

Testing an asset-based, community-driven development approach: 10 years of action researchⁱ in Ethiopia

A Reflection Paper for the 2013 IDRC Canadian Learning Forum

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Location	50+ community groups in Amhara, Oromiya, and Southern Nations Nationalities People's Region in Ethiopia
Dates research conducted	2003 – Present & Ongoing
Partner(s)	Oxfam Canada, Coady International Institute, Agri-Service Ethiopia, KMG Ethiopia, Hundee Oromo Grassroots Organization, International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), Sustainable Environmental Development Action (SEDA), International Development Enterprises (IDE), SOS Sahel Ethiopia.
Funder(s)	Comart Foundation, Canadian International Development Agency
Research methods used	<p>In 2003, graduates of the Coady Institute's Asset-Based Community-Driven (ABCD) Development course piloted an ABCD approach in five communities in the Oromia, Tigray and Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) regions of Ethiopia. The research design employed evolved over a ten-year period as Coady, Oxfam Canada and community gradually developed and introduced a range of methods, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ popular education methods and tools to identify assets, strengths and opportunities and to stimulate self-organizing around new activities;▪ a simple "<i>Tracking the Process as it Unfolds</i>" journal for field-level workers;▪ annual review workshops in which partners discussed learning, opportunities and challenges, and specific follow-up actions;▪ The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique to systematically tell hundreds of stories by community members and NGO staff about what community members considered to be of most value in what they had accomplished, and why;▪ An overarching theory of change that was jointly developed with partners and refined over time;▪ Review workshops, and community-NGO exchanges that were organized once or twice a year in Ethiopia and outside to support

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- learning from different experiences and contexts;
 - In 2008, a more systematic, formal evaluation, involving 400 community members, government officials and NGO staff that employed a mixed-method design using many of the above tools to track changes in assets and the MSC technique (Peters, Gonsamo and Molla, 2011). This exercise was repeated in 2011 and 2013 with an internal multi-stakeholder team and an external evaluator (Mathie and Peters, 2013, forthcoming).

E-Links

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Did or will your research project lead to a second phase?

The first phase (2003-2006) was funded with very limited internal capacity-building funds from CIDA. The second phase (2006-2011) was funded by the Comart Family Foundation and CIDA. The third phase (2011-2014) was funded by the Comart Foundation. At this point, CIDA also provided substantial funds for a second project with new partners, which was designed based on the learning from the previous years. The two projects ran concurrently with Oxfam Canada as the lead coordinator. We have since secured funding for one more year.

Introduction

Since 2003, the Coady Institute has been working with Oxfam Canada and local NGOs in Ethiopia to test an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach. There are multiple stakeholders involved, including: five local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), two international NGOs (INGOs), five government departments, two academic institutions, three private-sector agencies, and several donors.

The number of communities involved has grown from five during the pilot phase to 24 by 2011, and continues to grow. In all these cases, active groups in these communities have responded to the opportunity to collaborate with local NGOs using an ABCD approach, despite minimal external inputs in the initial phase. On-going action research continues to inform activity at the community level and the development practice of NGOs and other stakeholders.

Conventional development approaches typically focus on identifying problems, needs, and deficits that require outside assistance and externally-driven solutions. In contrast, this initiative started by uncovering the community-level capacities and assets that community members, as “agents” in their own development, could mobilise to meet opportunities. The ABCD approach encourages endogenous innovation as the communities organize and re-organize to realize each new opportunity. External, development-assistance organizations in turn work primarily as facilitators.

The approach utilizes a mix of popular education tools to identify:

- past achievements and current assets, including natural, physical and financial resources, individual skills, associations and networks; and
- opportunities for harvesting the “low hanging fruit” through activities that can be done with minimal external assistance.

