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## Retrospective community mapping: a tool for community education

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### • Introduction

When we<sup>1</sup> were conducting Community Based Planning (CBP) in Beitbridge, a southern district in Zimbabwe, there came a request through the council, from the communities, for community education. This surprised us as we had assumed that community education was interwoven with the participatory planning that we were doing. Until now I do not think we were completely wrong. Certainly the process of participatory planning is, by its very nature, educational. So the question was, why this request for education?

We were about to embark on project design with the communities, the step before the implementation of the ideas. In our view, all had been done. It was only when the councillors evaluated our earlier visits that we learnt our mistake. We had not done any community education and this was very clearly a problem.

### • The dependency problem

Although the process of CBP had been going on in every community with varying degrees of success, it was clear that this had not removed the 'chronic dependency syndrome'. Communities had gone through mapping, data gathering, problem analysis, and needs identification. From the beginning of the project there was emphasis in the councillors' workshops that communities had to understand that they should not expect any outside

assistance. In many cases communities have developed a dependency idea that someone else, not them, was responsible for ensuring the success of the community plans.

Project design, the next step after needs identification, therefore was in danger of raising community hopes and expectations. Communities would design projects thinking that the government or other agencies would fund whatever they identified as needs. This stems from experiences in the past where 'shopping lists' were submitted, resulting in District Development Plans. In forwarding the list of wants, communities never questioned where the resources would come from or who would do it. If this was done for our project it would be disastrous for the whole process.

This was not a small issue. Participation of the communities in the decision-making process was not enough for judging success of the project. For us, success would be manifest in the changes that would occur in the thinking of the communities about their capability to redefine their philosophy of development and finally determine the course and pace of that development through well designed projects. Project planning would remain hollow and mere rhetoric if everything was perceived as impossible without outside interference.

The participatory approaches used had not adequately made communities "*grow in judgement, including ability to critically examine their own beliefs and practices and make sound decisions on future courses of action*" (Srinivasan, 1992). This is because the methods seem to be limited in that they address the problems from the present to the future. For example, community mapping was too narrow as it only focused on the present situation

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<sup>1</sup> This article arises from work done by the author while working on a UNICEF supported community-based water and sanitation management programme

without enough probing into the historical development of the community.

The other problem was that there was no method which would assist people in reflecting on how their life had changed over time. They have not been able to assess limitations stemming from historical changes. This comparison of a harmonious past on one hand and the present miserable conditions of the community on the other, is vital not only for better judgement, but also for developing self-esteem and pride. This is what seemed to have been lacking in the development of the programme.

### • **Retrospective community mapping**

To resolve these problems, we came up with a participatory tool called Retrospective Community Mapping (RCM). This method seems to be a major breakthrough in community education and participation. It provides a strong basis for communities to understand and appreciate their *"problems based on fuller exploration of their causes and alternative solutions"* (Srinivasan, 1992). It is a participatory method which prepares communities not only for participation, but also for general development - a growth-oriented learning approach. It begins with the tangible (the physical historical map) and moves on to the abstract (discussion of socio-cultural and economic life). However, accuracy of time is not the issue, community experiences are more important. This is especially true of African societies where the concept of time is not cardinal in people's philosophy of life.

Thus, the objectives of RCM are to:

- Help the community revisit their own history in order to provide community cohesion, a sense of belonging and a sense of identity.
- Develop community self-esteem and pride.
- Develop critical thinking through the analysis of positive and negative aspects of the changes in their social life.
- Give a better understanding of the root causes of community problems and misery.

- Identify risky behaviours in the community or by individuals owing to the changes of life patterns and environment over time.
- Develop enthusiasm to act and build a better and sustainable future.

RCM is a method which makes people appreciate the constant motion in their life. When they reflect upon their history and understand the way things have developed to the present, they appreciate that poverty is not a static and immutable condition, and has not been there for time immemorial. *"They ... perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but as limiting - and therefore challenging"*. (Freire, 1972). There is evidence that where this method is used, communities have better plans for their future than others. In Mutetengwe Ward of Beitbridge district, for example, communities developed plans covering geographical information, economic strategy, social development and environmental issues.

In Africa, where interdependence amongst individuals of the community is not in the distant past, RCM resuscitates the more progressive idea of community cohesion. The community will realise their common background and how conditions were adverse to them as a community and not as individuals (Box 1).

