

to take into account the environment in which it takes place. Niger has one of the lowest human development indices in the world. The processes of population growth and desertification are ongoing, and as natural resources become ever more scarce, so rural communities need to change in terms of their food security systems, social relationships, legal systems, and so on.

Since the 1960s, one element of rural development strategies has been to promote membership organisations. However, only since 1996 has the government recognised autonomous rural organisations and then only those based on a cooperative structure. Initially, when external development assistance was forthcoming, the newly created community-based organisations (CBOs) appeared to be successful; however, once aid was no longer available, CBOs began to lose much of their strength. It therefore became apparent that there was a need to improve organisational capacity at the grassroots level in order to improve living conditions in the rural areas. It is essential that the development of CBOs contributes to the emergence of local organisations that are capable of negotiating with external providers to produce regional development policies and/or methods for financing local development.

The virtual absence of state involvement in the rural areas combined with the general, legal, and institutional constraints facing NGOs in Niger, in addition to differing views about CBO development, means that grassroots organisations must assume responsibility for seeking appropriate tools to facilitate autonomous and sustainable organisational development. CBOs must therefore set their priorities and identify potential sources of support.

The research presented here seeks to provide insights into how grassroots CBOs might encourage long-term and effective organisational development and foster capacity building.

The baobab metaphor for sustainable organisational development at the grassroots

Jolanda Buter and John P. Wilson

Introduction

To understand grassroots-level organisational development in Niger, it is important

Workshops as a research method

Stories, metaphors, proverbs, and symbols are highly valued in traditional education in Niger and represent an existing repertoire of competence among CBOs. These methods of communication, therefore, not only provide a valuable insight into endogenous knowledge and culture but are also important in organisational life and its development.

In order to build upon the inherent strengths of the people of Niger, we developed an action-research approach based on workshops that used proverbs, poems, storytelling, group discussion, and role-plays. This allowed the participants to explore their thinking about organisations: their deep-seated beliefs about how work should be organised, how authority should be exercised, and how people should be rewarded and controlled. In particular, the proverbs were used as tools to identify the meaning of development and organisational capacities, which participants felt are needed to ensure that their organisations can succeed and play a major role in community development.

The meaning of community development and capacity development

The proverbs gathered during the workshops encapsulate local attitudes toward and insights into features of organisational life such as vision, strategy, culture, structure, skills, and material resources. They also express the importance of respecting principles of evaluation and analysis in order to avoid failure and to ensure continuous learning. Thus, contemporary development issues are not a mandate of donors but are rather of indigenous grassroots concern. The workshops made very clear that, according to Nigerien culture, the debate on organisational learning and organisational capacity development is critically relevant to CBOs and not just to the donor organisations.

According to the workshop participants, good development is achieved when food, potable water, health, hygiene, lodging availability, ownership of arable land, infrastructure, financing, and universal education are assured and when domestic work decreases. They considered that this can be attained only when *social cohesion, good understanding, and good relationships among the different social groups exist at the family, community, and organisational levels*. They felt that community development succeeds only through good leadership, respect for diversity, the search for equality and justice, mutual aid, collective activities, initiative, diversity, creativity, courage, and respect for diverse religious beliefs. Participants from CBOs suggested that good development practices in the community should be integrated with organisational development. They concluded that a capable CBO is inextricably linked to sustainable community development, one reflecting the other.

The baobab as a metaphor for the effective strengthening of CBOs

In one workshop, a woman used the tree as a metaphor of organisational life and development to illustrate the importance of perseverance and learning from experience. Similarly, the metaphor of organism and growth often appears in theories of development and organisational development (Morgan 1997).

The tree as a universal life-giving organism is a very powerful metaphor, and instruments for organisational capacity development at the grassroots level can be inspired by the natural phenomenon of the 'tree'. This is especially so in Niger, where the tree is threatened by environmental change. Rural people make efforts to protect and plant trees because of their alleged regenerative powers. They are conscious that if change does not happen in a very short time the desert will consume life. Likewise, strong community organisations are needed to encourage community development.

