

Lessons from Pathway to Emancipation

Cases from Rural Mysore

By

Zeb Waturuocha, PhD.

zebwats@gmail.com/info@auiconsultants.com

919886001658

Lessons from Pathway to Emancipation - Cases from Rural Mysore

Abstract

The paper makes a brief introduction of the concept of Transformational Community Practice (TCP) and its definition in general. It explains the concept that the author has employed to bring communities together to create a common vision by listening to their own story. The author describes how the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Focused Group Discussion (FGD) were used to create Transformative Communities in villages that worked together with common identity to get things done. The paper is a description of the author's practical application of PRA and FGD in building community practice, using two interventions for illustration. This process united several people who have been politically, socially and economically empowered to take initiatives for social action. The second project resulted in forming a strong Village Watershed Committee that looks after the human and economic resources created in the project. As literates, we depend on our storage devices to retrieve data but the story of the village by the villager is a shared experience that is visualised, sketched and painted, providing insights on which direction people want to go. Their story became the pathway to their emancipation.

“If you are trying to transform a brutalized society into one where people can live with dignity and hope, you begin with the empowering of the most powerless. You build from the ground up. Adrienne Rich, “Going There and Being Here,” Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985”

Introduction

It is not the unequal distribution of resources but the overwhelming sense of hopelessness and despair in our culture that is the biggest obstacle to transformation of the marginalised (1) in our society. Such deep-seated beliefs force people to accept their fate. The so-called experts (government, philanthropists, non-government organisations etc.,) bounce on them with their expertise in the belief that they (the marginalised) do not know anything so, cannot save

themselves. The objective was to bring them to the mainstream society by changing their thinking. Genuine as the efforts were, the resistance from the people which stalls change is not understandable. In this paper, I will share my experience (spanning over 20 years) of working with organisations engaged in social change (as they call it). These organisations worked with Tribal, Slum Dwellers and Rural Village Women – a trio group – that is representative of the deprived, oppressed and marginalised communities. These projects came at a time when the erstwhile prominent region of Mysore was becoming more prominent as the projected IT city of the state. Land prices escalated as IT companies bent down to acquire as much land as possible from the rural poor. In the midst of sudden affluence caused by land-related economic windfalls, it became more challenging to get people together to look at issues that are common to them.

The paper argues that to develop effective responses to marginalization, the oppressed must play a central role in the design and delivery of programs and services created to address their needs. This paper describes how Sumana (Society for Rural Development), an NGO and I used the tools of PRA and FGD in effecting the required attitudinal change among the people. Specifically, the paper will reveal how a focus on *social attitude, (the way a society looks at and interprets issues of community concerns), and social practices, (the way community handles these social issues)*, formed the key to transformation.

Definition - Transformative Community Practice (TCP)

A community of practice is an important theoretical construct that underlies a particular model of learning. A learning in which people, through a process of legitimate peripheral participation, take up membership in and identify with a community which serves as the home for these shared practices. While knowledge communities can take many forms, communities of practice typically have a degree of informality and high connectivity (rather tight social relationships between members of the community, and a relatively high degree of identification with the group). Communities of practice rely on situated theories of knowledge, i.e., the idea that knowledge is a property enacted by groups of people over time in shared practices, rather than the idea that knowledge is a cognitive residue in the head of an individual learner.

The Total Community Practice (TCP) as developed by Sandra O'Donnell and Sokoni Karanja (2) requires that the owners of the experience be part of the design and implementation of programs aimed at de-marginalising them. O'Donnell and Karanja describe transformative community practice as a model built on indigenous involvement and which seeks to change

- the way individuals in the community see themselves with a view to develop deeper understanding of who they are and what they can accomplish,
- the individuals in the community view themselves in relationship with others in the community with a view to build a collective identity and sense of common purpose and efficacy;
- the way people outside the community view the community and its people

The basic tenets of change agents and service providers include the belief that the oppressed and marginalized are not capable of leadership and that they cannot help themselves. Hence they are incapable of acting in their own best interests. John McKnight argues that “the community is the basic context for enabling the oppressed to contribute their capacities, gifts, and fallibilities that would allow a network of relationships involving work, recreation, friendship, support, and the political power of being a citizen. (3).

