

Slosberg Grant Report

Community Learning: The Best Weapon to Fight Poverty

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During my masters candidacy at AUP in International Affairs, Conflict Resolution and Civil Society Development, I was given the opportunity to intern at Lifeline Energy, an NGO in Cape Town, South Africa that opens up access to education to millions through the distribution of solar and wind-up radios and MP3 players. Throughout my first year at AUP and the Sorbonne, I learned various ways civil society groups operate and serve their target communities and became interested in NGO best practices in how to approach communities with new projects and/or products. This interest led me to my work with Lifeline Energy, where I acted as project coordinator and liaison between Lifeline and its on-the-ground partner in Zambia, COMACO (Community Markets for Conservation). My position and responsibilities allowed me to go into rural Eastern Zambia to examine this unique partnership and draw conclusions on how to successfully and efficiently introduce new ideas into risk-averse and largely uneducated rural populations.

My position as liaison between Lifeline Energy and COMACO gave me the unique opportunity to see how two successful NGOs operate alone and in tandem to provide critical education to impoverished rural communities. COMACO is a social enterprise that works to preserve the wildlife and natural resources of the Luangwa Valley of Eastern Zambia by addressing the root causes of poaching and deforestation: poverty. They work towards this objective through a two-model system of business and farmer support. Extension officers educate farmer cooperatives (approximately 146,000 farmers) on conservation farming techniques and livelihood skills such as poultry rearing and beekeeping, whilst the business side

then creates markets by buying directly from the cooperatives and using the raw materials to produce and sell all natural, value-added products such as peanut butter, soy cereal, and honey. Lifeline Energy partners with the farmer support side of COMACO to reach more farmers and educate them on seasonal farming techniques. As the Luangwa Valley is roughly the size of Belgium twice over, COMACO supplements its extension support with an in-house radio program called Farm Talk. This program is listened to by over 800,000 farmers, predominantly on Lifeline's solar-powered and wind-up Prime radios. These radios act as COMACO officers since they cannot reach every farmer in such a large expanse of land, and they help farmers to plant and harvest in harsh conditions.

My role in this partnership as project coordinator was to co-create a revolutionary farmer executive training program using Lifeline's Lifeplayer MP3, the world's first ever independent-powered MP3 player, radio, and recorder. Farmer cooperatives have listened to Farm Talk for over three years and COMACO wanted to offer cooperative leaders a higher-level training course on three modules: Leadership and Governance, Conservation Farming, and Income-Generating Activities. I worked with a team to collect the content from various COMACO field officers, write scripts, translate them into the local language, Nyanja, record them onto the Lifeplayer MP3, train farm cooperative leaders on their use, and distribute them throughout the province. My main role was to write the scripts for the content based on collected information and then trained the cooperative leaders in the Chipata and Mambwe districts to properly care for and use the Lifeplayer. Two Lifeplayers were distributed to 43 chiefdoms, reaching about 1700 cooperative leaders who will then take what they have learned and teach newly recruited members and build the capacity of existing members. After each module, an exam is given to evaluate how well farmers are learning in an auditory, group format. My internship finished

before the exams could be administered, but I had the opportunity to write the first exam on Governance and Leadership.

While working on this project, the team and I came across several challenges; the first and most significant being distance. The Luangwa Valley is a massive province that includes national parks, unpaved roads, and inhospitable environments. COMACO has spent over a decade building relationships in the region, so they are able to reach more communities than most NGOs, but distance and isolation kept over 10 chiefdoms from participating in the project. COMACO is hoping to incorporate them after the rainy season, around mid-March. Fortunately, cooperatives are eager to learn and place a high priority on education. Cooperative leaders volunteered to travel with their Lifeplayer to third listening groups where demand was high. While the audio-based education initiative has yet to be formally evaluated, early feedback indicates that farmers enjoy learning in group settings and host a strong desire to learn so they may lead their communities in building productive visions for their futures.

In addition to learning about education in rural communities, this project also afforded me the opportunity to conduct my own research on development, best practices, and how farmers' capabilities are improved through the COMACO model. While out in the field training farmers, I interviewed 15 COMACO cooperative members about the challenges they face in their lives, how and if these challenges have been transformed by joining a COMACO cooperative, and what they hope for the futures of their households and their cooperatives. The sample size is small in comparison to the number of farmers working with COMACO, but these farmers are a random sample, as I spoke with them out of convenience and availability. They include men and women, cooperative leaders and regular members, old and young, and chiefdoms from Mambwe, Lundazi and Chipata districts. In order to collect comparable findings, I asked each farmer to

make five value statements on food security, income security, education, health, and environment. Despite the differences in their leadership levels, locations and incomes, every interviewee responded similarly for the value statements. No farmer is above the poverty line, but they all are earning more money than they had in the past because of the markets COMACO is providing for their produce, as well as from their own small businesses. One cooperative leader is raising boiler chickens and selling them to various NGOs to eat during their trainings. Perhaps more significantly, is the fact that no farmers feel food insecure. December until the next harvest (a period of about 5 months) is called “hunger season” and it is when families suffer from malnutrition and starvation; last year’s rains were particularly bad, so households are already struggling. However, the farmers I interviewed all said they will have enough to sustain them and their families until their fields are harvested and they are now looking towards the future and how they can invest in community projects or personal capital to provide even more for their dependents.

Although I am still in the process of analyzing my findings, what is clear is the importance of a communal approach to education within these farming communities. Radio and MP3 listening groups allow for them to feel comfortable and grow in confidence. Cooperative members became sensitized to the COMACO model through Farm Talk radio even before they joined. Once a member, continual initiatives, like the program I helped formulate, shepherded them through the transition process and now each farmer is an expert in conservation farming. One women’s group I interviewed has even innovated a new, more efficient way to make compost. Farmers are taking the information COMACO is providing and creating their own local programs that fit the specific needs of their communities. This has been made possible because COMACO is a bottom-up organization that focuses on households, and they recognize

the importance of community social networks. Zambians feel more comfortable learning, discussing, and working in groups, making the communalist nature of COMACO successful in the region. The ready markets have also helped farmers move beyond focusing on the daily struggle to find food and start planning for their futures. In Eastern Zambia, communities are slowly becoming self-sufficient and living outside poverty levels.