plaaslike gemeenskappe te bemagtig, beïnvloed. Hierdie hoofdoel is uitgevoer deur vas stel wat HVB's daarby bedoel as hulle die begrip *bemagtiging* gebruik, die strategieë wat hulle toepas om bemagtiging mee te bring sowel as die hindernisse wat HVB's verhoed om bemagtiging suksesvol teweeg te bring.

Om die doel van hierdie studie te bereik is 'n fenomenologiese benadering gevolg om kwalitatiewe data in te samel. Oop vraelyste, semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude en een fokus-groepbespreking is gebruik. 'n Totaal van 15 HVB's het die vraelyste ingevul en tien beamptes het aan die onderhoude deelgeneem. 'n Aparte fokusgroepbespreking is gehou met tien lede van 'n gemeenskaps- naaldwerkgroep om vas te stel wat die rol van die HVB's was by die vorming van die groep.

Uit die literatuur kom vier gemeenskaps- ontwikkelingsbenaderings na vore wat opeenvolgend toegepas kan word om bemagtiging aan te moedig. Die eerste benadering is die *welsynsbenadering* wat klem plaas op die bevrediging van materiële behoeftes. Die tweede benadering is die *ontwikkelingsmaatskaplike welsynsbenadering* wat hoofsaaklik daarop fokus om individue te help om hulself te help deur aan hulle toegang tot opvoedings- en opleidingsgeleenthede te gee. Die derde benadering is die *bevrydingsbenadering* wat daarop gerig is om individue aan te moedig om nie net bewus te wees van aspekte wat hulle onderdruk nie, maar om hulle eie doelwitte te definieer en dit uit te voer. Die laaste benadering, naamlik die *transformasiebenadering*, moedig individue aan om stelsels wat onderdrukking en ongelyke verdeling in gemeenskappe veroorsaak, te bevraagteken en te wysig.

Gebaseer op die resultate van die studie waaroor hier verslag gedoen word, is dit duidelik dat HVB's die term *bemagtiging* verbind met opvoeding en opleiding en die oordra van inligting aan gemeenskapslede. Dit is in teenstelling met die literatuur wat daarop wys dat bemagtiging slegs plaasvind wanneer gemeenskapslede hulle eie besluite neem, hulle eie doelwitte definieer en self optree. Die uitkomst wat HVB's verwag van hulle bemagtigingspraktyke is aspekte soos dat gemeenskapslede hul eie besluite neem, hulle volle potensiaal bereik en dat hul hul lewenstandaard verhoog sonder intervensie deur eksterne bronne. Hierdie uitkomst sal eerder 'n resultaat wees van die toepassing van die bevrydingsbenadering as 'n resultaat van opvoeding en opleiding. Daar is dus 'n gaping tussen die benaderings wat HVB's gebruik en die uitkomst wat hulle verwag.

Dit is verder uit die resultate duidelik dat HVB's nie die toepassing van die welsynsbenadering goedkeur nie omdat dit ontvangers van hierdie benadering aanmoedig om afhanklik te wees van eksterne bronne om hulle te onderhou. Die ontwikkelings- maatskaplike benadering word deur HVB's beskou as die geskikte benadering om bemagtiging mee te bring, alhoewel dit duidelik is dat egte deelname nie aangemoedig word met die toepassing van die ontwikkelings- maatskaplike benadering nie.

Die enigste teken van die bevrydingsbenadering was sigbaar in 'n naaldwerkgroep. Dit was egter duidelik dat die HVB's net in die beginstadium van die groep 'n rol gespeel het en dat geen opvolg-ondersteuning aan die groep gebied is nie.

Ten spyte van die HVB's se perspektief rakende bemagtiging is dit ook duidelik dat die stelsel waarin hierdie bemagtigingspraktyke uitgevoer word, nie ondersteunend is nie.

Die bevindinge van hierdie studie kan gebruik word om bemagtigingspraktyke, soos toegepas deur HVB's, te bevraagteken en om aanbevelings aan organisasies wat verantwoordelik is vir gemeenskapsontwikkeling te maak.

— *Dr M van der Merwe\**

*Agricultural Extension & Rural Resource Management Centre for Environment, Agriculture & Development (CEAD)*

*University of KwaZulu-Natal*

*Tel: +27 (0)33 260 6247*

*Fax: +27 (0)33 260 6118*

*Email: vandermerwem@ukzn.ac.za*

\* Corresponding author

— **Ms LR Mberengwa**  
Department of Home Economics Education  
University of Botswana

— **Ms RNLekoko**  
Department Adult Education  
University of Botswana

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This material is based upon work financially supported by the University of Botswana Research Fund.

## INTRODUCTION

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond, it is myopic to look at local communities as people whose developments have to rely on governments and outside experts. Such thinking indicates very little understanding of the nature of grassroots problems and the way they can be solved. Local communities can go a very long way in developing themselves if they get the support, respect and opportunity to be actively engaged. Many communities know better than development organisations what they need in order to develop and if resources permit, they can take developments into their own hands. Where the idea of community empowerment is respected and put into practice, great recognition exists that local communities have the relevant experiences, knowledge and will-power to take themselves from undesirable to desirable development situations.