Implementation of The Model

TCP Essentials

In using this model, there are 4 standards of operation that we found functionally practicable and adhered to in relation to the cases described here.

i. Shifting Power by Changing Attitudes

Within community practice ideology, the language of social Darwinism (the idea that social failure is due to the inherent feeling of inferiority in the individual) is no longer acceptable and yet, as Charles Garvin and Fred Cox point out, “a hierarchy of worthy and unworthy poor still exists”. This attitude continues to dominate. In this context, the organization needs to

ensure that attitudes change in a way resulting in actions stemming from a place of respect, a belief in the people involved and a recognition that they know best about their needs.

ii. Listening to the Community's Insider Knowledge

In their article on participatory change, Castlelloe, Watson and White state that, participatory change is a community practice methodology that is based on the belief that marginalized people best understand the challenges they face and know how to address them.

The work of the change agent of TCP is to draw forth the vision and plans of people living in low-wealth and marginalized communities, and support them as they create participatory and democratic grass root structures that give them the resources and power to do what they already require to be done. Really listening to the community requires a degree of inclusion that is complex and multi-layered. Moving beyond silence into an active role of speaking out and participating is an essential component of transformative community practice. For those who view the world through the lens of privilege, this is one of the key lessons of transformative community practice—that experiential knowledge must be understood to be at the centre of expertise

iii. Empowerment

Julian Rappaport defines empowerment as the process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives. According to Rothman, empowerment increases an individual's sense of control over her own life and feeling of self-worth. The Cornell Empowerment Group defined empowerment as “an intentional, ongoing process centred in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources.” “Empowering interventions and policies are designed to enhance the degree of control that vulnerable individuals exercise over their lives, a concept central to feminist and community psychology. The overarching goal is to increase the personal and collective power of people who are powerless and, in so doing, to reduce domination.”

iv. Capacity Building

A commitment to the individual members of a community must go beyond encouraging their engagement in the grass root process and include positive change through capacity building and skill development. This commitment is inherent in community practice methodology. According to Gutierrez, “empowering practice presumes that the worker or practitioner does not hold the answers to the client’s problems but in the context of collaboration, the client will develop the insights, skills, and capacity to resolve the situation”. Capacity building is an essential component of effective community practice when working with marginalized populations. Any effective community initiative must incorporate participatory tools and techniques and build the capacity of the group to move towards independence.

Introduction to the Projects

Sumana, working with women and children in the rural villages of Mysore and Mandya Districts, approached me as a consultant to NGOs and sought my support in the formulation and implementation of their projects. The case studies presented in this paper are a result of my association with them.

Background of the Community Attitude and Practice

Sumana, like any other NGO or government department, had this dream of bringing rural people (also called marginalised people) to the mainstream by changing them. It was during the initial interaction that the organisation realised how wrong this approach to development of people and community is. Sumana’s street theatre troupe created street plays based on local realities – alcoholism, child marriage, gambling, wife beating, etc. Through these plays, a series of mass contact programmes were conducted in these villages. People, especially women came forward to interact with the staff of the organisation. However, the response to a call to come together did not yield the desired result.

Little did we realise that in our approach, we were the flag bearers and this caused the unconscious collusion against us. We were seen as antagonists of cultural beliefs and ethos. Moreover, as our approach seemed to be questioning the status quo, we exposed ourselves to the mercy of the political and caste powers in the villages.

Assumptions and Hypothesis

The approach assumed that the villagers would jump at any offer of welfare or charity but we were wrong. This assumption was evident in the way the organisation went about the initial rapport building. We tested these assumptions as hypothesis and realized that acting on assumptions is equivalent to gambling.

Change in Approach

The above revelation caused a change from viewing the people as non-intelligent and helpless to viewing them as intelligent people who knew what they wanted. All they needed was support to regain the lost united spirit to work together. We were still apprehensive of being perceived as agents of government or foreign donors, religious conversions, and exploiters. I mooted the idea of involving the community through using the PRA and FGD tool, one concept I was well versed with and was able to train the staff on how to go about.

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

"Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) also known as Participatory Learning for Action (PLA), is a methodological approach that is used to enable people to analyse their own situation and to develop a common perspective on how to tackle the issues identified.

