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Empowerment, mobilisation and initiation of a community driven project: women and the Marula.

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Abstract

Bulilimamangwe is one of the poorest and most marginalised areas of Zimbabwe. In 2001 a community driven project was started under the Kellogg funded Integrated Rural Development Programme, to utilise the indigenous Marula trees found in the area. From the onset project members were mostly women. This paper documents the early years of the project. Achievements are given, problems faced examined and possible solutions put forward. Challenges, opportunities and conflicts are discussed in the hope that these may be of interest in the study of future projects utilising natural resources in poor communities.

Keywords: *Empowerment; women; natural resource; rural livelihoods; development; Marula*

Introduction

Africa is full of so-called 'development projects' purporting to be catering for community needs. While empowerment is very much the word and concept of the moment often it is more of a lip service to the people than an actuality. The Kellogg funded Integrated Rural Development Project (I.R.D.P.) in Southern Africa, between 2000 and 2003, tried to take the ideas of empowerment and community mobilization into the field and to assist the local people in formulating their own directions for development of their communities.

According to the Narayan 2002, empowerment is 'the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable, institutions that affect their lives'. Andersen in Ostergaard 1992 discusses empowerment as a policy approach to women in development, which, 'focuses on increasing women's control over the choices in their lives'. Empowerment 'seeks to increase their self-reliance and self-confidence so they will become more active players in society' (Ibid).

The overall objective of the I.R.D.P. was to reduce poverty where poverty was seen from a broad multi-dimensional perspective, encompassing inadequate food, poor health, and lack of access to knowledge and skills. In order to attempt to combat poverty the I.R.D.P. had four core objectives

- Increasing civic participation

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- Developing human capacity
- Increasing economic opportunities
- Enhancing health and well being.

All project activities were expected to achieve in some way all or most of these objectives. However the nature of such projects is long term and is not always clear sailing. The establishment and early years of the Marula Project in the Bulilimamangwe area of Zimbabwe illustrates some of the strengths that can be built on, and weaknesses that have to be overcome, in order to achieve a viable, self-sustaining project in many poor and marginalized rural areas. Some of these strategies may be applied elsewhere and obstacles and hurdles learnt from, to assist in the smooth establishment of community driven projects in similar environments.

Background to the area

Location of I.R.D.P. Wards involved in the Marula Project

Bulilimamangwe Area is situated in the South-West of Zimbabwe along the border with Botswana. What was one District, is now in fact three Districts, those of Mangwe, Plumtree and Bulilima.



The population of the District is around 180 000 (C.S.O. 2002). It is a highly rural district with most of the population living in villages, often with dispersed or scattered homesteads. Outside Plumtree- the only urban settlement within the district- economic activities are mainly confined to agriculture and wildlife utilisation with very minor service provision. Agriculturally most of the District falls into Natural region IV of Zimbabwe, a region most suitable for semi-extensive farming as it experiences annual rain-

fall totals of between 450 and 650 mm and is subject to periodic seasonal droughts. Rainfall is too low and uncertain for any significant cash cropping and traditionally most of the population rely on livestock production and the growing of a few drought resistant crops. Many parts of Africa have similar marginal environments.

While unemployment figures are difficult to gauge in an area of this nature, the 1992 Census (C.S.O. 1993) puts unemployment at around 43% of the economically active. The Bulilimangwe Rural District Council (R.D.C. 1999) believes that real levels have since risen, due in part to the annual release of school leavers onto the job market. There are high levels of out-migration to urban centres in Zimbabwe and to neighbouring countries of South Africa and Botswana. Greatest numbers of emigrants come from the male, economically active age groups, resulting in a population skewed strongly in favour of females.

The establishment of the Marula project

It is against this background that the Integrated Rural Development Project (I.R.D.P.) was established in the area in 2001. The programme targeted eight of the thirty five wards in the District, choosing wards representative of the different land ownership patterns found in the area. After meetings with the community in the eight wards it was decided to set up an Implementation Committee, composed of two community facilitators per ward and two rotating traditional leaders. The committee met monthly and produced a quarterly implementation plan. A Monitoring and Evaluation Committee was also set up and were engaged in ongoing monitoring of programme activities and field visits to see how initiatives were operating on the ground. The structure of the committees allowed for full involvement of the community and for accountability to the community, an element often lacking in development projects.

