

SOCIAL CAPACITY BUILDING IN RURAL AYMARA WOMEN ORGANIZATIONS IN PUNO, PERU

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Abstract

Social capacity building has been considered in the last decades an important element of rural development projects, as it helps organizations and communities to better use their resources, design and manage projects locally and improve their living standards. Social capacity building has been related to the development of certain skills and to the concept of leadership development. Social capacity building and leadership development under a social learning approach have guided a rural development project with an aymara women organization in Puno, Peru, where around 400 women artisans are trying to develop a business organization to improve their lives and their communities. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies have been applied to assess improvements in capacities and leadership. Results show that the technical aspects are the first to be developed but that group process skills and contextual skills take longer and are crucial to the success of the projects.

Keywords

Social capacity building, rural women organizations, leadership development, development projects, Peru

Introduction

Capacity building has been included as one of the objectives of development projects in the last decades (Brown, LaFond & Macintyre, 2001). The traditional vision of projects that promoted development by providing physical and financial infrastructure has been overcome by several evidences of failure in the long term and the awareness that people should be in the center of actions (Enemark & Ahene, 2002). Hence, the promotion of ownership, bottom-up approaches and endogenous development are related concepts that are now taken into account in project planning and management. Capacity building has been related to rural development and sustainability of rural development projects (Aspen Institute, 1996; Chambers, 1991; Flora et al., 1999; Schwarz, 2011). It enhances the community decisions to improve their lives and at the same time their resources are better used and not depleted.

Capacity building has been defined at different scales, from an individual, organizational or societal point of view (Enemark, & Williamson, 2004; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Liou, 2004; UNDP, 1998). The entity/organizational level is also called the meso level (Liou, 2004). At this level, successful approaches to capacity building go beyond the traditional capacity development, and include the role of the entity within the system, and the interaction with other entities, stakeholders, and clients (UNDP, 1998). The societal or macro level is the highest level within which capacity initiatives may be considered and it refers to the action environment (socio-political, government/public sector, economic/technological, physical). This level includes both formal and informal organizations within the defined system. (Liou, 2004; UNDP, 1998). Hence, at a collective scale, capacity building has to do with resources, commitment, networks, leadership and skills that help the community to address problems and opportunities, set their mission and strategy (The Aspen Institute, 1996; Chaskin, 2001). As a process of change, it has been defined as a bottom-up approach with a holistic focus (Brown, LaFond & Macintyre, 2001; UNDP, 2002; Horton et al., 2008). The outcomes related to capacity building include the enhancement of participation, influence on decision-making processes, the expansion of the leadership base, strengthened individual skills, better definition of mission and vision (to transform individual interests into a dynamic collective force), strategic planning, adaptation to changes, etc. (Aspen institute, 1996; Chaskin, 2001; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Liou, 2004; UNDP, 1998).

Different skills have been related to capacity building at an organizational or collective level, that can be promoted through planned interventions (apart from technical capacities), such as participation and cooperation (Aspen Institute, 1996; Foster-Fishman et al 2001; Goodman et al., 1998; Kwan et al., 2003; Maclellan-Wright et al., 2007; UNDP, 2006; WRI, 2008), leadership (Aspen Institute, 1996; Brown et al., 2001; Chaskin, 2001; Cheers et al., 2005; Flora et al., 1999; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Goodman et al., 1998; Horton, 2004; Innes & Booher, 2003; Lusthaus, 1995; Maclellan-Wright et al., 2007; UNDP, 1998; UNDP, 2006; WRI, 2008), commitment (Chaskin, 2001; Kwan et al., 2003; Horton, 2004; WRI, 2008), trust (Aspen Institute, 1996; Chaskin, 2001; Diallo, 2005; Goodman et al., 1998; Kwan et al., 2003), communication (Cheers et al. (2005); Diallo, 2005; Flora et al., 1999; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Innes & Booher, 2003; Lusthaus, 1995; Maclellan-Wright et al., 2007; UNDP, 2006; WRI, 2008), network building (Armstrong et al., 2002; Brown et al., 2001; Chaskin, 2001; Cheers et al., 2005; Coleman, 1988; Flora et al., 1999; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Goodman et al., 1998; Innes & Booher, 2003; Kwan et al., 2003; Lusthaus, 1995; Maclellan-Wright et al., 2007), entrepreneurship (Aspen Institute, 1996; Diallo, 2005), norms (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Kwan et al., 2003; WRI, 2008), team work (Diallo, 2005; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Innes & Booher, 2003; WRI, 2008), group process skills (Problem/ conflict-solving skills; consensus building, decision-making) (Armstrong et al., 2002; Aspen Institute, 1996; Chaskin, 2001; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Goodman et al., 1998; Lusthaus, 1995; WRI, 2008), sense of community, shared values (Brown et al., 2001; Chaskin, 2001; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Goodman et al., 1998; Kwan et al., 2003; Lusthaus, 1995; Maclellan-Wright et al., 2007) and vision and strategy (Flora et al., 1999; Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Liou, 2004; UNDP, 1998; UNDP, 2006; WRI, 2008).