Almost all development projects/programmes these days purport to empower local communities. According to Mosedale (2005), the term empowerment is often used by development organisations to add glamour to development programmes and to make such programmes sound technically correct. Such development programmes do not necessarily challenge the unequal distribution of power, and are therefore often viewed as a contributing factor in keeping the poor poor (Foster-Fishman *et al.* 1998), since they have the potential to undermine and weaken community participation. The absence of community participation may lead to problems of inertia, a passive attitude and lack of cooperation by community members (Lekoko and Van der Merwe, 2006). It is therefore critical to look at how the term empowerment is used, since it has a great likelihood of being misused and abused.

In this study, we underline the importance of a common understanding of the word empowerment for home economics extension agents in Botswana, because it is their understanding of the term that will inevitably determine what they do to support and advance empowerment of local communities. We believe that issues of community development and empowerment are so intricate that flexibility and vagueness in understanding concepts advanced in this area may end up frustrating the very efforts directed towards community empowerment. Thus, home economics extension officers (HEEOs) should make all efforts to have a common working definition of empowerment that will lead to responsible and responsive community empowerment practices. A true empowerment process usually starts with a clear conceptualisation of the term. Since different people are likely to see empowerment through a whole spectra of practices and thoughts, our interest was in HEEOs in Botswana, based in town, city and district councils.

Against this background, the overarching question of this study is: "How do HEEOs understand the concept of community empowerment, and how does their understanding impact their practices to empower local communities?" This question guided the study on which this article is based, in several ways: (a) it set

parameters, (b) it guided the construction of the data collection instruments, (c) it guided the process of data collection, and (d) it guided the procedures for data analysis.

The more specific objectives derived from the above question were to:

- describe HEEOs' understanding of the concept of empowerment and the way this understanding relates to their practices;
- describe the empowerment approaches that are used by the HEEOs in Botswana; and
- identify the hindrances that affect HEEOs' empowerment practices.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Empowerment definition

The emphasis in empowerment definitions is mostly centred on power, which might be: a) power over circumstances on individual, organisational and community level (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000: 46; Albertyn, 2005), and b) power to overcome imbalances in social systems (Kabeer, 1999; Tembo, 2003: 25; Mosedale, 2005). Where and when rural communities are empowered, they have the ability to take control of their special circumstances such as poverty, infirmity, unemployment and illiteracy, with minimal intervention from outside forces (Freire, 1973: 7; Rappaport, 1987; Couto, 1998; Zimmerman, 2000: 44). The taking of control is, according to Kabeer (1999) and Alsop and Heinsohn (2005), the result of increased choices in the case of previous inability or lack of opportunity to make choices. The increase of choices can take place through a process of gaining access to resources, the ability to set goals related to the increased resources and act upon them, and lastly, the increased control over livelihood assets (Kabeer, 1999; Bartlett, 2004). Together with the ability to set goals and to act upon such goals, individuals are encouraged to question oppressive structures and belief systems and to think about ways to change these (Hope & Timmel, 1995: 77, 79; Freire, 1973: 4).

According to Alsop and Heinsohn (2005), the extent to which someone is empowered is influenced by that person's ability to identify choices and to act upon these as well as the support provided in the institutional context within which choices are made. Development agencies in the empowerment processes thus play an important role in exposing individuals to choices and to provide the necessary informal and formal support structures and regulatory frameworks for choices to be translated into actions and desired outcomes.

### Different community development approaches to train and develop for empowerment

Four different community development approaches will be described, as part of a holistic empowerment model to enable individuals to have increased access to resources, to set goals and to act upon such goals, and to have increased control over livelihood assets.

The description of these different approaches, namely the welfare, the developmental social welfare, the liberation and transformation approaches are mainly based on the work of Hope and Timmel (1995: 77 - 79), Korten (1990: 117) and Chambers (2005: 208).

**The welfare approach** The welfare approach as an empowerment strategy focuses on addressing immediate needs of individuals in order to relieve the symptoms caused by poverty and by so doing giving individuals access to material resources (Hope & Timmel, 1995: 76). For example, in Botswana this could refer to food assistance programmes where handouts are given to destitute individuals and families. The welfare approach contributes to a low level of empowerment, namely individual empowerment on a materialistic level (Kroecker, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000: 46). Individual empowerment on a materialistic level involves the meeting of immediate and concrete needs, increasing resources and eradicating the symptoms of poverty. Empowerment does not occur if it remains at this level (Kroecker, 1995) even though individual empowerment is an important part of the empowerment process (Bak, 2004).