RCM gives the community an opportunity to evaluate and critically reflect upon 'development'. In assessing the institutions and infrastructure that were introduced in the given time periods, the community develops independent and critical thinking. This is a prerequisite to achieving all-round development. They start to appreciate that not all that came in the name of 'development' was positive to their life and that all their traditional practices were not negative and should be destroyed in the name of modernism. In fact they begin to realise that development should improve their life and not lead to its overhaul or to a complete reversal.

**BOX 1  
RETROSPECTIVE MAPPING  
IN MALALA VILLAGE**

The retrospective map made by the Malala Village Community in Beitbridge showed the settlement pattern of the indigenous people in the 1920s, how it changed and the effect on the environment, leading to the present water and sanitation problems.

The people were concentrated at the confluence of the Mzingwane and Vembe (Limpopo) rivers. This choice of the area reveals deep analysis of land use planning. The soil in these places is rich alluvium gaining its fertility from the millenia of organic matter deposited from upstream. As three old people explained, it was the most suitable land for cropping. Shifting cultivation was the method of farming. Croplands were not stamped. They did not practise monoculture and there was no cash cropping during that time. There were a bit of bumper harvests. The catchment areas of the rivers were intact and the rivers were perennial. The rest of the hinterland which comprised marshlands, forests and grasslands, were left for wildlife and grazing. This included the drier parts, not suitable for cultivation.

This life did not continue for long, as shown by subsequent maps. One year the people were just given orders to leave the land because it had been bought. Convoys of trucks came to ferry the villagers. The old people narrated the story in graphic detail and outlined how the area was made a commercial farming area. The people were then driven into the hinterland where they live today. More people came from other parts of the province to join them and within a few years the land started to fill up. When they arrived in that area (Mtetengwe) there were only three homesteads. From the subsequent maps one could see how the communities were enmeshed by the cash economy, how the environmental problems started to unfold and with that the progressive deterioration of living conditions. They were no longer masters of their destiny.

From this passionate narration the community started to gain a deeper appreciation of its history and the origins of their present life.

They noticed that the causes of their poverty and misery were common, starting with the loss of their economic base; their fertile croplands. This developed a great sense of identity, belonging and mutual interdependence amongst members.

From a number of retrospective community mapping sessions which we did with different communities, there was a critical evaluation of a variety of institutions like schools, health institutions, communication network etc. The underlying question was, what were the pros and cons of introducing this or that institution? The school, for example, taught people to read and write and therefore made communication much easier. But it also destroyed institutions that were responsible for moral education and replaced them with nothing or, worse still, unrestricted and corrupt media. Here the example of sex education films that were shown to primary school children was cited by the people of Kombatakala Village as negative to the morality of the Venda people and their way of bringing up children.

The introduction of the health institutions were analysed in much the same way again. Although they handled some of the illnesses, they destroyed more important institutions like the system of traditional health care delivery. Detailed analysis of traditional health care institutions, pathways and referral systems were discussed in varying depths including handling of diarrhoeal diseases. For the water and sanitation programme, this was very valuable information.

• **Procedure of RCM**

Box 2 shows the procedure one should follow when doing RCM. The starting point is to have as mixed a community gathering as possible according to gender, age, status, etc. It is important that the facilitator make sure that the community is well represented.

BOX 2  
A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO RCM

**Step 1. Establish a baseline date and intervals of maps**

When the community is gathered, and the procedure outlined, let them decide on the baseline date for their mapping. The basic question at this point is, "How far back do we remember about our community?" Usually those who have lived longest in that community will determine the year to begin from. Then the community decides on the intervals of maps. From our experience, maps were easily developed for each decade with 1920 being the base year.

**Step 2. Divide the community into mapping age groups**

Each community member has to decide at which age she/he was mature enough to understand the pattern of life and the environment of the community. Relevant groups are formed for each mapping period.

**Step 3. Drawing of maps**

Each groups draws a community map for their given period. They can do this on the ground using available resources. It is important that they try by all means to show everything that can be shown on the map eg. their hunting grounds, rivers that used to flow and fish in them, wildlife, vegetation, settlement pattern, croplands, grazing etc.