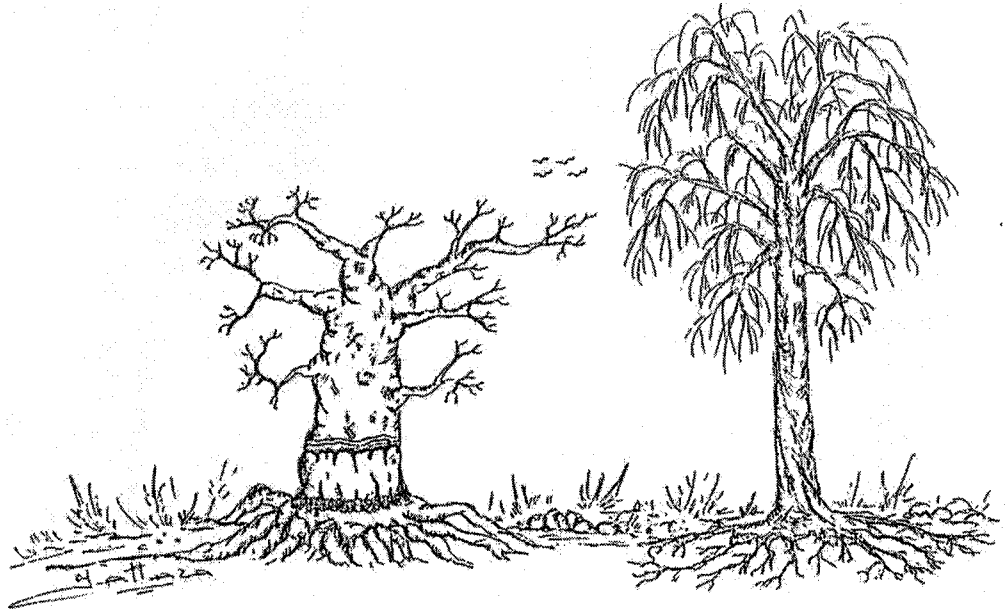


Figure 1: Illustration of the baobab and the eucalyptus

In terms of organisations as organisms, the local view of capacity development can be captured in the comparison between the eucalyptus or the red gum tree and the baobab or the monkey bread fruit tree (see Figure 1). This 'baobab model' can serve to assist in CBO development, training, and evaluation, as well as in the organic aspects of self-development, learning, and change. We will look next at a comparison of the roots, trunk, and branches of the two trees, which illustrate organisational and individual development.

Comparing the baobab and eucalyptus trees

The baobab is widespread throughout the semi-arid regions to the south of the Sahara. It is a deciduous tree and reportedly lives over 1000 years. It is recognisable by its massive grey trunk and enormous thick branches, which resemble the roots of a tree planted upside-down. Its height does not usually exceed 20 m. By comparison, the eucalyptus was introduced in Africa in the

early 1900s. It is a tall evergreen tree which grows up to 30–40 m, but is normally only 20 m in the Sahel.

The introduction of the eucalyptus and the way it is used symbolise the kind of development that has been implemented in Niger by donor organisations since the 1950s and CBOs' perception of development as something coming from outside, instead of an internally generated power. According to a tree specialist working in Niger: 'Today research is still inconclusive about the long-term effects of the eucalyptus on soil fertility and reproduction. An assumption is that it impoverishes the soil forever.'

The roots of a tree collect water and minerals to supply the leaves and the branches with nourishment for growth. They can be compared not only to donor aid, but also to the environment of the organisation: history, level of human development, beliefs, norms and values, legal system, infrastructure, existence of mass media, resources, and so on.

The eucalyptus has many roots and grows quickly. If one root is cut, it soon grows

again. To continue the metaphor, development interventions are also multiple and rather poor at learning from the negative experiences of previous interventions. The baobab, on the other hand, grows several big roots slowly over the centuries.

The tree trunk represents the organisational capacities needed to serve community development. It ensures the transportation of water and minerals, needed for growing, from the roots to the leaves. The activity of transport symbolises the process of capacity development by experiencing, interpreting, generalising, and applying in a continuous way, which takes into account the background of the organisation and the community. Each capacity area can be distinguished in the veins of the trunk and the relationship between the roots and the branches.

The branches symbolise the effects of capacity development on community development, such as access to arable land, health, peace, education, income-generating activities/employment, effective saving and credit systems, potable water, lodging, food, security, and justice. The branches of the eucalyptus are cut to serve as fuel and building materials. However, the wood is easily attacked by termites and other insects, and, therefore, it has to be replaced on a regular basis. Plantations can be managed on coppice rotations of six to ten years, which avoids replanting after felling; however, this depends on the fertility of the soil. The baobab, by comparison, serves as a landmark and a meeting place in village squares. The trunk is occasionally used for water storage and more exotic uses of the trunk have been recorded, including the building of prison cells or toilets. The wood is the least useful part of the tree but is still used to make canoes, rafts, trays, and paper. It is only rarely burned as fuel.

Thus, the branches of the eucalyptus are cut down to serve short-term objectives, and growth resumes. The baobab, on the other hand, serves the long-term objectives and diversity of community development. As a whole, it is used for a variety of purposes in

people's survival strategies. Similarly, organisational capacity development is essential to the organisation's survival in adapting to an ever-changing world.

Trees do not grow only at the top, but organically. Similarly, development affects the whole organisation. Changes are not always easy to distinguish, especially when change affects human behaviour and skills. Certain changes are measurable and quantitative while others are difficult to measure and are more qualitative. This is also shown by the elements making up the capacity areas.

Organisational development has constraints and limitations, like the leaves, flowers, and fruits of trees, all of which are temporary. They come back each new season and have a positive effect on the overall growth of the tree. Over the years the baobab gets bigger and taller, the roots get longer and become more resistant to adverse circumstances. As the tree matures, the fruit becomes more abundant and the quantity of seeds available for new plants increases. Maturity is also important in organisational development to serve sustainable community development. It is a consequence of earlier experiences, and this encourages us to take responsibility for our environment and our behaviour. The eucalyptus, on the other hand, matures quickly and does not have a long lifespan.

