

## Strengths and weaknesses of church and community mobilisation approaches

### Strengths

**The approach changes attitudes at various levels.** The attitude of the local church to the community becomes more positive as church members discover their calling to serve the poor. The attitude of community members to the church improves as they see the church looking outward and seeking to make a difference in the community. Attitudes among church and community members improve as people begin to listen to each other and work together.

**The approach encourages communities to rely more on their own resources** and depend less on Christian organisations and other institutions.

Since the approach encourages greater use of local resources and changes attitudes, **it is more sustainable than other development approaches.** Since it is the local church that mobilises the community, there is less contact between the community and external facilitators. The majority of the approach is therefore facilitated and monitored within the community.

**The approach encourages replication.** Once a local church has mobilised one community, it can share its learning with other local churches in the surrounding area so that they can mobilise their communities. If there is support from denominational level staff at an early stage, the approach is more likely to be replicated beyond the pilot churches and communities because there is ownership at a higher level. There is evidence that once other communities see the positive changes in a community, they are inspired and envisioned to make changes in their own community.

**The approach can result in improved leadership at community level.** As community mobilisation encourages people to be more involved in decision-making about community issues, community leadership becomes more accountable and transparent. The process may result in corrupt leaders being challenged or removed. In addition, the process may produce new community leaders as it usually involves training local facilitators who gain skills, confidence and experience to become able leaders.

Since it is the local church that mobilises the community, **the community begins to see the church in a more positive light.** As a result the local church may grow in terms of numbers. Since the approach should bring unity within the community, people are less fearful of being seen going to church and the church becomes a natural meeting place. The approach also encourages discipleship as church members are encouraged to study the Bible and are given responsibility for the work. The use of Bible studies to mobilise the local church encourages the approach to be a way of life rather than a one-off process.

Traditional development work involves organisations offering resources to the community, and perhaps asking the community to make a small contribution. Church and community mobilisation processes are different. **Communities and local churches are encouraged to consider their own resources first** and then approach Christian organisations for what is lacking. This is more sustainable and empowering than other approaches.

### Weaknesses

**Church and community mobilisation can take time.** It takes time to change attitudes and overcome church members' unwillingness to interact with the community.

**The work can lose momentum.** It is sometimes difficult to gain full ownership by the local church. Once processes start to focus on community mobilisation, some church members may lose interest and enthusiasm.

This approach can involve **a lot of workshops and a large investment of people's time** and Christian organisations' funds.

**Church and community mobilisation processes take a long time** – anything up to three years. There is a long time before there are tangible results in the community. The quality of the work can therefore suffer as people lose interest or move away. It is more vulnerable to external factors, which may result in changing needs at community level and abandoned initiatives.

One of the strengths of the open-ended approach is that it focuses on needs identified by the community and therefore brings sustainable change. However, by depending only on the perspectives of the community in identifying needs, **some key issues may be missed**. For example, the community may not identify hygiene improvements as a need, though it may identify safe water. If the community addresses the issue of safe water by digging a well but does not also focus on improving hygiene, there may not be such noticeable improvements in health. HIV and AIDS is another development issue that may be missed during needs identification due to lack of knowledge or stigma, but which, after being addressed, can have a great impact on community life. Another important issue is disaster risk reduction. Disaster risk reduction involves taking action to avoid future disasters or make them less destructive. This may not be identified by the community because community members are too focused on dealing with current problems. However, lack of attention to it may result in widespread suffering in the future if a hazard hits an unprepared community. A good facilitator can make sure that such issues are raised at the needs identification stage.

**The approach usually relies on skilled facilitation.** Facilitators should have good theological understanding, excellent participatory facilitation skills and a humble and servant-hearted attitude with commitment to empowering others. Facilitators provided by the Christian organisation usually mobilise local churches. Local church facilitators usually then mobilise the community. These local facilitators may have the necessary skills already, or may require training by the Christian organisation.

**The approach may result in strained relationships** within a denomination. As local churches are empowered, they may start to ask for more participatory and accountable decision-making within the denomination's hierarchy.

Christian organisations may find it **difficult to obtain funding for this approach**, since its outcomes in terms of community initiatives are undefined until towards the end of the process.

**The approach may unrealistically raise expectations.** While communities are encouraged to use local resources to carry out community initiatives, external support may be needed for some priorities. Christian organisations do not always have the funds or expertise to support such initiatives.

Source: *ROOTS 11: Partnering with the local church*, Tearfund 2007, pages 39-41