We invited the people to share the history of their village through sketches and stories. This idea saw our relationship assume a new dimension. The villagers took us on transect work through the village. When they gathered, we requested the elderly men and women to tell us the story of their village. The men would help with different colours of powder to locate on the ground, farmlands including common land, temple, sacred trees, drainage, cowsheds, etc., and the women would locate water sources, latrines and bathrooms, garbage dumps, defecation spots used by men and women, etc.



Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)



Transect Walk through the village

This approach generated unprecedented interest and enthusiasm. In one village, we had about 120 people turn out early in the morning to be a part of this activity.

Focused Group Discussion (FGD)

The second intervention tool that we used was the FGD, a semi-structured group discussion that yields qualitative data by facilitating interaction between community participants. The strength of the FGD is the forum it creates for discussion between participants and eliciting new ideas and explanations that would not have come up during individual or household surveys.

The enthusiasm with which people shared and listened to the story of their village, propelled us to listen further to understand what is important and urgent for them. We requested that the group must represent both male, female, youth/children drawn from different castes, religion, age, literacy, etc., from the village.



FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

During the FGD, we identified (with the help of the people) the following social issues and facilitated the participants to describe the general attitude/mind-set (6) and practice towards these social issues. The summary of the discussions that led to the design of our interventions are given on this table.

Social Issues	Social Attitude (Mind-set)	Social Practice
Child Marriage	Marry them young to save dowry and family dignity	Child marriage is one of the most widespread social practices in India today
Girl child Education	Women are only made for home. After education, the girl will be married off into another family.	Literacy rate in rural areas was only around 68.46% while the graduates among rural population account only for 3.61%.
Subjectivity of wife	Women are compulsorily under the control of their husband.	Husbands have the right to torture their wives and it is an internal family problem
Superstitions	Hereditary and cannot be questioned	Fate or by luck decides the kind of life you lead
Castes	Our line of birth which we cannot do	Untouchability, exclusion and

	anything about	intolerance
Gender preference in Childbirth	The birth of a male child in the family is a blessing while the birth of a girl child is a curse or at best a burden	Sex determination test, foeticide, separation or divorce to a lady who consecutively gives birth to female children
Alcoholism and Gambling	Men have absolute freedom to drink, gamble, have illicit relationships, and torture women.	Lifetime Physical and/or Sexual Intimate Partner Violence: 29 % Physical and/or Sexual Intimate Partner Violence in the last 12 months: 22 % (7) Child Marriage: 27 %
Health and Hygiene	Vicious circles of traditional healing or mantras, more space for animals than human beings in the home, etc.	Open air defecation, dumping in drains, animal waste and menace are part of living

An important lesson learnt while building relationship with the people is not to criticize their practice even if you do not approve of it. If you want them to do more, teach them more.

Project I: Community Approach to Women's Development

(Conducted by Sumana, Society for Rural Development, Mysore, India and Sponsored by Bilance-Netherlands, 2004-14)

Objective: Bringing the Community together for Social Action

The successful review of the socio-environmental and economic scenario of the villages gave us hope that people will trust us to support them. With their consent and participation, we initiated a Community Organization and Social Education which formed the umbrella that shadows our work in this area. Several of our programmes come under this category. Under this programme we learnt and experimented on 'Transformative Community Practice (TCP).

While bringing the community together for social action through various activities, we were providing awareness and education on several social issues including health, HIV/AIDS, infanticide, educating the girl child, women's rights, evils of child marriage, dowry, atrocities against women, etc. Our approach included street plays and drama in the villages, mass contact programmes and public addresses, observation of national and international days in villages and in public places. As a result, people started questioning their own attitude towards certain social beliefs and practices. The greatest impact of this intervention was the women's ability to rally against men who were wife beaters. In several villages, wife-beating became a taboo. In some villages, the women came together to shut down wine-shops. Today, it is heartening to see the drastic decline in child marriages and swift increase in educating girl children. I would like to make a special mention of a group of 13 young ladies from Mellahalli village, who undertook tailoring class from Sumana. The most educated among them was an 8th standard pass. These women have been together as a group since 1993. Except for one that died, the rest got married and their children are progressing steadily in education. Today, this village, (where it was so hard to even find one girl who had passed her SSLC) has about 3 Engineers, 4 MBAs and a good number of teachers and nurses among the girls.