The Marula project was started in 2002 by women in the I.R.D.P. wards. It was the result of consultation with the community who identified the Marula as an abundant natural resource found within most of the wards and with the potential to be harvested to supplement rural livelihoods and to assist in economic growth. In a marginal agricultural area such as Bulilimangwe, utilisation of indigenous biotic resources can supplement income from herding and be integrated into the production activities of the subsistence smallholder.

Traditionally the Marula has many uses. Most women are aware of a variety of uses for the tree and its products, ranging from utilisation of the fruits for direct consumption and alcohol, to the use of the kernels for oil or crushed and added to vegetables to provide extra nutritional value to a basic diet, to medicinal uses and even for use as a termite poison (group verbal reports, Marula workshop 2003). Similar uses are documented throughout Southern Africa (Marula Organisation, S.A. 2003). The project sought to build on the traditional significance of the Marula in order to make it a vehicle for economic empowerment. The majority of traditional uses of the tree involved use by women, so the project was ideal to provide a focus for the involvement and betterment of the lives of the most disadvantaged rural women and was founded on an existing knowledge base.

Economic benefits to the community can only be sustainable if women can control and direct the development of the project and be at the forefront of engineering its growth. In order that women were directly involved ten women went on a 'look and

learn' tour to a women's Marula project in the Tswapong hills of neighbouring Botswana. Here they were able to observe and interact with women who were engaged in a similar project to theirs and to share experiences. The 'look and learn' concept has been widely used and has been successful in engendering interaction by and between ordinary project members and in learning through a less theoretical approach, than that of traditional instruction.

Participants at a workshop held in early 2003 reflected the involvement of women in the project. Representatives from all wards and some stakeholders attended. Of the twenty five participants twenty two were female. Participants had further roles in the community including home-based careers, adult literacy tutors, pre-school teachers, church leaders, a nutrition garden chairperson as well as mothers and grandmothers with their critical roles of caring for families and traditionally educating future generations. Recognition of the multiple roles of participants is important in understanding the scope of projects of this kind and their ability to infiltrate all aspects of community life.

Project early development and progress

For the first two years during which the project was operational, activities were confined to the extraction of Marula nuts, which were collected by I.R.D.P. vehicle from ward collection points monthly during the collection period (July to October) and taken to sell to a more established women's project in Botswana (Kgetsi ya Tsie). In Botswana the oil was extracted from the nut and sold on. The I.R.D.P. acted as a facilitator in setting up the project. It brought people together from different communities within the District and helped provide a forum for ideas that could be used to reduce poverty within the community. The I.R.D.P. provided the communities with a grant through the Kellogg Foundation. This grant took the form of a pseudo loan scheme. Money from the loan was used to buy Marula nuts from the women involved in cracking. After selling the nuts the money was returned back into the fund. Further profits were used within the communities for identified community projects. This fund helped in bridging the time and distance gap between the producers and the market. However it did effectively distance producers from market through shielding them from direct market concerns. However, the I.R.D.P. involvement enabled the community to access funds to initiate the project in a situation where loans would not be forthcoming from formal money lending institutions.

Total production in the first two years of the project was quite similar, however this similarity is deceptive as various restraints limited operations during 2003.

Table 1. Monthly and yearly total of nuts collected

Month	2002 (kgs)	2003 (kgs)
July	82	199
August	89	178
September	102	28
October	121	No collection
Total	394	395

Source: compiled from I.R.D.P. Bulilimangwe reports and collection records 2002 and 2003

Differences in quantities gathered in particular months from year to year can be attributed to differences in rainfall patterns and in the ability to travel to purchase nuts. Fuel was scarce and difficult to procure in Zimbabwe in 2003, therefore the purchasing team was limited in its ability to visit sites. Only the five most productive wards were visited in 2003 because of transport restraints and it is likely that production might have been significantly higher if more groups could have been reached and more frequent visits made. Collections were only made from the least productive of the five wards in August and only the most productive ward was collected from in September.

Masendu can be seen to be by far the most productive ward. This reflects both the abundance of the resource and the poverty of the community, which provides a motivation towards any income generation available. Masendu is the poorest of the eight wards in terms of economic base and infrastructure.

Table 2. Marula production per ward 2003

Ward	kgs
Masendu	307
Huwana	40
Natane	13
Dombolefu	25
Izimnyama communal	6.5
Total	391.5*

Source: compiled from I.R.D.P. Bulilimamangwe records 2003

- Disparity from figure in Table 1. due to slight differences in records

Commitment to the project is reflected in both numbers of women involved and in their constant production over the three months of the season. Only indications could be arrived at for the 2003 season as inconsistent ability to collect nuts from villages may have lowered some women's returns and been a deterrent to production.