Social capacity building is also very much related to leadership development (Allen & Lachapelle, 2012; Odeh & Bruning, 2006; PNUD, 1998, 2006), as the promotion of a good leadership maximizes and protects the investments in capacity building in a certain context. Leadership development has a collective meaning (as opposite to leader development, which has an individual scope and refers to personal skills, behaviors, values, etc.) and it refers to a

process that includes the connections between leaders in a system, interpersonal relationships, social influence processes, group dynamics, the context, etc. (Day, 2000; Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005). Both leaders and followers have an important role in the leadership process. Different theories around leadership as a collective concept have been developed, such as transactional leadership (Burns, 1978), the Leader-Member Exchange (Uhl-Bien, 2006), transformational leadership (Avolio, Bass & Jung, 1999; Bass, Avolio & Berson, 2003), authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), complex leadership (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007), relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006) or distributed leadership (Bennett, 2003; Raelin, 2003; Spillane et al., 2001; Gronn, 2002). Leadership development as a process that promotes leadership both in leaders and followers and that pays attention to the social relationships is considered of interest to rural development, where leaders do not occupy formal positions as in business organizations, but lead based on their social relationships, which they use to promote common objectives to improve the social wellbeing of their communities (Allen & Lachapelle, 2012).

Development projects that include leadership development and capacity building aim at helping communities to develop their capacities to design and manage projects successfully and contribute to the improvement of their living standards. The model of planning as social learning is considered very adequate to promote social capacity building and leadership development, including the enforcement of the aforementioned skills. This model promotes bottom-up processes to generate policies and programs, i.e., it encourages the participation of the affected population in the definition of the actions to take in the territory. Therefore, in the model of planning as social learning is a two-way information exchange between planners and population, of special interest in the management of rural development (Cazorla et al., 2004). According to this approach, projects need to integrate local knowledge with scientific knowledge and produce a mutual learning between planners and the population affected by the actions (Friedman, 1987, Cazorla et al. 2004). As a result of this dialogue, each proposal is subject to change and therefore it is considered that planning precedes action. The role that planners take is to mobilize resources and catalyze public and private interests to find innovative solutions in their territories.

Social capacity building and leadership development have guided a rural development project with an aymara women organization. The organization includes Aymara communities located in the Andean region of Puno (Peru) around Titicaca Lake, in a sensitive area where natural resources are used inappropriately and local communities are among the poorest in the country, due among other factors, to high altitudes, extreme temperatures, poor communication and transport infrastructure; low technological level of agricultural production activities and very poor marketing of products at low prices paid by intermediaries. The mainstay of the economy of the region is based on sheep and alpaca wool production together with cattle raising and cultivation of potatoes, quinoa and barley. Besides these factors, women experience additional difficulties due to several interrelated aspects: male-chauvinistic idiosyncrasy, low level of education, poor mobilization of financial resources to women and their associations, Aymara language as the only means of expression for many women and low participation in decision-making processes, among others (Cazorla et al., 2010). The organization gathers 21 groups and 400 women artisans from six districts around Titicaca Lake in Puno region. The project started in 2008, with the collaboration of GESPLAN Research group from the Technical University of Madrid, the NGO Design for Development and the women organization Coordinadora de Mujeres Aymaras (CMA). The global aim of the project is to improve the women capacities so as to promote entrepreneurship and economic development, and help women to become leaders in the development of their communities and poverty alleviation (Cazorla *et al.*, 2010). The project is promoting the artisan activity, with several home and fashion textile collections, and a revolving micro-credit to finance their activities. The model of planning as social learning is a useful approach to build capacity and leadership in this rural context, as there is a continuous learning and women are developing their skills to lead the project in a sustainable way.