According to Adato *et al* (2006), social welfare is helpful, but does not provide any structural changes. This is mainly due to receivers of welfare who are not concerned with trying to classify their problems as social or political problems but rather to classify problems in economic terms. Smith and Subbarao (2003) further state that safety nets will not address the root causes of poverty, for example low incomes, low productivity of labour and insufficient education. However, safety nets can be justified as an interim arrangement for overcoming the immediate consequences of poverty while developing countries aim to increase labour-absorbing growth as a lasting solution (Smith & Subbarao, 2003).

The importance of using empowerment approaches as a succession on the welfare approach is explained by Brown's (2005) study. It showed that when individuals accept the status quo of being poor and become dependent on welfare, the targeted poor will inculcate poverty in their identity. They become trapped in poverty, feel helpless and lose their dignity (Hope & Timmel, 1995: 78). Dependency on the welfare approach can be changed by applying the developmental social welfare (DSW) approach, which involves the breaking of the culture of silence and enabling people to gain skills.

**The developmental social welfare (DSW) approach** The DSW approach concentrates mainly on the teaching of skills and knowledge to individuals and families so that they will be able to enter the commercial market or to start their own entrepreneurial projects (Hope & Timmel, 1995: 79). The DSW approach helps people to help themselves by giving them access to training opportunities. This approach does not encourage participants to question systems and beliefs – the participants become aware of inequalities and injustice but they do not seek to understand why they are experiencing them (Freire, 1970:

68; Korten, 1990: 117 Hope & Timmel, 1995: 78). The DSW approach does not encourage individuals to break free from dependency and to trust experts and authorities. Individuals are made to feel as if they are empowered by being helped to cope with an unchanged situation with which they might otherwise not be comfortable.

**The liberation approach** Applying the liberation approach, which is the enabling of different groups to express their insights, expectations and reasons for action, can lead to the alteration of the developmental social welfare approach. The liberation approach enables individuals to move from the awareness of issues that confront them to define their own goals and to act upon them (Freire 1973: 7; Kabeer 1999; Bartlett 2004). This enables individuals or community groups to move from the expectation that authorities must change circumstances in order to take action so as to improve the functioning of the system (Freire, 1973: 7; Couto, 1998; Korten, 1990: 117). Critical thinking, self-reflection, dialogue, consciousness-raising and participation form the pillars of the liberation approach and enable community members to move from awareness of issues that confront them on a daily basis to their examination of them, and this will ultimately lead to empowerment.

**The transformation approach** The transformation approach takes development a step further, since this approach involves not only questioning values, beliefs, or distorted assumptions, but also the transformation or changing of perspectives, behaviour, cultural beliefs, attitudes and values. In other words, the transformation process enables individuals and community groups to question and alter their old perspectives and habitual patterns of thinking and doing. The transformation approach contributes to the expressing of new values and to creative development of new types of structures expressing these values.

When HEEOs engage thus in empowerment practices it is necessary to apply the holistic approach to empowerment in order to ensure sustainable empowerment.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

HEEOs work together with social workers and community development officers in the Department of Social and Community Development (S&CD) in district and city councils throughout Botswana. The Department of S&CD is responsible for the provision of services to people in communities to enable them to change their livelihood, to provide technical expertise, to help them to identify and solve problems and to implement policies.

The research being reported on here comprised a phenomenological study that investigated the Botswana HEEOs' perceptions and meaning of community empowerment and the processes they engage to empower the local communities. Phenomenology is an in-depth study of lived experiences (Patton, 2002: 104) which, in this research, had the potential to illu-

minate the understanding of empowerment experiences of home economics extension workers. Qualitative data gathering methods in the form of semi-structured interviews, open-ended questionnaires and a focus group discussion were employed to understand the phenomena of empowerment.

A full understanding of experiences requires in-depth interviewing and probing, hence interviews in this study allowed questioning, probing and the sharing of ideas with participating HEEOs. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten HEEOs. The interview guide used for the interviews consisted of twelve questions related to HEEOs' understanding of empowerment, the empowerment approaches they are applying and the problems they encounter in their day-to-day work. The open-ended questionnaires were based on empowerment indicators derived from literature, and comprised eight demographic questions and thirty-five questions on HEEOs' work experiences (roles and responsibilities). A separate focus group discussion was conducted with one community sewing group in order to establish HEEOs' involvement in the formation of the group as well as to share the successes and challenges experienced by the group.

## Subjects

At the time when data for this study were collected, there were 21 HEEOs deployed in various city, town and district councils throughout Botswana. The open-ended questionnaires were mailed to all twenty-one HEEOs, but only 15 HEEOs completed the questionnaires.

Ten of the 21 HEEOs were involved in the semi-structured interviews. Two were drawn from city councils, one from a town council and seven from district councils. Convenient sampling was done based on the availability of officers to be interviewed. A group of ten women from a community sewing project in one of the district councils was involved in a focus group discussion to clarify information given by HEEOs.