As NGO fieldworkers and community members uncover often-undervalued strengths, people regroup and initiate new, mutually-beneficial activities. Uncovering or acknowledging assets in this way builds confidence in individual and collective agency, both on the part of community members and an on the part of NGOs who now recognise community strengths and potential. Through incremental steps and with the facilitation of the NGO, the groups build links with private and public sector organizations that recognise their capacity to organise and are willing to invest time and other resources. This has evolved into a “joint venture” in which multiple stakeholders, including a family

foundation of “venture philanthropists,” invest a variety of resources together and take the risk of trying something new, staying open to a variety of possible outcomes.

An evolving research design

The research design used in this project has evolved over a ten-year period since 2003. Initially, the Coady Institute and Oxfam Canada staff led the design, but since 2008, local NGO staff and community members have gradually taken on more responsibility and initiative.

In 2003, graduates of the Coady Institute’s Mobilizing Assets for Citizen-Led Development course piloted the ABCD approach in five communities in the Oromia, Tigray and Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) regions of Ethiopia. During this pilot phase, maps and diagrams generated in the asset-mapping process provided participatory, community-level base-line data that community members could refer to later. In addition:

- A simple “*Tracking the Process as it Unfolds*” journal was completed by field-level workers.
- *Annual review workshops* were held to bring partners together to discuss learning, opportunities and challenges. These workshops informed innovations like introducing a leverage fund to help communities connect with outside institutions, and designing community-led value chain tools.
- *The Most Significant Change technique* (Davies, 1998) was employed to allow community members and NGO staff to systematically tell hundreds of stories about what they considered their most-valued accomplishments.

Consolidating these viewpoints became the basis for decisions about the next steps.

By 2008, the number of ABCD groups had increased from the five pilot sites to 24 groups as the NGOs became more comfortable with and convinced of the value of using the approach. Other new, unaffiliated groups also formed spontaneously by following the example of ABCD groups within their community.

An overarching theory of change was jointly developed with partners and refined over time. Review workshops occurred more frequently and involved more stakeholders, including government and private sector agencies, in addition to more NGOs and community members.



Figure 1: Location of original five ABCD pilot sites in 2003

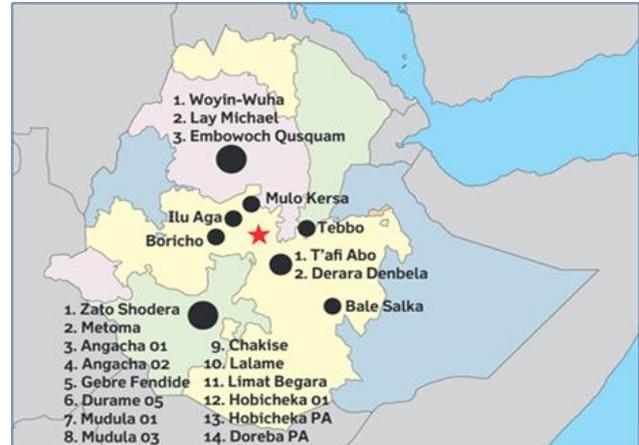


Figure 2: Location of ABCD groups in 2011

Community and NGO exchanges were organized once or twice a year both in Ethiopia and outside so that new ABCD communities could learn from established communities, and NGO staff could learn how to apply an ABCD approach in different contexts.

Evaluation:

Ongoing reflection, learning and evaluation has been a critical component of the research project that informed its evolution. The Coady Institute staff in this partnership were initially cautious about spending too much time in communities for fear of distorting the process. But in 2008, they jointly designed and participated in a more systematic approach to learning with a formal evaluation, involving 400 community members, government officials and NGO staff. The evaluation employed a mixed-method design that included many of the same tools used for planning in 2003, including the MSC technique. This allowed NGO staff and community members to track changes in their assets over time (Peters, Gonsamo and Molla, 2011).

After much debate about how to formally evaluate an ABCD approach, a mixed-method evaluation design was proposed to accommodate the different methodological preferences and information needs, including minimum baseline information. Triangulating different methods, and involving different team members helped to offset bias, counteract extractive methods with participatory processes, and reinforce the learning and affirming aspects of the evaluation so that it did not become too disruptive an intervention.