**Step 4. Presentation of maps**

All groups gather and go round to each group to present their map. Question time is given during or at the end of each presentation, whatever is preferred by the community. If the maps are drawn on paper, the groups will take turns to present the maps.

**Step 5. Description of socio-economic and cultural conditions**

The community goes back into their respective groups and describe the pattern of life in their period. They discuss demographic changes and associated impacts. They recall various institutions for health, education, bringing up children, family, marriage etc. They discuss their cardinal philosophy of life and belief patterns including religion, social cohesion etc. They discuss economic activities, (hunting, tillage, industrial production etc). They also discuss access to means of production during their period such as land and finished commodities.

At times it is very difficult to separate this step from step 4 above. Often when maps are being presented people start asking questions and discussions go on. However our experience is that subjects tend to be more exhaustive if the groups have an opportunity to reflect upon the socio-economic conditions of their time.

**Step 6. Presentation of life patterns for the period**

The community goes into another plenary session where each group presents the life pattern of their period. The community describes different patterns of life for each mapping period. Other community members can ask any questions and this can lead into any course of discussion. This provides a good background for the communities to choose what themes they will want to discuss and what problems they want to focus on and resolve. This becomes an important step, because this is how people determine themselves what they want to learn and decide the content of their education.

*"We simply cannot go to the workers - urban or peasant - in the banking style, to give them knowledge or to impose upon them the model of the 'good man' contained in a programme whose content we have ourselves organised ... The starting point for organising a programme content of education ... must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people."*  
(Freire, 1972)

**Step 7. Focus group discussions**

A focus group discussion usually flows naturally from the questions raised. Themes can be chosen without control whatsoever, by the facilitator. Community members should ask questions, debate and discuss freely without fear of getting out of topic. The focus group discussions will also show the facilitator what the community is interested in. If the facilitator has other areas he/she feels have to be discussed, then open ended questions and other methods are suggested.

Specific themes can be introduced into RCM (Box 3). For example the maps can be used as a story with a gap. One can take maps of consecutive decades and ask what the community thinks could have caused change from one condition to the other. For example, what caused the drying of a stream that is shown to have been perennial in all the previous maps; or what caused deforestation?

Socio-economic changes can be analysed in a similar manner.

**BOX 3  
UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF  
FARMING**

This technique was used in Zimuto Communal Lands (Masvingo Province) during a community write up of a project proposal for environmental conservation related to small earth dams. The question was, how has agricultural production changed over the period 1920 to 1993?

There was heated discussion when traditional methods of tillage (shifting cultivation, without stamping, contour ridges, chemical fertilizers or mono-cropping) were positively presented by the elders. They cited conventional methods as root causes of erosion and other environmental problems. Extension workers vehemently resisted, arguing for conventional methods of farming. The conclusion reached by the community in the end was to have a serious study of the past methods to fight problems introduced by conventional methods of farming.

Open-ended questions that stimulate debate and thinking can also be asked. For example:

- Did sexual behaviour change at all during the period? If so, how, and which periods had different sexual behaviour from others?
- How did tasks, authority and general status for men and women change?
- What has been the role of outsiders in the past and is this changing?
- Which abandoned institutions could have positively survived alongside the educational system, health services etc.?

• **Conclusion**

What is apparent in a project that genuinely attempts to be totally community-based is the complexity of social structures and motion. Even those communities which are considered to be simple have an intricate thread woven in a way that no outsider can easily understand. The community ought to educate not only themselves but even more importantly, the outsider, especially the extension worker. The serious blunder that is always made is that the outsider comes in as a godfather with knowledge to be passed to communities. This is commonly termed community education; with specifications of objectives, content, methods, even timetables and facilitators or educators. The question is, do we really end up with an educated community?

To us, community education connotes a process of unearthing the origins of a community in order to understand its own life at a time when it managed its own affairs. What were the intricate webs of social institutions, belief systems and philosophy of life that sustained the community in its daily interactions with nature? How did this change; who controlled the changes and with what effect on the thinking of the community? Why? Who is master of the community's destiny today? Should that be the case or should they control their own change?

Retrospective (or Historical) Community Mapping is a method which probes into this. It is no doubt one of the ways communities educate themselves in 'reclaiming the commons'. It lays the basis for any other education or community 'development'. We sincerely suggest other educators use it.

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