## Data analysis

Data obtained through semi-structured questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussion were analysed by using thematic coding techniques. The researchers studied the data and identified five main themes. The themes were: 1) empowerment definitions, 2) activities and projects in which home economics extension officers are involved, 3) empowerment approaches applied by HEEOs, 4) challenges HEEOs are facing and 5) the environment within which the HEEOs work. The first two themes are related to the first objective of this paper which is to describe HEEOs' understanding of the concept of empowerment and the way this understanding relates to their practices. The third theme is related to the second objective of this paper, which is to describe the empowerment approaches that are used by the HEEOs in Botswana. The last two themes are related to the third objective of this paper, which is to identify

the hindrances that affect HEEOs' empowerment practices.

Two researchers jointly did the analysis according to the identified themes. A third researcher did the analysis separately. The results from the two analyses were then member checked and there was general agreement on most of the classifications.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main aim of the study on which this article is reporting, was to explore HEEOs' understanding of the concept of empowerment, to describe the empowerment approaches that are used by HEEOs and to identify the hindrances that affect HEEOs' empowerment practices.

### Home economics extension officers' understanding of community empowerment

In the interview, respondents were asked how they define the term empowerment. All of the HEEOs associated the concept of empowerment with skills and knowledge impartation or information dissemination. Teaching of skills and knowledge implies the development of people by including them rather than merely involving them in the entire development process. This understanding by HEEOs of empowerment is in contradiction to Bartlett's (2004) view that empowerment is encouraged when community members are making their own decisions, defining their own goals and taking their own action.

The definitions of empowerment as given by the development workers do not allow or include some form of participation or control by the community in the empowerment processes. As reflected by the following statements emphasis is rather put on the development workers' role and responsibility in the empowerment process of community members:

*When we teach them about policies and mount commemorations [prepare celebration days, like youth and family days] as well as information dissemination, we are empowering them.*

*We give power and knowledge [to community members] to show what is expected of them so that they can know their roles and responsibilities.*

In contradiction to above statements, Mosedale (2005) states that development workers cannot confer empowerment on community members, since development workers can only facilitate the process whereby community members empower themselves. Facilitation of the empowerment process includes the creation of circumstances where reflective practices, critical thinking and dialogue are encouraged (Freire, 1970: 68, 81). When community members are not encouraged to question their circumstances, discriminatory social structures and distorted assumptions,

they remain in the state of false consciousness where they do not have critical understanding of their circumstances (Freire, 1970: 68).

HEEOs' perspective that empowerment is merely a result of education is also reflected in the nature of practices and projects in which HEEOs engage. The two main practices described by the HEEOs are related to a) skills training for women, orphans and the destitute and b) the coordination and assistance of day-care centres and home-based care centres. Skills-orientated projects include women's projects where skills are imparted (e.g. sewing skills, brick moulding, vegetable gardening, cooking, recycling and laundry) as well as knowledge related to family nutrition, policies that affect women and the management of finances.

The HEEOs mentioned several outcomes they expect as a result of education (skills and knowledge impartation), such as the community's ability to speak for themselves and to stand up for themselves, improved quality of life, ability to help themselves and not rely on government, ability to make own decisions, utilising their full potential without fear of disapproval of superiors and the ability to sustain themselves in future without help from outside forces. However, according to literature (Hope & Timmel, 1995: 78; Kroeker, 1995), the expected outcomes listed here are not a primary outcome of the teaching of skills and knowledge. The outcomes listed are rather related to participatory approaches where there is less emphasis on skills training and more emphasis on the interaction within groups.

There is thus clearly a discrepancy between what HEEOs expect as the outcomes of their practices, and the reality of the empowerment approaches they are applying. The HEEOs describe skills training as the main vehicle to bring about empowerment, while literature (Korten, 1990: 117; Hope & Timmel, 1995: 78) emphasises that skills training does not produce empowerment, even though it enables people to help themselves. The teaching of knowledge and skills targets individual behaviour rather than collective actions (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Alibertyn, 2005). Individuals are made to feel as if they are empowered by being helped to cope with an unchanged situation with which they might otherwise not be comfortable. The teaching of skills and knowledge is, thus, an essential part of the empowerment process, but it will not lead to sustainable empowerment on its own.

In all cases, HEEOs described the communities they are working with as disempowered, which is contrary to their (HEEOs') expectations that their practices bring about empowerment. The fact that the empowerment activities that HEEOs facilitate do not contribute to empowerment shows that such activities are not adequate to bring about empowerment.

Disempowerment was attributed to various factors. Firstly, disempowerment was related to individuals in terms of low self-esteem, passiveness or lack of skills

and education. One HEEO reported:

*They lack confidence, they ask themselves "hey, how am I going to use this, I don't know how to use this."*

Secondly, there was disempowerment caused by dependency on government assistance as was observed by one HEEO who said:

*People do not care to work because of government assistance, they only want to get enough money to drink alcohol, they are over-dependent on government handouts, are physically fit but do not work. One of the main forces that keep people in poverty is dependency on the Government. They are too dependent.*

This statement correlates with Brown's study (2005) that showed that when individuals accept the status quo of being poor and become dependent on handouts or welfare, they inculcate poverty in their identity. They become trapped in poverty, feel helpless and lose their dignity. This can be caused by a continuous feeling of powerlessness that causes those who receive government assistance to believe that their situation cannot change and that they cannot see their situation in an alternative manner (Kabeer, 1999; Lukes, 2005: 69-74).

