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What stimulating and committed leadership can achieve: Nkouondja, Cameroon

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• Introduction

Nkouondja, a village in the West Province of the Republic of Cameroon, is well known in the Foubot District for its improvements in the management of its water supply system in the area. Principally, the community was convinced to pay for its water, (see Tayong and Poubom this issue). One of the secrets behind this improved management is the fact that the village has a number of strong and committed leaders, such as the Chief, the President of the Village Development Committee (VDC) and the President of the Water Management Committee (WMC). This is an important factor since if the leadership of a community is committed and receptive to change, the Participatory Action Development process is likely to proceed smoothly. However, if the local leaders are too dominant and want to pull all the strings of community life, they can also be counterproductive. In this case, the success of the PAR process in Nkouondja was made possible because the leaders are strong, rather than authoritarian, and are respected by their communities.

The village is also well-organised, with small groups of villagers which are supportive to local development. These groups exist both inside and outside the village. They often work co-operatively for activities like farming and selling of farm produce, and are ready to assist the village collectively.

As government policy, the department of Community Development (CD) gives support to community initiatives. The people of Nkouondja are beneficiaries of such policy. In this article we highlight the role which some of these leaders played in the process of developing the water supply system, and the

importance of their commitment to the process.

• The chief: a symbol of respect

The chief of Nkouondja is generally seen by all the villagers as a symbol of respect and order. His presence during any occasion in the village gives an atmosphere of peace. He was always present at the PAR village meetings, which took place at his residence, where he sat in a corner listening to all discussions. The PAR team members had the honour of sitting next to him, along with the notables and neighbourhood leaders, because of their rapport with him and the respect the team has in the village. However, his presence does not prevent villagers from speaking their minds.

The chief only offers his opinions and ideas once the PAR meeting or exercise in the village has ended. For example, after a session on the evaluation of the standpipes, which revealed that almost 80% of them were dirty he asked:

'We like the work you are doing here. The result you have about our sanitary situation and the cleanliness of the village are shameful. It is however good that you let us know about this, but what are you going to do with this type of information? We hope that you are not going to portray this type of picture of the village to outsiders'.

The slow and gentle nature of this chief can be very misleading to an outsider. The PAR team doubted his authority over the people until one incident occurred. The villagers were no longer participating fully in the supply of local materials for the construction of a new catchment that was to increase the flow in the

system to serve the increasing demand for water by the community. In his calm, gentle style, the chief requested papers to assemble all the neighbourhood leaders to discuss the issue. This was done and all these people were assembled the following day. He met with them to find out why the work was not progressing. Various reasons were mentioned. Rather than being authoritative, he showed his previous experience in problem-cause analysis, as used in one of the PAR workshops. He asked the PAR team to help the people identify the root cause of the problem. Collectively with women, who happened to be meeting at the chief's house that day, the causes and consequences were identified. The main causes were discouragement by recalcitrant members, lack of sanctions on these members, and weakness in monitoring by the neighbourhood leaders. The major consequences of this included damages to cement in storage, and the partially constructed wall in the catchment collapsing. The core solution was identified as increased commitment from neighbourhood leaders and immediate resumption of work the following day.

Picture of problem - cause analysis

Everybody was happy and determined to resume work, but the problem was how to inform the entire community that night. The neighbourhood leaders immediately accepted the responsibility of doing this and set up a system to keep track of who participated. The president of the women's group volunteered to supervise all the women and promised to remind them very early in the morning.

Feeling satisfied about the job and the result, the chief made the following closing remarks to the meeting with the research team:

'Since you have been coming here, you talked to us about the importance of involving women but we never could imagine the difference we now see. We wish that you continued to train them as much as possible. I will like to see them drive a car, like the woman I saw in Fombot town. You are now our light and we are ready to follow. It will be our pleasure to provide you with land and a wife from Nkouondja so that you become one of us.'

The chief is just one of the key persons in this village who have been very instrumental in the PAR project in Nkouondja. Let us look at a few others.

• The president of the village development committee

Mr. Isiaka oversees all the development initiatives in Nkouondja. Such a person needs to be receptive and dynamic and he possesses these qualities. For example, a student from the University of Buea reading Women Studies, consulted the PAR team to identify a community with which to research gender issues regarding water supply management and was advised to choose Nkouondja. Mr. Isiaka gave her a very warm welcome and guided her through the whole research process. As she puts it *'Mr. Isiaka seems to know so many things. I was surprised to find a man in a village with so much knowledge. He was telling me many things I did not even know, like the seasonal calendar, village map and others I cannot remember. I was really embarrassed'*.

It was due to his effort that the women eventually came fully into the management stream of Nkouondja water supply system. In the first PAR meetings in this Muslim village, the women used to peep from the outside through the window. Gradually they participated in the PAR process, through exchange visits with women from other PAR villages and through presenting the problems identified by the women to the men. During the visit of an IRC International Water and Sanitation Co-ordinator in April 1998, the women came out in full to welcome him, and to talk about what they had learned. Aminato, the dynamic president of the women's group, said in her speech that the PAR process is changing their lives. This time, both men and women were present in the public meeting.

Mr. Isiaka reported that the PAD approach had been applied in resolving problems between parents and the headmaster of a primary school in the village. The problems had made the school almost non functional, but today everything is back to normal. Now Mr. Isiaka is requesting the Pan-African Institute of Development, West Africa (PAID-WA) to

sponsor him to disseminate his experiences to other villages.

- **The president of the water management committee**

It is impossible to write about Nkouondja water supply system without mentioning Mr. Moussah. Though he was elected without the participation of women, they all are very pleased with him. This man would sacrifice his personal time for the management of the system.

At this moment the village is constructing a new catchment to increase the flow in the system. The success of such projects depends highly on the right management. Although not his duty, Mr. Moussah will walk the whole village from door to door just to make sure everybody is aware of work the following day. Sometimes the PAR team offered him a lift, but he would not accept, because there are places he wants to visit which are inaccessible by vehicle..

During a diagnostic session with the women, the research team attempted to bring up management issues involving his president, but all the women collectively said that he is very good. As one lady put it: *'This project has come at the time we are very busy in the farm, but the way the president will take to talk to you is such that you would not hesitate to participate'*.

However, some of the other Water Management Committee (WMC) members are not very active. During a visit to the village Mr. Isiaka asked Mr Moussah why he was doing so much work alone. The WMC president said that when he feels things are not going well he does not sleep. Mr. Isiaka then said to him *'you are killing yourself very much. Hold as many meetings as possible so that others can help you.'* Mr. Moussah clapped his hands and said *'It is true. I walk too much and the village is too large. In fact if the women president would not have helped, it could have been even more difficult. I think I should be holding more meetings and distributing the tasks.'*

Mr. Moussah is hardworking and learned the hard way. His experiences in the PAR project

as a local researcher has added to the qualities and values he has now.

- **Small groups in the village**

Nkouondja village is well organised, to such extent that you will find farming groups, youth groups and marketing associations. When there is a development project, all villagers are levied to contribute a certain amount. In the PAR process, some groups made group contributions to the water programme in addition to their individual contribution. At an assembly meeting to welcome the IRC Co-ordinator, a small group of about six people contributed 15,000 CFA France (US\$50). This motivated the visiting PAR team to support them with contributions in cash. Cement was immediately bought that day for the catchment construction project to continue. The spirit and qualities of the leaders of the Nkouondja water supply system gives hope that the system will be sustainable. The PAR approach is a strong instrument in changing attitudes and providing skills to community members and their leaders to better manage themselves.

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