A total of 198 women were directly involved in Marula kernel production in 2003. While some of these women produced very low totals they were still actively involved in the project and had the potential to increase production and involvement as the project developed. Masendu ward had the core of most committed women and all 8% who produced kernels each month came from this ward.

Most women achieved fairly low production levels, the largest number producing between 1 and 1.9 kgs during the 2003 season. Mean production was 2.07 kgs. However a few women achieved much higher totals, one reaching a total of over 14 kgs for the season. Production totals may be misleading as some women work alone, while others work with other members of their family. However, low production levels are an ongoing concern and may be attributed to the laborious task of cracking nuts by hand to extract the kernels.

The project survived the first two years with a significant number of women involved. This was an achievement given the difficulties involved in extracting the kernels and in operating during abnormal conditions of fuel shortage and economic stress during the 2003 season. In terms of I.R.D.P. objectives, although the project has only

brought very low financial returns to the women producers, it has opened a door that can lead to further economic opportunity. It has allowed some of the women involved to interact with other women engaged in similar activities beyond Zimbabwe's borders, thus building Regional cooperation at grassroots levels. This has served to build upon the local women's knowledge base and to break away from a situation where academic 'experts' from outside the community decide upon the direction of the project. Sharing of information by women in similar environments in adjoining countries is important in building a knowledge base that is rooted in indigenous knowledge and hands-on experience, rather than in theory. Project members participated directly, in line with the I.R.D.P. objective of increasing civic participation. Marula groups developed capacities of organisation and shared existing skills of kernel extraction and Marula use. In the short term the project provided a small amount of financial return that could be used to enhance family or individual well-being. In the long term the project showed the potential to provide members with a more significant income and involvement.

Problems, limitations and challenges for the future

Most women involved in the project have only been able to produce very low totals of nut kernels. One of the main reasons for this lies in the labour involved in cracking the Marula nuts. This was the greatest concern of women attending the 2004 workshop. Most Marula projects elsewhere in Southern Africa have machines to help extract the kernels from the nut. Monetary returns from production were very low. The low returns could mostly be attributed to the primary production nature of the project to date and the cost of transporting the raw material across the border to sell to the Marula project in Botswana where they realise the greater profit when they extract the oil.

Thus while women have been directly involved in the project, limitations were faced due to reliance on a relatively outside agency to collect nuts and prices being controlled by buyers in Botswana. Women in the project therefore remained effectively marginalised in levels of income received and control over prices and nut collection.

Membership of the project has been mostly elderly women. This is partly because older women have more time to crack nuts. The women may also be assisted by children and youth (Ngwenya and Tshuma 2002). While these women have a wealth of experience and traditional skills, they lack the skills of business management needed for the project to expand.

Table 3. Project members unable to write name by ward, 2003

Ward	% unable to sign
Masendu	35.4
Huwana	53.3
Natane	41.6
Dombolefu	23.5
Overall	37.6

Source: derived from I.R.D.P. Bulilimangwe Marula collection records 2003

Of the top ten producers 42.1% cannot sign their name

Many active members of the project are illiterate. Literacy levels in Bulilimamangwe as a whole are low, with an illiteracy rate of around 25% (Bulilimamangwe Rural District Council 1999). The Zimbabwe Government Census of 1992 records a literacy rate of 72.06% of females over the age of fifteen. There is a steep decline in literacy as one reaches the older generations and the 1992 census shows 76% of the population of over sixty-five as illiterate. Records of Marula kernel buying where women are asked to sign their names on receipt of payment show the following picture:

The problems faced in 2003, the second year of the project, served to highlight the problems of dependence of marketing through another project outside the area. Women involved in the project were vulnerable to factors operating beyond their area and problems, such as that of transport, were accentuated by difficulties prevailing nationally. In addition the collecting and marketing were effectively driven, in all senses, from the I.R.D.P. district office rather than from within the project itself.

Opportunities and possible solutions to some problems

To eliminate or lessen vulnerability and to more greatly empower women to drive their own project there is a need to

- **Raise production and add value locally**

Most similar projects in Southern Africa have machines to help extract the kernel from the nut, but to import the technology from neighbouring countries is expensive. The local Intermediate Technology Development Group (I.T.D.G.) have been working to develop a decortication machine to assist with the removal of the oil bearing kernels from the nut. The use of such a machine will enable women to raise production levels and improve returns. To add value locally an oil pressing machine was also designed to use within the rural environment. Such simple technology could be operated by all but the most elderly. The use of this basic machinery would allow oil to be extracted within the area for sale or marketing within other products like soaps. Already there are other projects in Zimbabwe that are producing soaps utilising natural plant and tree oils and these have the potential to be marketed locally and outside the country. Initially such machines may be set up in a central point within Masendu, the most productive ward.