A team of representatives from Oxfam and participating NGOs carried out a similar set of evaluation activities for three days in seven communities. They used the MSC technique to facilitate an open-ended but systematic discussion that allowed people to evaluate the



Photo : Vegetable producers map income and expenditures using a community economic analysis method called the « Leaky Bucket », Abine, Ethiopia

changes in their communities. They then used qualitative and quantitative participatory tools to elaborate and assess some of these changes in more detail. The diversity of tools used in this evaluation was intended to capture evolutionary (and often unexpected) changes, as well as the predicted change (Davies, 1998). Because many of these evaluation tools were similar to those used in

the initial asset mapping and mobilizing phase, community members could not only see the changes that had occurred since the

baseline, they could also begin to take ownership of gathering the data for routine self-evaluation purposes.

Following this evaluation, Coady, Oxfam and the main donor contributed to a reflection paper on the strengths and limitations of the methodology. They concluded that while the methodology was able to capture tangible and intangible results, as well as predicted and unpredicted changes, it needed some refinement for the next formal evaluation activities scheduled for 2011 and 2013. Refinements included: integrating more participatory tools to generate quantitative data; including more interviews with NGO staff to see how they had internalized the approach; and integrating the perspectives of an external evaluator to lend an independent perspective.

Given the open-ended nature of the partnership and the ongoing informal evaluation activities that revealed many of the successes and challenges before the actual formal evaluation took place, there were few surprises. However, there was one thing that stood out. The theory of change had not identified whether or when injections of small funds might be necessary to facilitate linkages with supporting agencies and bring community activities to scale. The idea of “leverage funds” was therefore introduced as a measure to help communities get over the “red line,” once they had demonstrated success on their own. This required action on the part of NGOs to help them use these leverage funds and make more solid connections to micro-finance institutions.

Overall, while the results of the mixed-methods design did not satisfy everybody all the time, it allowed each stakeholder to take what they wanted from it. For example, for Oxfam Canada’s management, the key insight was that several innovations had

occurred at the community level and this would influence future programming in Ethiopia and elsewhere:

- **product innovation** or the creation of new or improved goods and services. For example, the ways that local NGO partners adapted their programs to build on indigenous resource-sharing practices at the community level, and how one NGO introduced an open funding mechanism for innovative community-defined initiatives that fell outside of their organizational mandate.
- **process innovation** or new ways of producing products. For example, in how the project focused on the idea of rights and entitlements as assets. This was an innovative way of putting a rights-based agenda into practice, when they had earlier been concerned it might be neglected.
- **interface innovation** or new ways for different actors to collaborate. For example, how the ABCD approach introduced new types of relationships between communities and NGOs, and between communities and local government that placed outside agencies in an increasingly responsive rather than directive role.

For the **donor**, two things stood out.

First, the initial expectation of community groups' interest in collaborating with applied research institutions for the development of technological innovation proved unrealistic. The direction of the next phase of the partnership therefore changed to the innovation needed to forge market linkages.

Second, the donor noted the importance of investing incrementally at the pace of community change and only providing support when it would not undermine community ownership. Related to this was the evidence of the ability of ABCD groups to save and channel these funds into several new community activities; it was this momentum that needed their support -- but not too much!

For the **Coady Institute**, results at the community level had confirmed the trends of the mid-term. However, it was the extent of diversification of income and livelihood streams that had taken place that was most surprising and exciting. This would encourage an expanded view of the dynamic of the local economy and ways in which different community members spread risk.

For **local partners**, the evaluation confirmed their experience of ABCD contributing to intangible "softer" changes in organizational capacity and confidence at the community

and household level, in particular the self-reported increase confidence of women evident in their increased participation. This confidence was captured during the MSC exercise, where women and men described the increased presence of women leaders among ABCD groups, the changing role of women within the household as well as the tangible gains they experienced through their action plans (e.g. women-run businesses).