Realising the possibility of men withholding financial support for their wives who according to them, have become wise, the Self-Help Group Promotion and Federation of SHGs was mooted and readily accepted by the women. The programme started with us giving a piggy bank to each woman and asking them to save a minimum of Re1 per day. The women used to bring the boxes to the meetings, record their savings and a member would take it as loan. Over time, the groups have opened their own bank accounts where money is deposited.

Along with this financial reserve, which only the women and their group members know, the women are able to avail loans for different purposes from their groups. This has saved them from the clutches of money lenders and their extortion. Moreover, the loans were availed at a minimal rate of interest and the interest accumulated to the group which they distributed from time to time. As their savings increased they became less dependent on banks too. Those

women who had no education, confidently handled their finances and maintained their SHG records with the help of training from the NGO.

For the continuity and sustainability, the women's groups were brought together as a federation under the name of Mahila Shakthi Okkutta (Women's Power Group). The leaders are elected every 3 years and given leadership training which helps them take everyone's opinion on board.

Project II: Community Based Human and Natural Resource Development Project (CBHNRDP) (Conducted by Sumana and Sponsored by Eze Germany/AFPRO India, 2000-2006)

Objectives: Empowerment through Traditional Indigenous Knowledge (TIK)

Profile of Village and Beneficiaries

The village of Kamarahalli has multiple castes comprising of Madiga Sc (85), Nayakas – ST (620), Kurubas – backward class (and other castes (3)). There are 181 households with a population of 971. The area has 492 acres of private lands, with 76 marginal farmers (132 acres), 52 small farmers (184 acres), 28 big farmers (172 acres) and 25 landless households. A larger proportion of the land is rain-fed. Beneficiaries are marginal farmers and landless labourers. Majority of them are on daily wages that range between Rs.15-25 per day for women and Rs 30-50 per day for men. It is a caste-ridden village with minority upper caste dominating. Political and caste division prevent people from coming together as members of one village. Drunkenness and gambling are the two major vices. Women are the worst affected as they manage the household of a drunken and gambling husband who reward them with all forms of atrocities including torture, extra-marital relationships and abandonment. The village has a less educated population. However, the good thing is that about 60% of the population are of employable age, from 15 to 45 years.

The Process

Representatives of Sumana approached the village heads and requested a meeting with the villagers. Once they assembled we introduced and explained about Sumana and its projects and invited them to accompany us around the village. On the day of Transect walk (8), 23 women, 36 men and 18 youth assembled and we walked around the entire village noticing different points such as bore-well and hand-pumps, garbage and waste disposal dumps, defecation spots, public places, drainage, water taps, etc. On the same day, we took out a Participatory Rural Appraisal where the people drew the picture of their own village on the ground to identify various structures.

We expressed interest to better their lives provided they were keen to respond. We detailed about our Focused Group Discussion, the type of representation and asked them to give us a date, to start our programme. By the time we arrived on the said date, both men, women and youth were eagerly waiting for us. It proved that we had won their minds.

What became apparent after the transect walk and PRA was that the village was divided on the basis of caste and political affiliation. However, as one of our learnings in the previous project, we did not mention or emphasise on the need for unity. We focused on creating a vision of a village with dignity for women by the eradication of open-air defecation, a village with a separate water tank for animals, a village with clean and well-maintained drainage, desilted tanks and waste disposal. In our proposal, we had included Watershed Management to enable cultivation on their rain-fed agricultural land. A good amount of money was budgeted for land activities such as, bunding, gully plugs, tank desilting etc. Provisions were made for the use of machines for the land work including drainage cleaning and construction.

But when we heard their stories, we realized they could execute all their work (including agriculture and land), manually. We went with their decisions of not using machines during the project. The entire village worked for months to get all the work done through the Watershed Committee, (formed to manage the work including finance for the project). A bank account was opened in the name of the Watershed Committee and it was accountable for all transactions. The Watershed Committee is now responsible for the sustainability of the community that has emerged in this village.