Lastly the community's feelings of disempowerment were ascribed to their lack of buying power. This in turn determines the resources community members can access, like loans for development projects. This is related to Kabeer (1999) and Barlett's (2004) description of disempowerment since they relate disempowerment to a lack of resources that cause the poor to have limited choices to improve their livelihoods.

The above-mentioned factors related to the disempowerment of community members reflect the state of disempowerment of community members but in no instance did development workers link them to the empowerment approaches they are applying.

#### **Empowerment approaches employed by HEEOs**

The subsequent discussion focuses on the specific empowerment approaches as employed by the HEEOs. Tembo (2003: 25) states that it is essential to examine the empowerment approaches employed by agencies in order to establish whether the experiences of the poor match the development and empowerment claims laid by the development agencies. It is, therefore, important to understand the decision-making capabilities and actions of the people who should benefit from projects versus the intentions and approaches used by those who implement the projects.

Data related to the different empowerment approaches were obtained from a wide variety of questionnaire items such as: What role are you playing in

the projects? Who decides what should be done in the projects? How do the people involved in the project make decisions? What keeps the project going? In the interviews, respondents were asked the following questions:

- What are you doing to understand the needs and problems of the community members better ?
- What are you doing to increase ownership of projects, participation, critical thinking skills, increased feelings of self-efficacy, ownership of projects, initiative, and to take leadership roles?
- If new projects are implemented, what role does the community play? Probe: What stages do you go through in implementing the projects and where do the community members play an active role?

Responses to the above groups of questions provide indicators to the process of empowerment, and are described in the following section in relation to the four stages of empowerment.

**The welfare approach** This approach refers to the giving of handouts to communities to relieve the immediate symptoms of poverty. It was clear that the HEEOs did not support the application of the welfare approach as an empowerment strategy and they were all aware of the consequences of applying the welfare approach when working with poor communities. One officer critiqued:

*Participation in community projects is hindered by the availability of food rations or handouts given by the government. Thus, the people do not realise the potential value of these projects. They would rather continue to depend on government handouts than engage in projects that could get them out of this dependency syndrome.*

The welfare receivers are, according to Hope and Timmel (1995: 76), likely to ascribe their problems to circumstances beyond their control or to ill luck. They constantly experience powerlessness which may lead to acceptance of the power differentials which, in turn, may lead to minimal expectations of themselves and their environments (Rappaport, 1987; Kroeker, 1995). As Botswana works towards a more empowered nation by the year 2016 (Presidential Task Group, 1997: 2 - 3), drastic action needs to be taken to wean its people from government handouts if significant progress towards real empowerment is to take place.

#### **The developmental social welfare approach**

This approach is related to the impartation of skills and knowledge and will be discussed in terms of how HEEOs carry out the following activities when engaging in community education projects: needs identification, planning, implementation, evaluation and providing follow-up support.

It was evident in the interviews and questionnaires that the developmental social welfare approach is the main approach applied by HEEOs when working with poor communities in Botswana.

The HEEOs employ several methods to **identify needs** of the communities. The first strategy they reported on was to ask the community members what they would like to be taught. It was clear that training is only initiated as a response to the needs identified in communities, as indicated in the following responses.

*We train women depending on their need.*

*If the people show interest we teach them.*

The second strategy was for the Village Development Committee (VDC) together with the *Kgosi* (traditional community leader), to identify community needs and then determine the project to be implemented. The third strategy reported on was to use the identified needs as a starting point to teach others skills as indicated in the following response:

*They do question what will be done next, some actually want to learn other things like leather work, some actually ask "if we learn this what are we going to do with these skills, are we going to sit at home, are we going to get money?"*

Training projects are thus a result of needs identification of community members. The question is, however, whether these training programmes are only based on the choices with which community members are familiar, or whether the way needs are assessed gives access to new choices. It was also noted that the identification of needs of community members is not taking the assets and the infrastructure within which these needs will be addressed into consideration.

The main issue discussed in terms of **planning** was whether the community members are involved in planning the training programmes, or not. Two different views were expressed. Most HEEOs indicated that they are the only ones who plan the workshops:

*The planning is done by the department with resource persons but they (community) are not involved all the time.*

*The home economics extension officers are the only ones involved in planning and base the planning on the need assessment.*

There was only one case reported where they plan together with the community or trainees.