A question that continues to challenge us is whether the quality of this action research could be improved with more resources, or with more strategic data gathering. Our “theory of change” inevitably becomes more complex over time, as do the challenges of demonstrating impact, interactive effects, and attribution. Quantitative measures such as change in “income levels” for example are loaded with assumptions about the appropriate development pathway for well-being and security, yet it continues to be a powerful indicator among several stakeholders. Adequately capturing the complexity of change and providing the evidence needed for decisions to be made without inordinate disruption of the process itself is a tricky balance, as discussed later.

This evaluation exercise was repeated in 2011 and 2013 with an internal multi-stakeholder team including staff from Oxfam Canada, Coady Institute, and local NGOs and an external evaluator, who conducted her own separate analysis of the learning and changes since 2003 (Mathie and Peters, 2013, forthcoming).



Photo : Vegetable producers debate over the most significant changes that have occurred in their community, Abine, Ethiopia

Research Excellence in this Project

In the context of action research, research excellence is fundamentally about relevance for decision-makers who are making decisions about the next course of action. Given that differential power skews the decision-making, it is particularly important to use research strategies that build that capacity for effective decision-making by all.

For research to be relevant to decision-making, it has to be of the appropriate quality for the decisions to be made by the decision-makers involved. It must also be timely, and it must involve the capacity building of those most impacted by the decisions of all.

Typically this means a mixed methods design, in which considerations of plausibility/accuracy, credibility/validity, as well as cost, are taken into consideration given the nature of the decisions and the methodological preferences of decision-makers (Habicht et al., 1999).

This research project exemplified three criteria that were included in the 2013 Canadian Learning Forum framework for excellence in community-based and involved research.

1. The quality of the research design

The quality of the research design in this project is reflected in how tools were developed according to emerging needs and how these tools were used and owned by the community. In order to be a truly collaborative process, a mixed-method design that took into account different stakeholder decision-making needs was considered a priority in this context. However, this is easier said than done, especially given resource constraints and the possible opportunity costs of methods that have high resource demands. Ideally the action research process, as an opportunity for learning, analysing and deliberating is part of the ABCD process, not separate from it.

While the Coady Institute and Oxfam Canada took the lead on designing these research processes from the outset, it was important that these processes were taken over by local NGO staff and ultimately, by community members themselves. It took some time for local NGOs to realize that community members do, in fact, have the capacity to monitor their own progress formally and informally using simple methods, and it was to everyone's delight to see this occurring without formal facilitation, particularly in the last two years. It was also interesting to hear reflections from local NGOs about participating in the evaluation activities, particularly around the realization that it does not have to include an outside expert with "technical expertise." In other cases, however, it still took some facilitation from local NGOs, but in a coordinating capacity rather than a direct role.

2. Timeliness to the needs of the community or other stakeholders

The idea of 'timeliness' of research and action has been a constant tension among all partners, but particularly local NGO staff. On the one hand, they are dedicated to participatory research processes and they appreciate evolutionary change; but they are also accountable to donors that expect to see certain actions at specific times.

In this project, we had one very patient, like-minded donor that allowed iterative adaptations to the research and action based on the ebb and flow of community and NGO experiences as the participants integrated an asset-based approach into their other program areas. However, other donors sometimes applied pressure to spend money quickly, which forced them to act at an unnatural pace in ways that were not always informed by the action research. These donors were also uncomfortable with the unpredictability of the research, and the bureaucratic red tape that they required to change course sometimes hampered making responsive changes based on the research processes. Funding this kind of research has required creativity, flexibility, patience and compromises, and is an equally interesting part of the research.

All partners, particularly Coady Institute, have also spent considerable time thinking about how to produce research outputs in a timely way that could feed into their own decision-making *and* satisfy the diverse information needs of a range of stakeholders, including curriculum, popular education tools, qualitative and quantitative reports, promotional materials, etc.).