Methodology

The methodology followed in this study is based on a multi-disciplinary approach that includes various theoretical perspectives, such as social and human capital theory, social capacity, capacity building, empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 2000), methodologies from the logic of participation (Korten, 1980; Uphoff, 1985; Cernea, 1992; Oakley, 1993; Chambers, 1997) and social learning processes (Friedmann, 1993; Cazorla, & Friedmann, 1995). The evaluation of capacity building and leadership development is based on a two-scale framework, with an individual level and an organizational level. In both cases, capacity building has been evaluated through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. At an individual scale, evaluation was done with a survey to measure perception of individual capacities, personal interviews to group leaders with the focus of life stories, and a workshop to draw perception of life change with the project and future perspectives. In this study the focus is set on the organizational or collective aspects of capacity building. Instruments applied are: empowerment evaluation workshops carried out in 2007 and 2012; structured interviews to leaders from the executive committee and technical team to evaluate organizational capacities and leadership development in the last five years, carried out from November 2012 to January 2013; and participant observation in October and November, 2011 and November, 2012. These sources of primary information complemented other secondary sources that were consulted: diagnosis documents from 2007, periodical documents produced by the local technical team from 2008 to 2012, reports for the financing institutions, results from an assessment carried out in 2011 with a competences approach (Sastre-Merino & de los Ríos, 2012) and scientific papers related to the project from GESPLAN research group.

Results

During the first empowerment evaluation workshops in 2007, women set the mission and vision of the organization, and the results from the workshops were used to set the aim and lines of action for the project. The most important aspects that were said during those workshops were the need to strengthen the relationships with clients and markets, the importance of a business-like management of the organization and the need to strengthen the organization. The strategies to fulfill these objectives were: technical capacity building in materials selection, and garments design, cleaning, ironing and packaging; training in business management, support in the formalization of the organization and in the search of clients and markets, and the creation of strategic alliances with other institutions; and support in strengthening the organization.

The three empowerment evaluation workshops carried out in November 2012 (one in each of the three areas of the project), were designed using the information from the previous workshops in order to know if the same topics were the most relevant for them or if they had changed over time. It could be realized that there has been an important learning since 2007, as by that time women asked the project to help them in marketing their crafts and now they acknowledge that they were not prepared for that and that they have had to walk a previous path to improve their technical capacities, and now they think they can face marketing. In that sense, there has been a process of capacity building in order to self-evaluate the progress of the organization and plan the actions needed to continue moving forward to make their organization become a real and sustainable source of income to improve the lives of their families.

In this vein, the main findings of those workshops, together with the opinions of the technical team from GESPLAN and the leaders interviewed, and the information gathered through the project monitoring are organized around four areas: Organizational learning; Improvement of the organization technical capacities; Improvement in the organization's relationships with clients and markets; and leadership development.

Organizational learning

Results about the organization show that it has been strengthened, through various actions, such as the formalization and legal establishment of the CMA and the creation of the executive committee. The number of members has increased considerably, from 320 women in 2010 (Negrillo et al., 2011) to a total of 408 women today. Internal rules have been developed, and women recognize the importance of working together. Thus, they are working on strengthening their networks of interconnected groups. Women state a feeling of belonging to the organization, thus confirming the enforcement of social capital, they share the same values and have a common vision of the project. Nevertheless, social capital inside each group is much stronger than between groups, especially if the groups are from different areas. This is one aspect that causes tensions in the decision making processes and that has been noted in the empowerment evaluation workshops and in the opinions of the leaders and technical staff. Thus there is a need to further work in building commitment with the whole organization, and to improve the participation processes, so as to overcome the difficulties set by the long geographical distances that exist between areas. This is related to the need to improve communication, which was evidenced during the workshops, as there was a lack of information in some of the areas of the project.

In relation with the need to develop a business structure, some steps have been taken, although it is a very long process. One of the adaptations adopted so far implies a simplification of the decision-making process that the organization had before to accelerate the decisions and be more operative. The traditional decision making process started with a meeting of the executive committee and all the group leaders that reported the issues to their groups and, after consulting them, communicate their ideas or decisions back to the executive committee and decide by consensus. Because this process sometimes involved long periods of time that slow down the progress of the project, the executive committee started to decide the actions to take. The executive committee, formed by two women per area intends to balance the opinions of the three areas, although women acknowledge that in practice one of the areas has more power than the rest, because of a stronger leadership and because of the difficulty for the leaders that live farther from the office to move for each meeting. Although these conflicts exist, and there is an example of a group that has abandoned the organization, there is a general trust in the committee, something considered fundamental for the sustainability of the organization. In the cases of conflict, the technical staff acknowledge that group process skills still need to be developed, to solve the problems and continue working together, something that has been noted to be difficult in a context where resentment is embedded in the culture and it takes time to overcome them.