Main conclusions

Development should begin from where people are: who they are, what they can do, and what they know how to do. People are at the centre, and thus their beliefs, values, and norms, are at the centre of change. Their culture is also at the centre and should be explored and understood in order to improve the quality, effectiveness, and sustainability of development efforts.

As we have seen, effective knowledge about organisational cultures can be discovered through exploring proverbs, narratives, stories, metaphors, and actual practice.

They express deep-seated beliefs about the way work should be organised, how authority should be exercised, and how people should be rewarded and controlled. The workshop method used in this research is an example of an effective tool in fostering organisational development by encouraging the exchange of experiences and cultural knowledge which exist among CBO representatives.

The development of CBOs' capacity is a process by which they increase their abilities to perform core functions, solve problems, define and achieve objectives and understand and deal with their development needs in a sustainable manner (UNDP 2000). It suggests that the tools of organisational development and their evaluation should be based on the knowledge, experiences, and development priorities expressed by CBOs themselves, in this case in rural areas of Niger.

Community-based organisations should be viewed as learning organisations which facilitate the learning of all their members and consciously transform themselves and their contexts. Not only should attention be given to the effectiveness of individuals, but also to actions which affect an organisation as a whole in order to bring about change. In reality, effective organisational change takes place in a complex manner and is very slow and difficult to achieve. The emphasis on *process* underlines the importance of considering the open-ended nature of the expected outcomes and the need for interventions based on long-term engagements between CBOs and aid agencies.

The comparison of the eucalyptus and the baobab metaphors expresses most precisely what, according to grassroots organisations, organisational development is all about. The eucalyptus is tall, thin and relatively new, it grows quickly, and it is used mainly for fuel and other short-term purposes. The baobab has grown for centuries in the Sahel, is large with big roots, is used for multiple purposes, and serves the survival strategies of rural people, their long-term objectives, and the diversity of community development.

Because of its exploration of cultural associations, this metaphor model is easily understood by local people and can encourage the expression of views and feelings. It can also facilitate a better positioning of CBOs in community development and be effective in strengthening their capacity. It illustrates the interrelationship between aid, environment, organisational capacities, and changes at the grassroots level. It also respects the organic and holistic view of villagers, their reality in community development, and CBO life.

References and further reading

- Atampugre, N.** (1997) 'Aid, NGOs and grassroots development: Northern Burkina Faso', *Review of African Political Economy* 71:57–73.
- Bonnal, J. and J. P. Chauveau** (1997) *La dynamique des sociétés rurales face aux projets participatifs de développement rural: Réflexions et proposition d'action à partir d'expériences d'Afrique de l'Ouest*, Rome: FAO.
- Buter, J.** (2001) 'Capacity Development of Community-based Organisations and its Evaluation in Rural Niger, Niamey', unpublished report, Sheffield: University of Sheffield.
- CRWRC** (1999) *Partnering to Build and Measure Organisational Capacity: Lessons from NGOs around the World*, Grand Rapids: CRWRC.
- Honey, P.** (2000) 'Learning from anecdotes', *Training Journal* (April).
- Kessy, Z. M.** (1998) *Culture africaine et gestion de l'entreprise*, Abidjan: CEDA.
- Levinger, B. and E. Bloom** (2000) *The DOSA Page, New Directions in Organisational Capacity Development*, New York, NY: Education Development Center, available at www.edc.org
- Mariko, K. A.** (1987) *Poèmes sahéliens en liberté*, Paris: La Pensée Universelle.
- Morgan, G.** (1997) *Images of Organisation*, London: Sage.

Oztel, H. and O. Hinz (1999) *Changing Organisations with Metaphors*, available at www.trainingzone.co.uk/

Parkin, M. (1998) *Tales for Trainers*, London: Kogan Page.

Simon, G. and C. Cassel (1998) *Qualitative Methods and Analysis in Organisational Research*, London: Sage.

UNDP (2000) *Capacity Development for Sustainable Human Development: Conceptual and Operational Signposts*, available at www.undp.org

The authors

Jolanda Buter worked as a trainer of trainers for six years on an ILO food security project in Zinder, Niger. This research was

undertaken in partial fulfilment of her MEd at the University of Sheffield. She is currently an independent consultant in training and development of local organisations with an emphasis on gender issues. Contact details: Sitio Alportel, CX Postal 20a Alportel, 8150 Sao Bras d'Alportel, Portugal. <jolanda.buter@mail.telepac.pt>. John P. Wilson is a writer and researcher in the field of human resource development. He is editor of *Human Resource Development: Learning and Training for Individuals and Organisations*, and his most recent book, written jointly with Colin Beard, is titled *The Power of Experiential Learning*. Contact details: 3 The Chase, Clarke Dell, Sheffield S10 2NR, UK. <j.p.wilson@sheffield.ac.uk>.