*We are doing the planning together; we call a meeting and discuss the issue and assign a task or decide who does what.*

It was however evident that the "planning together" as described above was rather related to including community members than involving them. Narayan (2002:

20) and Tembo (2003: 24) regard participation as a process whereby people in their diverse livelihoods are viewed as co-producers together with development workers to take control over decisions and resources. The fact that community members were not co-producers in the activities arranged by HEEOs is evident in the following statement:

*If they feel their projects will enable them to make a living they will give first priority to them instead of abandoning them.*

This statement shows that community members' role in the planning activities were limited, which cause them to take no ownership in these activities.

The **implementation phase** is the actual execution of training projects. This discussion will focus on the delivery methods used to convey knowledge or to teach a new skill. The data reflected that demonstration and lectures were the main delivery method applied.

*We do a bit of lecturing and demonstrations and then students [community members] do the same. We use the one [member] with a particular experience to lead and demonstrate to others. They are better motivated that way; they use that skill to propel others into action.*

The main forum used to train community members is through workshops, or as some called them, short courses, seminars and daily training. Participation and idea sharing were listed as integral parts of the training process.

*We ask them to come up with ideas and we modify them by giving professional advice and encourage them, but we do not tell them what to do.*

*Responsibilities were assigned in some cases by the extension workers and in other cases by the participants themselves.*

Even though it was claimed that participation and idea sharing were part of training there was not sufficient evidence to show the beneficial outcomes of such participatory processes. The following statement shows that community members still lacked the ability to apply the acquired skills:

*They feel they do not know how to use the equipment even though they have been taught.*

Bartlett (2004) states that in order for empowerment to take place, training should firstly enable community members to understand a skill or technology, and secondly to decide for themselves how to apply such skills or technology, instead of just enabling them to only adopt a skill or technology.

During the study on which this article is based, it was determined that **evaluation** is only done after the workshops (summative evaluation). No formative evaluation of projects takes place. It was however not evident that the understanding gained of why projects failed during evaluation translated into action to avert the projects from future failure.

**Follow-up support** was described by many HEEOs as an essential element of the development process but there was no evidence that follow-ups have been conducted after training.

Based on the above discussions, it is clear that HEEOs follow the appropriate development procedures, namely assessing needs, planning, implementing the plans and lastly evaluating the results together with community members. However, there was no evidence that the involvement of community members was an integral part of all the phases. Involvement requires community members to engage in critical analysis and reflection, in-depth understanding of situations, and insight that can lead to new practices, inspired by their own understanding. Participation does not take place when individuals are attached to processes where the agendas are already set, the issues defined, and the outcomes limited (Kasperson & Breithart 1974: 10); much rather, intervention is an ongoing, socially constructed process.

**Liberation approach** This approach challenges individuals, families and community members to question the functioning of systems and to think of ways to alter such systems in group format (Hope & Timmel, 1995: 79). It was evident from the findings of the research reported on here that extension workers encourage community members to form groups after skills training has taken place. However, the liberation approach can only be considered as successfully applied if the groups are able to define their own goals and to act upon them as their access to choices increases (Kabeer, 1999). There was only one statement by HEEOs in this study that indicated that the liberation approach might have taken place in one sewing community group:

*The group owns and runs the project, most decision-making is done by them, and they come up with their own ideas and take initiative to do things like opening an account. They were assisted initially by a home economics extension officer – afterwards they decided to form their own group – they worked with a cooperative and IFS department [Integrated Field Services Department].*

A focus group discussion was conducted with the sewing community group to establish whether: 1) the group was exposed to the liberation approach as implied by the HEEOs, and 2) to determine external factors that facilitated the formation and the performance of the group.

The following statement from the focus group interview displays components of the liberation approach that were evident in the group:

*We have a leader who chairs meetings and ensures equal treatment of all the members. Others come with ideas individually. Everyone is allowed to say what they feel. It helps us to recognise each individual's strengths and weaknesses. We are really cooperating and everyone has an input. When an individual comes up with an idea we all discuss it and collectively come up with the final decision.*

As reflected in the above statement, the community sewing group functions independently from outside support or intervention to take their own decisions and by so doing they contribute to the development of social capital. The development of social capital enables the sharing of control in a group, and collaborative decision-making gives people value, respect and power in the group (Zimmerman, 1995).

The sewing community group can be considered as stable in terms of their operational system but it became evident that they lack a fluid support and mentorship system to advance even more. In response to the question: "Who supports you in your business", one member replied:

*We do not have a good support system in place. Last year, the son of one of our members helped us to write a proposal. We get support and encouragement though from cooperatives who market our products.*

When asked how the group started, the following statement reflected the contribution made by the HEEOs in the area:

*Women in the same ward gathered and went to the council to ask for assistance. We wanted to be taught sewing skills and our request was accepted. We attended the lessons and we were then able to sew. The people from the council encouraged us to carry on, on our own.*

The HEEOs, thus, only responded to a request to help in starting a project but did not play a role in the implementation of the project and follow-up support. Internal factors in the group, such as members' determination to make the project a success, the decision-making structures and conducive working relationship, all manifest the liberation approach.