Leadership development

Leadership development has been perceived in terms of the progressive involvement of women in the productive process, especially among the group leaders, as they have asked to learn where to buy the materials, they have travelled to exhibitions, they are looking for training in different agencies and they are getting involved in office work that will allow them to manage the project independently in the long run.

The use of a participatory approach from the design phase of the project, to define it and include the voices of all stakeholders, has allowed women to take ownership of the project from the beginning so it has had the support of the

majority of the members. One of the results of this strategy is that the rhythm of the project has been defined by women, which ensures that they own it and have the capacity to tackle the next phase but it is slower than other top down approaches. The style of leadership that guided the actions of the technical staff was the transformational one. With this approach, knowledge both from women and the technical team is combined, as defined in social learning processes, so action produces knowledge that is again applied to action.

Improvement of the organization technical capacities

Regarding the evaluation of the improvement of the organization technical capacities, women realize they have improved the quality of their crafts, and now they are aware of the importance of having different sizes, and of working with quality standards. As a result of participating in monitoring activities, under the social learning approach, they have created a quality control committee and quality control procedures and they have improved the production office to meet their requirements, purchasing the necessary machinery and office equipment (Negrillo et al., 2011). They have received training in the topics identified in the first workshops, and after, they have realized new needs in the second evaluation. They have also developed a replication system, so one or two women from each group receive training and then train their groups. This has been implemented for example in a yearly design workshop carried out with the support of the Spanish NGO Design for Development (DPD), to improve the quality and innovation of the garments. In these workshops, women and designers integrate their knowledge to adapt the traditional designs to international trends and preferences but using local production techniques. They have already created four collections that are presented in catalogs, available online.

Both the information from the workshops and from the interviews suggest that there is a need to continue building capacity in several aspects, such as communication, time management and quality and to foster teamwork. Both time management and quality are the two aspects that generate the greatest conflict. To improve these aspects, working tools have been adjusted, as well as materials, timing, mechanisms of supply, production, monitoring, quality control and marketing in each group and area. But still they have to improve the establishment of all these procedures in all groups, and that will take some time.

Improvement in the organization's relationships with clients and markets

Concerning the relationships of the organization with clients and markets, which was the main concern of women in 2007 empowerment evaluation workshops, women think they have developed some financial literacy and gained confidence to start new business. Nevertheless they know this is the area that needs more improvement and they recognize that they are still very dependent on the external aid from the technical staff and NGOs. They are aware of the need to use new technologies as internet but they are not ready to undertake that process by themselves. In the workshops they set several areas of improvement: need to use internet or to hire someone that can do the contacts with clients and be able to do all the administrative and legal procedures, and the need to start and maintain relationships with other organizations to have bigger orders. The organization has already established relationships with various local, national and international institutions, in some cases for support and in others to establish business relationships, although the contacts have been made mainly through the technical staff and women still cannot lead the process alone. One of the main benefits of these contacts is that they are achieving global markets that were not at hand before, when they mainly sold their crafts to intermediaries that paid low prices. This has caused that they have started to know how to calculate benefits, taking into account the cost of materials and labor and that now they are committed to maintain quality to continue in those markets. The increase of revenues is very relevant since the craft is almost in all cases the greatest contribution of women to the household economy.

Conclusions

Social capacity building is an important element to be considered in development projects, as it promotes ownership, bottom-up approaches and endogenous development. In rural areas, it enhances the rational use of resources and the improvement of the well-being. It has been related to the development of certain skills and competences, such as technical skills, participation and cooperation, commitment, leadership, trust, communication, network building, entrepreneurship, norms, teamwork, group process skills, sense of community, shared values and vision and strategy.

Social capacity building is related to leadership development, understood as a process that promotes leadership both in leaders and followers and it takes into account the relationships, context, group dynamics, etc. This conception is taken from "relational" leadership theories, like transactional, transformational, leader-member exchange, authentic, relational, distributed or relational leadership. For rural development, the model of planning as social learning is considered an adequate framework to build capacities and leadership, as it promotes participation of all stakeholders in all stages of the project cycle and it considers that both planners and population exchange knowledge and produce learning that reorients the project.

Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments as empowerment evaluation workshops and personal structured interviews, we have analyzed the application of this approach to a rural organization of aymara women. Results show that the development project has promoted capacity building and leadership development, with different levels of performance. The technical capacities have been the first to be promoted and the most developed, although

women and technical staff acknowledge that other capacities related to relationships with the context, markets and clients and group process skills need further development and are crucial to the long term success of the project. The process is continuously reoriented to help the organization to become leaders of their project and be able to combine their social structure with a business-like organization, in order to have a real opportunity to work and improve their living standards and the well being of their communities.

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