

ABCD IN WOYIN-WUHA

Investing group profits in future generations



In northwestern Ethiopia, a dynamic process is underway which is not only creating improved livelihood opportunities for rural citizens, but also changing the attitudes and priorities of an entire community.

In the village of Woyin-Wuha, a number of residents created an ABCD group aimed at mobilizing available community resources in order to improve its overall well-being.

In the very first year of its existence, the group was able to successfully combine a range of income-generating activities with sustained social outreach efforts targeting local children affected by HIV and food insecurity.

Beginnings of the ABCD Process

Woyin-Wuha is a *kebele* (village) with just over 1,000 residents in the East Gojjam Zone of Ethiopia's Amhara Region. A high-altitude and densely populated area (averaging ~150 persons per km²), East Gojjam has a long history of struggle with food shortages. Yet it was only in 2009 that Agri-Service Ethiopia (ASE), an NGO with a four-decade record of helping improve the livelihoods of the country's rural farmers, started addressing the chronic food insecurity facing this area through community-level activities aimed at enhancing capacity for sustainable agriculture. In June 2010, ASE conducted a three-tier ABCD training workshop in Woyin-Wuha,

which involved appreciative interviewing and reflection on past successes, asset mapping, and community economic analysis using a simple "Leaky Bucket" diagram showing how money flows into the local economy and either stays or leaks out. These activities were intended to serve multiple purposes, such as:

- raising the community's awareness of the full spectrum of resources it has at its disposal;
- helping community members understand how their local economy currently functions and how its efficiency can be improved;
- promoting a community-wide recognition of the role that its residents themselves have played in its past developments.

At the heart of this process was the intention to shift the community's focus from needs and problems to assets and opportunities as a way to stimulate activities that it could undertake using primarily its own resources and expertise. In turn, these activities would inform the program decisions of ASE so that it could invest in and complement community-owned initiatives while increasing its own relevance and the sustainability of its programs. In November 2010, the Woyin-Wuha ABCD group came into being, consisting of 13 men and 10 women.

Resulting Initiatives

Within the first year of its existence, the ABCD group in Woyin-Wuha has already carried out a number of impressive activities. A 400-metre-long stretch of a nearby gully has been treated with check dams and the planting of protective vegetation to prevent further degradation of the village's farmland. Income-generating activities have also begun, such as potato field irrigation, production of *gabis* (traditional woven shawls) for sale, and research into how to improve wheat crops. In addition, the group members have been sponsored to undergo training in carpentry and beekeeping offered by a local NGO.

The most remarkable initiative of the Woyin-Wuha ABCD group has been to use some of the income from its other activities to support local children orphaned by AIDS.

The ABCD group has not only uplifted the self-esteem of local orphans, but also changed stigmatizing community attitudes towards these children.

Yet arguably the most remarkable initiative started by the Woyin-Wuha ABCD group has consisted in using some of the income generated by its other activities to support local children affected by HIV/AIDS and food insecurity. In their discussions of the changes they wanted to bring about, the group members raised deep concerns over the precarious existence of the community's children who had lost one or both parents to AIDS-related illnesses and were left with no other option but to sell their labour to well-off farmers. These discussions culminated in designing a process aimed to identify the community's orphans living in circumstances that hampered their continued development and to find ways of improving their prospects for the future. The orphans' relatives as well as local school and government officials were consulted about how to best address the issue. Eventually, it was decided that ten of the community's children deemed the most vulnerable would be sent to a nearby school with their tuition and other study-related expenses to be covered by the ABCD group.

Changing Attitudes

Supporting local orphans went far beyond the provision of pencils and exercise notebooks. Before the ABCD group started working with these children, they had typically found themselves avoided or rejected by their relatives and neighbours who had perceived them to be associated with the deadly disease. Some of their fellow community members even regarded these children as cursed. Through personal engagement and by demonstrating the potential they saw in these children, the group members have not only acknowledged the dignity of local orphans and uplifted their self-esteem, but also changed the stigmatizing attitudes towards these orphans and HIV-infected people in general that were prevalent in the community before.

Today, these same children play an integral role in the activities of the Woyin-Wuha ABCD group and their various contributions to its work are widely appreciated throughout the community. Their reintegration into the social matrix of the village has helped forge a new community tradition of extending support to those who were previously often left alone to fend for themselves.

Addressing the Major Challenge

The integration of orphans into the local school community is the main challenge facing the Woyin-Wuha ABCD group. While the group has largely succeeded in reversing negative attitudes towards orphans among the village's adult population, they still face discrimination from other children in the classroom. To address this issue, the group initiated a meeting with local government and school officials. The meeting has led to the launch of an HIV/AIDS sensitization campaign for local school students and the inception of a school-administered award aimed to foster respectful and supportive relationships among students.

Moving Forward

Today, the ABCD group in Woyin-Wuha continues to support local orphans in a number of ways, including providing them with new school uniforms. The group has also planned three new initiatives aimed to assist area residents facing food insecurity:

- the establishment of a community grain bank to make food supplies available at the crucial times;
- further gully reclamation work to prevent farmland decreases;
- the development of composting systems to increase crop yields and reduce expenditure on artificial fertilizers.

These intentions demonstrate the group's unwavering commitment to expanding its social security program to support those community members whose resources have become so depleted that they are not always able to sustain themselves.



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