



The 'self-help' group: structures and deeper understandings

Humanitarian actors operate all over the globe, which can bring diverse learning from various contexts, but also generalisations that lower the quality and effectiveness of aid that is extended. The practice of 'importing' and 'layering on' interventions additionally risks undermining existing supportive community structures.

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Background

After the two decades of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency in Northern Uganda, a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other humanitarian aid agencies invested heavily in reconstruction and development of the region. To encourage community participation in economic and agricultural development, one common approach was to create small groups, often called 'Self-Help' groups, at the village level.

There are lessons from around the world of how people mobilise credit and participate in agricultural or other activities in small groups, which this has proven to be a popular model in the humanitarian sphere¹. Northern Uganda has a history of agricultural working groups, and so the mobilisation of such community networks can be strongly justified in this region. Indeed, many NGOs have explained that their approach was 'building on existing community resources'.

Methodology

Qualitative research was conducted between September to December 2018 in Gulu, Nwoya and Omoro districts in Northern Uganda, including five focus group discussions (FGDs) with working groups that had never received support from NGOs, five FGDs with groups that had been facilitated by and received support from NGOs, ten key informant interviews with NGO staff and Ugandan academics focusing on community development, and one observation of a donor visit to a supported 'Self-Help' group.

Key Findings

Traditional Acholi agricultural working groups were bound together by the spirit of reciprocity, trust, honesty and a common interest in pursuing activities that addressed their shared challenges. These were initially broad-based, comprising of mainly the extended family or even clan members. This kind of arrangement was distorted as a result of the conflict and many groups became relatively homogenous in terms of composition, with group numbering between seven to nine.

By contrast, groups established by NGOs and other aid agencies in Northern Uganda included a mix of males and females, youth and the elderly, those who took part in the rebellion and those who did not, and the disabled. When programmatic strategy, often influenced by donor wishes, requested that group size increase, some reached far beyond the size of any of the agricultural working groups within the community that were still being rebuilt after the conflict. Consequently, there appeared an unnatural growth patterns which eventually collapsed for the groups that received support while

¹ Das, J. (2016). "Role of Self Help Groups in Socioeconomic Change of Rural Women: A Micro Level Study." [Indian Streams Research Journal](#).



their counterparts continued to experience a gradual but steady growth pattern in group membership. Below is a graph that shows such a pattern.

Figure 1 shows the pattern of group membership growth in five supported and five non-supported groups between 2014 – 2018. Phase 1 was the time the group formed, phase 2 was the end of the first year, phase 3 was the end of the second year and phase 4 was the end of the third year.

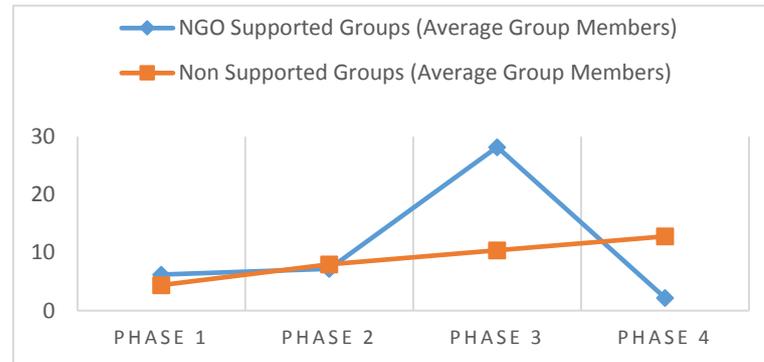


Figure 1 – Membership growth of supported versus non-supported groups

While the supported groups' membership rose slowly in the second phase and sharply in the third phase of their existence, this dropped sharply in the fourth phase. All five self-help groups that received support from NGOs ceased to exist after support was withdrawn. In contrast their non-supported counterparts had a gradual but steady rise in group membership, which continued beyond three years.

Findings

- NGOs under-estimated the antagonism that existed between various sections of the community in the post-war context, for example those who were born and grew up in the camps and the older generation, and those who took part in the rebellion and those who did not. The assumption was that the cohesive model of traditional communal agricultural work would apply to 'Self-Help' groups regardless of their composition. Guided by a value of 'inclusivity', NGOs often requested that groups be formed or modified to include a mix of genders, the disabled, and the chronically ill. The radius of trust was only artificially extended which was detrimental for the long-term sustainability of the groups.
- The wrong values were emphasised in the construction of 'Self Help' groups. Whereas trust, honesty, common interest and reciprocity are the values that have historically guided traditional work groups in Northern Uganda, these were secondary to the values of 'inclusivity' and various other rules and regulations. These were not just unfamiliar but often destabilising for groups. For example, in some groups, monetary fines for failure to keep time during meetings discouraged some members to the extent of abandoning meetings all together.
- NGOs and aid agencies were perceived as more committed to donors than the community. The rapid jump in numbers in phase 3 was related to pressure from donors to 'show numbers'. An adherence to huge targets at any cost included a perceived 'strategy' of giving a small number of items (e.g. three piglets) but counting the entire group as beneficiaries (up to 30 people). Examples like this devalued the group in the eyes of its members, who in the absence of trust, honesty, reciprocity and other key traditional values, began looking for monetary gain.



- Some of the 'Self-Help' activities that NGOs introduced to groups were felt to be irrelevant to their lives, for example candle making out of honey products, and so they were not interested in continuing them afterwards.

Recommendations

In response to these key findings, a series of recommendations can be made to programme designers and implementers:

- When working with community-based groups it is vital to first gain a deep understanding of the socio-political structures, processes and tensions. In a post-civil war context this is especially important. The composition of groups should be very carefully thought out, through extensive consultation with local leadership and other trusted and knowledgeable resource persons.
- When building upon existing constructs of what a 'Self-Help' group is, it is crucial to understand their history, composition, activities and core values. These core values may be invaluable to creating a robust and sustainable system, and violations could undermine or devalue group membership and should be actively avoided.
- Where there are pre-existing groups that will be built upon, it is recommended that programmers allow for natural growth that is endogenous and not engineered from outside. This can allow for gradual trust building which could eventually grow to include the wider community.
- This 'natural growth' approach is one demonstration that NGOs are committed primarily to the community and not to their funders, which will also help extend the groups' 'radius of trust'. Values of mutual trust and honesty are not unique to the Northern Uganda context, and should be prioritised in all NGO interactions with 'Self Help' groups, above and beyond other values such as 'inclusivity'.
- Group activities should be selected by group members and be important to their lives. This is key to a 'Self Help' process. Different activities have a different comparative advantage depending upon where and how people live, which requires NGOs and their donors to avoid a 'one size fits all' approach.

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