The challenge is for community developers to convert from developing human capital to developing social capital, or rather to interweave the development of social capital and human capital. It is in the rich dynamics of social capital that critical thinking, dialogue, reflection and consciousness raising will emerge. This



does not propose that informal businesses need to take place in groups, but it suggests that social capital is developed among those who are in the same situation. A study by Ntseane (2004) on female entrepreneurs in Botswana showed that success in informal businesses was directly related to social support among the entrepreneurs themselves (women in similar businesses) instead of competition among them.

**Transformation approach** This approach enables individuals or families to question and alter habitual patterns of thinking and old perspectives. Throughout the interviews, no evidence was cited by the HEEOs that suggests that transformation had indeed taken place in any of the communities. Hence, we can conclude that no real empowerment took place in the communities.

#### Hindrances in the empowerment process as experienced by HEEOs

During the interviews, HEEOs cited various constraints that impede their work of empowering the people and the communities. The three major problems were:

- HEEOs view education and training as the main empowerment vehicles. Literature has shown that education and training does not produce independency but enables people to help themselves. Strategies that promote independency encourage people to think critically, reflect on their situations and question the belief systems and structures within which they are operating. However, HEEOs were found to be lacking in strategies to support community projects and to mentor the community group members. This partly caused projects to be not sustainable.
- The system within which HEEOs operate was found not always to be conducive to empowerment. Inadequate resources were singled out. For some, there was not enough money to buy the prerequisites to start projects, and for others, funds were diverted to other projects viewed as more worthy. This gave rise to conflicting interests among the various stakeholders who have an interest in uplifting the standards of living of the people in the communities. These included conflicts between chiefs and VDC officers, among project members, HEEOs and social workers, HEEOs and their supervisors, whom they blamed for not being knowledgeable about their work. Absence of clear policies that govern HEEOs' work, shortage of staff and also of vehicles to ease transportation required for monitoring of projects were all reported as hindrances to developing and empowering the people. The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate the nature and magnitude of some of these hindrances:

*I don't like the way the supervisor works with me. She does not know what I am doing. ... [She] is difficult to convince as she does not know what home economics is about.*

- ... We do things ourselves with no support whatsoever; it is a difficult task monitoring the food basket. The social welfare do not know a lot of things, they do not involve us home economists in anything they do like the distribution, monitoring and purchasing of the food.
- Despite efforts by HEEOs to develop the communities, the people showed preference for government handouts which they viewed as the only constant thing they have. All 10 officers interviewed saw this as a big challenge to their efforts. One officer reported:

*With the food baskets being given, it hampers them from wanting to do anything. They make no effort to change because they know they will get handouts. Others added: it is the policies that cause dependency, and People relax knowing that they will be given rations.*

Based on the three hindrances discussed, it is clear that empowerment practices of HEEOs are not confined to their perspectives of empowerment. HEEOs' practices are affected by the system within which HEEOs are operating as well as the perspectives of the poor or other affected community members. When the goal is to enhance HEEOs' capacity to empower communities, it is important to question the operational system of HEEOs also and to understand poor people's perspectives related to empowerment practices.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study on which this article is based, was to explore HEEOs' understanding of the concept of empowerment, and to determine the extent to which their understanding of empowerment drives activities geared to empower local communities.

The review of literature in this study showed that community empowerment involves the application of relevant and workable strategies to improve the quality of life for people living in rural areas. Community empowerment is all about helping local communities to "gain an understanding and control over their social, economic, and/or political forces and other challenges of their lives" (Kindervatter, 1979: 62). Contrary to these essential elements of real empowerment, most development efforts in this study remained at the welfare and developmental social welfare levels without actual empowerment taking place at the liberation and transformational levels.

The study being reported on here had the potential to benefit the field of adult and extension education in many respects. It generated original information related to how HEEOs understand the concept of empowerment and how activities in authentic work challenges are put in place to empower local communi-

ties. Community developers are provided with practical and local definitions that may enable them to differentiate empowerment-based practices from other forms of development activities which are not necessarily geared to empower the communities. The research has a high potential to unearth ways in which empowerment processes could be thwarted by the economic, political, cultural and other imbalances of the realities of local communities. Thus, this information is useful as policy makers devise policies and strategies that can best empower local communities.

The study was also timely for those people in Botswana who are working towards a more empowered nation by the year 2016. As the government encourages individuals and groups to join hands towards building an informed nation, issues of empowerment are paramount. The information contributed by this study is relevant and meaningful because it comes from community-based extension workers (HEEOs) as major players in issues of empowerment in question. Through this study, therefore, HEEOs' voices can be heard in the literature that contributes to informing people about community development in Botswana. HEEOs can also reflect on their practices and efforts so that they can become informed of ineffective strategies which might ultimately inform policy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are proposed as a result of this research:

- Development workers should think and act beyond the traditional development frameworks, by adopting practices that will enable community members to critically reflect and evaluate their circumstances. This will enable community members to question their belief systems and oppressive structures which might lead to empowerment.
- Home economics extension officers, as reflected in this study, should be provided with mentors in the field who can guide them through the process of empowering communities.
- Training organisations need to realise the importance of developing development/extension workers who have grounded understanding and practices of empowerment, together with the know-how to implement it.
- Organisations (e.g. government) that employ development workers (including HEEOs in Botswana) need to critically assess the structures and systems within which they expect empowerment to occur and to formulate relevant policies. The lack of resources (finances and staff) and inadequate support systems deter empowerment practices.

