

PERSONAL CHANGE FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT¹

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Boker tov!

Sabah el heer!

This gesture may in the main serve as one's passport of entry to communities of a number of countries in the Middle East region and beyond. These are greetings in Hebrew and Arabic respectively. Remember, 'h' in Arabic is pronounced 'g'. 'Sabah el heer' will therefore literally sound like 'sabag el ger'. This is what we learned during the three-week long period of a departmental in-service training on community mobilising course we attended in August 2011. The course was offered by Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development (NISPED) from Israel, in collaboration with the Limpopo Department of Agriculture. I fortunately happened to be part of the second group trained in this respect. That is where we didn't only learn about community mobilising from cooperative enterprise development point of view in general, but also how it is approached in Israel. I found this worth sharing with other colleagues, particularly those who didn't have the privilege of attending the training session. Living up to the principle, people shall share.

As change agent, I, in particular have learned that communities are complex and so are change agents. I found the two social poles implicitly alike wherein apparently one of them may have a potential to repel the other. Communities seemed to harbour that prospect. One of the two parties therefore has to change to make the interaction compatible. And it is interestingly not the communities but the change agents themselves that need to change first. Attitude, among other elements was emphasised to be our main culbrit. If we don't change in this regard, we cannot be in a position to change others. The main areas in which we need to change include *inter alia* listening, respecting, tolerating, and accommodating others' views. We also need to know and understand as well as to be accepted by these communities. To achieve all these, change agents need to first appraise the communities and learn from them in order to be aware of their socio-cultural dynamics, values, local knowledge, experiences, capabilities, achievements, etc. A display of recognition and respect of these values may warrant communities' openness and change agents' acceptance by such communities.

As we learn from these communities, we should also train them through fun so as to ensure their free and full participation. Learning through fun is very interesting. We spent three weeks in the community mobilising course but I felt like it was a one week period. Learning through fun was found very exciting and effective. The approach intrigued high level of participation. This is true, because for change agent to ensure inclusive, free and rigorous participation, the group participation environment should not be too strict and formal (Diale, 2009). We also learned that community development should be bottom-up. As change agents, we should start with the people and on what they have. Acknowledging and appreciating their strengths, capabilities, and achievements may also help us secure some sense of responsibility and ownership of communities' challenges as well as the prospects of

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resolving such challenges. This needs to be done with caution to avoid some display of pity for communities for they will also play victims, and develop some elements of dependency. To avert this eventuality, we should instead inculcate a sense of pride amongst the people with a view to empower them towards self-esteem and self-reliance.

Maslow hierarchy of needs prioritises hard (physiological) needs before the soft (self actualisation) ones. However, the training taught us how to approach community development the other way round. i.e inverting the pyramid wherein the priority is changed by putting the soft needs at the bottom of the pyramid as the starting point upwards (NISPED, 2011). The objective here is to changing people's behaviour towards self actualisation first and securing basic physiological needs last, with the understanding that when people are changed, they see their world differently. They can also see opportunities. They become able to find solution to their challenges towards securing their basic physiological needs. In other words, change agents should focus their energy and efforts more on changing the people than their environment, and allow them to change their environment themselves. We therefore need to conscientise the communities to making them aware of who they are, what they know and have, and what positive contributions they can make to change the situation within which they find themselves (Swanepoel and De Beer, 2006). This can be learned from Malunga & James's (2004) analogy that "*an eaglet that does not know that it is an eagle may live like a chicken*" until an eagle descends and hovers over it to make it aware that it is an eagle and it can fly. This is the role of change agents.

The spirit of the course was presumably to change the concerned extension workers and make them compatible with the changing communities' complex dynamics. However, change agents should be careful not to completely and blatantly restrict themselves to the prescribed exercises as blue print. Situations and levels of social advancement of the communities differ. Each community is different and it therefore needs to be approached differently (Chamber, 1994). I would in conclusion suggest that the hierarchical brackets across the board of our organisation should not matter. Change is change, it affects all, and those species that are less responsive thereto may not survive (Charles Darwin, 1859). We therefore must change or remain irrelevant and ineffective.