For local partners working on the ground, it was generally the *process* of informal and formal evaluation that made the most difference. Once the validation workshop was completed, they generally did not take much interest in the report. However, it was the report that made the most difference to donors and senior managers.

'Timeliness', in this case, was a relative term, with those furthest from the day-to-day operations, seeming to be more willing to take risks and move more quickly than those on the ground. Their relatively removed, but more-powerful position helped foster new and innovative ideas, but occasionally, it also led to misinformed courses of action.

In terms of research outputs, partners experienced different levels of satisfaction with *how the research was presented*. Initially, stakeholders had a hard time agreeing on how to package their learning in a way that was useful for everyone and therefore, producing the outputs often took too long. Over time, however, as staff turnover decreased, it required much less time to produce useful and timely research outputs. Timeliness, we have realized, is something you learn over time.

Throughout these challenges, the primary donor partner was flexible and patient. It put un-earmarked money aside to invest in additional research and action activities that could not be predicted at the outset. This flexible funding, alongside on-going informal and formal monitoring and evaluation, has generally allowed for timely and responsive action among stakeholders.

3. The research process allows both researchers and participants in the research to strengthen their knowledge and other capacities

This criterion of research excellence was important for two reasons.

First, as mentioned, mutual capacity-strengthening and building on the knowledge and expertise of community members, NGOs and donors, were inherent principles of this partnership.

Second, in the past, some participating NGOs had partnered with applied research institutions that were dominated by scientific experts, rigid baselines, extractive questionnaires, and control groups, and this experience soured their belief in the research process. This research did not, in their view, lead to the creation of new knowledge or capacities for partners or communities.

The current research process, therefore, needed to be designed to build the skills and knowledge of participants. One mechanism for this was providing informal and formal “time-outs” for development practitioners to think analytically and critically about their own practice, knowing that the risk-tolerant donor was as keen to learn about failures as much as mistakes. NGO staff appreciated these deliberate and structured conversations with community members so that they could improve their own practice and be more accountable “downwards” as opposed to only “upwards” to their donors.

Community members also demonstrated an increase in their power and voice over time as a result of having the space and feeling valued for the knowledge they contributed. Over time, they learned to be more forthcoming with the NGO partners versus just guessing what NGOs wanted to hear, how to track their own progress, and how to move forward as a household and as a group. These systematic “time-outs” generated learning and knowledge and ended in key decision-making moments.

The subsequent actions of participants proved the value of these deliberate, decision-making moments. For example, community groups explained that while they understood agricultural production and productivity very well, they were not accustomed to thinking about markets and were often exploited by brokers and investors, and received reduced profits.



Photo : Aloe soap producers discuss the most significant changes that have occurred in their community, Yabello, Ethiopia

In response, the Coady Institute staff researched and designed tools that producers could use to see how to increase their share in the value chain. Rather than relying on outside consultants, the NGO staff and community members were subsequently trained on how to facilitate “community-led value chain analysis” that has ultimately resulted in farmers seeing opportunities for a greater share in the value chain. As a result, in collaboration with NGOs farmers have begun to explore how to make transactions more effectively with market actors in the chain, and have also formed cooperatives to sell and buy in bulk, accessed micro-credit to own more of the production process, and have increased their incomes. As this and other examples prove, research and the action are intertwined and both build the capacity of stakeholders.

Additional Research Criteria that the project exemplified

The research project also exemplified four additional criteria of research excellence that were not included in the Learning Forum's provisional framework.

Upon reflection, we find that research excellence, in this case, was about **putting in place formal systems to generate learning and make decisions that will complement the informal, unpredictable and intuitive decision-making that takes place all the time**. However, the on-going process of testing, debating, arguing, accepting failure and adapting for success is a process that is rarely acknowledged as an integral part of healthy development and research activity.