- **To build upon the knowledge base existing within the community**

This may be harnessed in order to expand the project into marketing other products derived from the Marula. The most obvious product to market is jam made from the marula fruit : this has already been produced by other projects within Zimbabwe (Safire) and other countries within the Region. More imaginative products may stem from more traditional uses and their production could go some way towards ensuring that women retain control not only of the resource, but also of their indigenous knowledge. There could also be expansion into other wild tree products such as the *Jatropha*, which produces seeds in the months preceding the Marula. Similar equipment is needed for oil extraction and it may be possible to combine the production of the two species. *Jatropha* oil has been used for making soap in some areas of Zimbabwe and for oil for leather making.

- **Train and raise skills of members of the project**

Despite lack of formal literacy women have developed alternate skills. There is a

high ability to recall and store information mentally. Interaction between members through face-to-face contact is of prime importance. These skills may be perceived as strengths filling the place of more formal written literacy. Youth from the area may be employed by the project to assist in marketing and record keeping. This will keep the project in the hands of those indigenous to the area.

- Establish direct markets rather than use 'middle' agents

This challenge will follow the introduction of basic oil pressing machines. Marketing through 'fair trade' links may enable maximum profit to be retained.

- Sourcing funding from within the community

Funding for some initiatives could come from members of the community who are at present outside the country. There is already evidence that these absent community members are funding initiatives in their home wards and have set up development associations where they decide on projects to initiate (Dube 2003). This would serve to keep control and direction of the project within the hands of those rooted in the area.

- Reduce the role of the I.R.D.P. district office and devolve power/decision making to the project itself

In 2004 management of the Livestock, Marula and Health projects were placed under the newly established Tjinyunyi Babili Community Trust. The Trust was established to operate as a community development agency linked to partners and organisations such as Kellogg. Through the Trust structure the project aimed to gradually move away from its dependence on Donors and operate in a more autonomous fashion. It is still too early to see how effectively this has been able to take place.

Possible conflicts

Conflicts inevitably emerge when trying to establish a project of this nature. Some conflicts have already been identified by the women themselves (discussion with women and reports from groups, 2003 Plumtree Marula workshop). The Marula is traditionally a communal resource and while women may harvest from trees immediately adjacent to their homesteads, some trees are harvested or used by the whole community, and even those in a member's field are not seen as a private resource. Traditional tree tenure can be complex and seemingly contradictory, with verbal information given by women not always tallying. This situation is mirrored elsewhere in Southern Africa and has at times been confused by colonial ideas of ownership that have been superimposed on the traditional (Krieke, 2003)

The season for harvesting Marula nuts falls in the Zimbabwean dry season when traditionally livestock are allowed to roam. Fodder at this time is scarce and animals tend to congregate around Marula trees and feast on the fruit. This puts them in direct competition with the women who wish to harvest the nuts.

Further conflict has been experienced between women engaged in the project and men who wish to cut down the non fruit bearing trees to use for timber. In a strongly male dominated society women have trouble in getting the men to listen.

Solutions may lie in increased involvement of the whole community in the project. Awareness of the value of the Marula will increase when it is seen to generate signifi-

cant monetary gains. Support of the traditional leadership structure is essential and their involvement in the I.R.D.P. structure and in the newly established Trust has helped.

Conclusion

The initial years of this Marula project illustrate some of the strengths and weaknesses of starting off a project of this nature. Genuine empowerment of those involved is a complex matter involving the understanding of dynamics within the community as well as the logistics of the physical launching of the project. The early years of this project have served to allow women involved to discover their own strengths and weaknesses and to see their own way forward. This is necessary to avoid the project being a short term wonder and to allow it to build itself. The transfer of the project from the more donor driven I.R.D.P. to a newly established community trust has meant greater control by the project members themselves. The project has made the transition fairly smoothly. However, it's future may ultimately depend on the ability of younger, more educated individuals from within the group to spearhead effective marketing and linkages. Links to other similar projects within the Southern African region might assist in the sourcing of viable marketing and trade opportunities.

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