Application of TCP

It is obvious that marginalisation is a product of poverty and caste. It is in this belief that we, as change agents, approach communities to help understand the barriers that prevent them from connecting with the larger community, to break boundaries of isolation and encourage meaningful exchange. We understand that everyone has a story to share and each story has a lesson to teach. We also believe that people will not come forward to tell their stories because they do not consider them good enough to be told. As, change agents we need to go looking for such stories.

Go Where People Are

To the marginalised, the door of hope and trust is locked over time. They do not need us as they are accustomed to live life, the way they have been, for ages. Nothing is presumably going to come out from new initiatives. However, Clarity of objective, and diligent approach marked our initial entry. The increase in the number of people we reach today, is a clear indication that nobody knows better where the members of a community can be found than the other members of the same community. We approached them and they led us to the others.

Building Relationships and Establishing Trust

According to Paulo Freire, “without first establishing an atmosphere of trust, the effectiveness of change agents and their meaningful access to the experiential community will be negligible”. This was not an easy task but the meticulousness with which Sumana created ownership through people’s own stories, did it all. The transformation process supports people as individuals, recognizing that everyone is unique. Each person needs to know that she is seen, not simply as a member of a group. This means being available at inconvenient times. In the process, different relationships are formed with different people. One of the values change agents bring to a community is a commitment to recognize and bridge differences in the group, closing the gaps created by caste, class, age, and abilities.

Listening to the Experiential Community

A few broad generalizations can be made about health and social services. These institutions have been designed, developed and maintained by policy-makers and professionals acting in what they believe is in the best interests of all. Although there are exceptions, the vast majority of traditional services that make up our complex and elaborate social safety net are, as McKnight points out, “developed to meet the needs of the marginalized but without any input from them”. We know from experience that programs and services developed by more traditional experts fail to meet the needs of the marginalized, yet, more and more resources are dedicated to programs and services designed with a coercive element that translates as: “they don’t know what’s good for them.” Addressing marginalization entails more than meeting the assumed needs of each individual. It means working to change crucial underlying structures that are deeply embedded in their culture and using collective knowledge based on information, to a large extent, supplied by the experiential community.

We experienced this process in the Kamarahalli Watershed Project where offering people the opportunity to tell their own stories excited and got them committed to their individual and collective goals. Startling ideas and comments emerge from those who, in more traditional circumstances, might be unwilling to contribute. The take-away for us from this project are as follows.

- Everyone needs time to adjust to change.
- Experiential community members may be sceptical and unwilling to commit until trust is established and they understand that it is in their best interest to become part of the process.
- There should be no pressure to speak in the group, or to the change agent.
- The choice of whether or not to become part of the process is left to each member of the community.

Capacity Building Programmes (CBP)

As the groups progressed, it was time to enable leaders to take charge of the groups. Hence, a package of CBP was introduced to help leaders take initiative, assume responsibility, take decisions and motivate their members to understand, initiate and take social action.

Analysis of the Project Summaries

As expected, our initial village meetings were not fruitful. People would turn-up drunk and, as a result, women would not attend the meeting. Even if they did, they wouldn't speak or participate. We were however, successful in envisaging a 'Vision of a Liberated Woman' and along with the women in the select work area, we were able to co-create and present the image to the public.

In the analysis and understanding of the 2 major projects described above, I want to share the important learning that I gained in relation to what enhances and what blocks community efforts.

- People are experts of their own experience. This however, does not mean that they can do everything they need to help themselves. A need for support does not mean one is not capable; in this case it is a consequence of having lived for years under the shadow of oppression.
- While recognition, inclusion and involvement may increase personal power, sharing experiences seem very invigorating because it was during such experiential sharing that we were able to discover the intrinsic qualities and capabilities of people that have been trampled by hardship.

References

1. McKnight, John. *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.
2. O'Donnell, S M., and Sokoni T. K, "Transformative Community Practice: Building a Model for Developing Extremely Low Income African-American Communities." *Journal of Community Practice* 7.3 (2000): 67-84.
3. Waturuocha, Z, *Moving from Assumptions to Hypothesis in Groups; Learning Crucibles: collective Experiences from T Group Practice*, ISABS, New Delhi, 2014; pp 49
4. [India - Global Database on Violence Against Women - UN Women](#)
5. <http://evaw-global.atabase.unwomen.org/en/countries/asia/india?formofviolence.html>