## REFERENCES

ADATO, M, CARTER, MR & MAY, J. 2006. Exploring poverty traps and social exclusion in South Africa using qualitative and quantitative data. *Journal of Development Studies* 42(2):226–247.

ALBERTYN, RM. 2005. Increased accountability through monitoring empowerment. *Journal of Family Ecology and Consumer Sciences* 33:31–36.

ALSOP, R & HEINSOHN, N. 2005. *Measuring empowerment in practice: Structuring analysis and framing indicators*. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3510. Available online. URL: [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/41307\\_wps3510.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/41307_wps3510.pdf). Accessed 20 March 2008.

BAK, M. 2004. Can developmental social welfare change an unfair world? The South African experience. *International Social Work* 47(1):81–94.

BARTLETT, A. 2004. *Entry points for empowerment*. Available online. URL: <http://www.communityipm.org/docs/Bartlett-EntryPoints-20Jun04.pdf>. Accessed 7 April 2008.

BROWN, B. 2005. The incorporation of poverty into adult identity over time in Botswana: Transformation tales and implications for adult education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 24(5):393–404.

CHAMBERS, R. (2005). *Ideas for development*. London. Earthscan Publications.

COUTO, R. 1998. Community coalition and grassroots politics of empowerment. *Administration and Society* 30(5):569–595.

FOSTER-FISHMAN, PG, SALEM, DA, CHIBNALL, S, LEGLER, R. & YAPCHAI, C. 1998. Empirical support for the critical assumptions of empowerment theory. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 26 (4):507–536.

FREIRE, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth. Penguin.

FREIRE, P. 1973. *Education for critical consciousness*. New York. Seabury.

HOPE, A and TIMMEL, S. 1995. *Training for transformation: A handbook for community workers*. Book 3. Gweru, Zimbabwe. Mambo Press.

KABEER, N. 1999. Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change* 30:435–464.

KASPERSON, RE and BREITHART, M. 1974. *Participation, decentralization, and advocacy planning*. Commission on College Geography Resource Paper No. 25. Washington. Association of American Geographers.

KINDERVATTER, S. 1979. *Non-formal education as empowering process with case studies from Indonesia and Thailand*. Amherst, Massachusetts. Center for International Education.

KORTEN, D. 1990. *Getting to the 21st century*. West Hatfield, Massachusetts. Kumarian Press.

KROEKER, CJ. 1995. Individual, organizational, and societal empowerment: A study of the processes in a Nicaraguan agricultural cooperative. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23(5):749–764.

LEKOKO, RN & VAN DER MERWE, M. 2006. Beyond the rhetoric of empowerment. *International Review of Education* 52:323–332.

LUKES, S. 2005. *Power: A radical view*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London. Palgrave Macmillan.

MOSEDALE, S. 2005. Assessing women's empowerment: Towards a conceptual framework. *Journal of International Development* 17:243–257.

NARAYAN, D. 2002. Empowerment and poverty re-

- duction: A sourcebook. Washington, DC. World Bank.
- NTSEANE, P. 2004. Being a female entrepreneur in Botswana: Cultures, values, strategies for success. *Gender and Development* 12(2):37–43.
- PATTON, MQ. 2002. *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks, California. Sage.
- PERKINS, DD & ZIMMERMAN, MA. 1995. Empowerment theory, research and application. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23(5):569–579.
- PRESIDENTIAL TASK GROUP. 1997. Long term vision for Botswana: Towards prosperity for all. Gaborone. Botswana Printers.
- RAPPAPORT, J. 1987. Terms of empowerment/exemplars of prevention: Towards a theory for community psychology. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 15:121–143.
- SEEVERS, B, GRAHAM, D, GAMON, J & CONKLIN, N. 1997. *Education through cooperative extension*. New York. Delmar.
- SMITH, J and SUBBARAO, K. 2003. What role for safety net transfers in very low-income countries? Social Protection Discussion Paper Series. Washington, DC. World Bank.
- TEMBO, F. 2003. Participation, negotiation and poverty: Encountering the power of images. Aldershot, Hampshire. Ashgate.
- ZIMMERMAN, MA. 1995. Psychology empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23:581–600.
- ZIMMERMAN, MA. 2000. Empowerment theory: Psychological, organizational, and community levels of analysis. In Rappaport, J & Seldman, E. 2000. *Handbook of community psychology*. New York. Plenum Press.
-