In order for people to feel comfortable arguing and debating, however, there must also be a **conscious effort to build and maintain healthy and transparent relationships**. While it is more of an 'x factor' that you cannot put your finger on, it underlies research excellence. We have been fortunate because for the most part, the partners are all like-minded and have complementary interests:

- community groups were tired of being 'beneficiaries' of projects and wanted to be more active participants in understanding and driving development activity;
- NGOs wanted more time to reflect on why they were doing what they were doing and learn about practical research practices that were not extractive or intrusive;
- the Coady Institute wanted to see if an asset-based approach, building on existing organizational capacity and local assets actually makes a difference and how to measure this difference in the context of multiple stakeholders with different needs and interests; and
- the Comart Foundation wanted to participate actively in a process that it perceived reflected its "hand up not hand out" philosophy, and wanted to learn along with other partners about how that worked in practice.

There was an alignment of interests here. From the outset, this partnership was about a mutual exchange of knowledge serving the interests of each partner.

The **timeframe of this partnership** is key factor underlying the success of our research. It takes time:

- to institutionalize learning and research processes so that it becomes an expected part of a partnership.
- to understand what kind of research product or process is most useful for each partner.

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- for senior managers to see the value of allowing one or two of their staff to take two weeks to think and reflect without much financial compensation.
 - for local staff and community members to get to know you and to see you not as a donor, but as a genuine research partner, and that research is not an activity done “to you” but “with you” with mutual benefits.

A final consideration that has not been mentioned in the research excellence criteria has to do with the **risk-taking approach of donors**. Because it was never locked into a particular course, the donor of this initiative encouraged the “ducking and weaving” required by new discovery or changes in the local context. This is in contrast to the more risk-averse results-based-accountability culture that permeates development assistance and can stifle innovation.

Epilogue

The Learning Forum in Antigonish validated and expanded our understanding of research excellence, particularly in the areas of rigor and participation. Following the forum, we felt affirmed that collaborative, community-engaged research for evaluation purposes is a legitimate form of research.

In retrospect, we wish that we had emphasized the bridge between community-engaged research and evaluation more clearly, and had a richer discussion on this. There will always be tensions about the rigor of participatory methods and using an internal team for evaluations, however criteria for rigor are influenced by the purpose and audience for the research. In this case, the purpose was to build the knowledge and capacity of stakeholders, to introduce methods for community members to ultimately take over the data-gathering process themselves, and to inform decisions about the course of the project going forward.

Adding a fourth criteria, “learning and capacity-building”, to the definition of research excellence during the forum, provided recognition that while the *creation of new knowledge* is one research output, the *process by which the knowledge is created* is just as important if community engagement and usefulness for decision-making among multiple stakeholders are also goals. One did not negate the other in our case.

Standards of rigor for participatory and social constructivist research paradigms are different from more conventional research paradigms, and we found it thought-provoking to juxtapose our research with that of Kendra Siekmans: *Effectiveness of post-campaign door-to-door hang-up and communication interventions to increase LLIN utilization in Togo: a cluster randomized control trial*. This study prioritized scientific rigor and used

external investigators as it was perceived to be more credible and met international standards. Their research produced more quantitative and technical results and had significant influence at the policy level, but Siekmans questioned its relevance at the local level. Our candid discussions on the strengths and limitations of both approaches were helpful for thinking through the value of different types of engagement for different types of research.

Going forward, we feel confident that our research *process* generally met the objectives of each stakeholder, but there are still some challenges about the *packaging*. As Michael Edwards pointed out, researchers need to think creatively about new ways of communicating their work, and this is one thing we will take forward.

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Endnotes

ⁱ In other reports and publications we have referred to this activity as monitoring and evaluation. The fact that we were testing an iterative process that was open-ended in nature gives the activity stronger association with the idea of “action research,” in our view, though the overlap between M and E and action research could be the topic of another paper.