

Wholistic Development Organisation, Cambodia

Case study of open-ended church and community

Background

In Cambodia, many communities were disempowered in the 1970s because the oppressive Khmer Rouge regime reduced people's ability to care for their families, to make community decisions and to participate in community activities. As a result, responses of local churches to need are often relief-orientated, which creates dependency.

Wholistic Development Organisation (WDO), a Christian organisation, wanted to challenge dependency and facilitate local churches to empower communities to take action. They trained Christian facilitators, who then envisioned local churches. The local churches identified six members to form a Christian core group, which worked with the community to identify problems and possible solutions. The facilitators and Christian core group provided support to communities as they addressed their own problems.



Aim

To establish Christian core groups that have the capacity to implement integral mission through facilitating community initiatives that contribute to food security, income generation and health.

Steps in the process

1. Selection and training of facilitators. Committed Christians who are actively involved in their own local church and who have a passion for serving the poor are employed by WDO as Community development facilitators. They receive training in community development, leadership, management, organising people, dealing with trauma, facilitating group meetings creatively, and developing character and values through weekly Bible studies.
2. Selection of target communities. Communities are identified by WDO on the basis of need and the maturity of the local church and its leadership.
3. Formation of community-based Christian core groups. The community development facilitators use Bible studies and discussion with the local church to help members to identify their vision for the future of their community and then how to plan fulfilment of the vision. The local church elects a small group of Christians to form a Christian core group, which acts as the main catalyst and organiser of the process.
4. Community needs analysis and action planning. The Christian core group brings the whole community together to discuss and identify the root causes of community problems and identify possible solutions. They also identify what local resources are available and what contributions members of the community can make in terms of time, labour, materials and money.
5. Taking action. The community takes action to address its problems with facilitation from the community development facilitators and Christian core group. Once the community shows a willingness to contribute its own resources, seed funding to support initiatives is given by WDO in the form of loans. Repayments are kept within the community to act as a revolving fund.
6. Developing the capacity of the Christian core group. The community development facilitators invest time in developing Christian core group members throughout the process so that eventually they can manage initiatives in the community with minimal support.

Impact

Trapeang Keh was a poor community with dry land, migration out of the area, ill health and debt. There was little trust or cooperation between members of the community. The church consisted of four members and they were persecuted and marginalised by the rest of the community. After the mobilisation process, the community members began to work together to address their problems, such as through digging improved wells and setting up irrigation systems.

Attitudes and relationships between community members changed. There is less social disruption because men no longer need to migrate. The community discussions encouraged men to listen to

Open-ended church and community mobilisation

women. Men's respect for women has therefore increased. There is less domestic violence and more sharing of 'women's' tasks with men, such as gardening, water collection and cooking. There is less quarrelling and fighting in the village and less alcoholism. Decision-making is fairer and more inclusive.

Attitudes to the church have also changed. The Christians have grown in confidence to care for their neighbours and share their faith. There is less persecution and more respect for Christians. The church has grown, and all but two households now attend the local church.

Lessons learned

Those who have experienced poverty themselves tend to make the best facilitators. The facilitators do not need to have any development qualifications or experience. In fact, those with formal qualifications tend to be less willing to stay in communities or travel to remote areas, and have not stayed long with WDO. Facilitators were willing to spend time in the community, including staying overnight, which many development workers are unwilling to do. This has led to the formation of deep relationships that has enhanced the success of the mobilisation process.

Relationship-building helps to overcome community dependency. At the beginning of the process, communities were often resistant to participatory approaches and the emphasis on the importance of community involvement and responsibility. WDO overcame this challenge by investing time in each community, building relationships and sharing the vision of the work.

Existing power structures can feel threatened by the process. Local power structures, such as village development committees, sometimes felt threatened because the process empowers poor people and gives them a voice. The process often achieves far more in a community in a few months than village development committees achieve in years.

The process works better with well established local churches. If churches were too young and immature, they were unable to take on the responsibility of being a catalyst for the mobilisation process. They saw the process as an opportunity to grow the church by offering aid as an incentive for people to convert, rather than as an opportunity for the local church to show that it cares about the community.

[Click here for a more detailed account of this case study.](#)

Source: *ROOTS 11: Partnering with the local church*, Tearfund 2007, pages 34-35