



The Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress, Zimbabwe

Self-reliance for Sustainability

Dumisani Nyoni

gatekeeper



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The role of local
organisations in
sustainable
development


The roles of local organisations in poverty reduction and environmental management

All poverty reduction is local. This is easy to forget given how discussion and debate on the subject is dominated by bilateral aid agencies, development banks, national governments and international NGOs. But regardless of higher level commitments and decisions, what actually happens on the ground in particular localities is what makes the difference. Many barriers to poverty reduction are local — local power structures, land owning patterns and anti-poor politicians, bureaucracies and regulations. Much of what the poor require — schools, healthcare, water and sanitation, land, social safety nets, getting onto voter registers — must be obtained from local organisations within this local context.

Local organisations have a major role in addressing these realities, helping poor groups access entitlements and engage with government. They may be local NGOs, grassroots organisations of the poor, or even local governments or branches of higher levels of government. But they function on a local level, have intimate knowledge of the local context and should be accountable to local people. Many operate on very small budgets, outside the main funding flows and frameworks. Yet they are not isolated from larger governance issues; indeed, much pro-poor political change has been catalysed by local innovations and by political pressure from grassroots organisations and their associations.

This publication is one in a series of case studies and synthesis papers looking at the work of local organisations in development and environmental management. These publications were developed in collaboration with the local organisations they profile. They seek to encourage international funding agencies to rethink the means by which they can support, work with and learn from the local organisations that are such a critical part of pro-poor development.

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Executive summary

The Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP) has worked in the Matabeleland region of Zimbabwe, one of the nation's least developed regions, since 1980. It has sought to address poverty and rebuild this area after the destruction and under-development associated with the fight for independence. It works principally among rural communities—although its focus has expanded to urban areas as well. Its aim is development and poverty reduction through empowerment, participation and self-reliance and it seeks to achieve this through the establishment of various programmes such as micro-finance, education, food security, community grant-making, and water resource management.

Rooted in cultural practices—family connections, hard work, music and song—ORAP's approach has been to address poverty by reconnecting people and rebuilding the social fabric of communities, using the family as the base unit, and uniting these into groups at different levels (family, village, umbrella, association). ORAP sees community groups not only as executing bodies, but also as channels for dialogue on development initiatives, philosophy, and approaches. It also emphasises developing relationships with external agencies, not only as sources of funding, but also for learning, idea-sharing, and partnerships. Among the lessons learnt are the significance of respecting the wisdom and input of local community members, and including them as empowered members of boards, task groups, committees, etc. ORAP's experience shows how in many cases, having local members lead planning processes can ensure the greatest success.

ORAP has successfully established sustainable self-driven community groups and developed links with formal sectors of society. It has helped change people's perceptions of poverty and development and has managed to keep its projects and programmes going, even where external funding has ceased. ORAP's continued presence and work programme, despite the country's economic crisis (from 1999 to date) and the withdrawal of many international NGOs and other organisations, demonstrate the sustainability of organisations that are locally-driven and rooted in the community.

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Self-reliance for sustainability

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Introduction

Following Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, internal ethnic-based conflict between rival political parties resulted in destruction and underdevelopment in the Matabeleland region. The Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP) was founded in 1980 by a Zimbabwean woman, together with a group of socially dedicated Zimbabweans, as a welfare organisation that sought to rebuild this least developed region of Zimbabwe (Matabeleland and the Midlands), irrespective of the ethnicities of its population.

For 28 years, ORAP has been mobilising people across communities to take charge of their development processes. Rooted in cultural practices—family connections, hard work, music and song—ORAP's approach has been to eradicate poverty by reconnecting people and rebuilding the social fabric of communities.

The organisation

ORAP exists to fight poverty in all its forms, principally among the rural communities of Zimbabwe, by empowering people by facilitating their own development in their cultural contexts. With the growing phenomenon of urban poverty, ORAP will also respond in the same way to needs in the urban areas, as resources permit.

Vision and philosophy

ORAP envisions empowered grassroots communities of women, men and young people free from hunger and poverty. Its development philosophy is one of self-reliance and grassroots participation based on the premise that rural people are poor because they have been dispossessed of their traditional knowledge, language and way of life. Disadvantaged groups must draw up their own plans and uplift themselves, relying mainly on their own intellect and available resources.

The ORAP development philosophy is derived from values and principles rooted in the culture of the Ndebele people who occupy most of the areas where ORAP works. These values have been articulated in the Ndebele language and can be captured as “7 Zs and a Q”:

Zenzele — do it yourself

Zihluze — examine yourself

Ziqoqe — mobilise yourself

Zimisele — commit yourself

Ziqhatshe — be self-employed

Zimele — be self-reliant

Ziqhenye — be proud of yourself

Qogelela — save/invest

The philosophy revolves around the core concept of *Zenzele*, which stems from the African saying *Akusimuntu ongasimuntu walutho* (“there is nobody who has no purpose”). *Zenzele* is thus a development process of self-discovery and self-mobilisation administered by the self—not solely for the benefit of self but also for the development of others. This concept guides and threads through all that ORAP does and is evident everywhere and anywhere ORAP operates.

The basic belief infusing ORAP’s work is that a human being is the prime instrument for development and that this relatively untapped force should be empowered through mass consciousness and self-determination. The fulcrum of such a process is perceived to be the family, hence ORAP’s unique family approach to development. ORAP’s approach to development starts with self-examination of an individual who belongs to a family.

In the rural Zimbabwean context, communities are made up by the coming together of families for any purpose—weddings, funerals, farming, politics, etc. In the Ndebele culture, this coming together also occurs for labour purposes, such as in agriculture, building and construction.

The colonial era destroyed the core family structure in Zimbabwean communities. Families were separated as villages were destroyed and through migration (mainly of men) from rural communities to urban settings to look for work. Through this, the strong social fabric of the community fell apart. Thus any development initiatives that communities could have undertaken were disconnected from their cultural practices, philosophies and organising principles.

How does ORAP put its vision into practice?

When ORAP first embarked on its work, one of its core realisations was that to participate in rebuilding a post-colonial Zimbabwe, development efforts would not be sustainable and self-reliance would not be achieved if ORAP’s primary objective was not to help to restore the social fabric of communities. Thus ORAP’s developmental philosophy is driven by the

BOX 1. EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY MOBILISATION

Zimbabwe is fortunate to have made a large investment in education in the first 20 years of the country's independence. But whilst it is government policy to provide decent education for all Zimbabweans, government has a very limited capacity to deliver on this—even in the most basic of ways. The country's very complex recent political history (from World Bank/IMF-led "economic structural adjustment" to the current political conflicts with, and hence sanctions from, certain members of the international and donor community) has meant that government has almost no resources to meet those needs. The steady decline in resources allocated to the education sector and the deterioration of the country's economy have led to schools becoming factories of despair, rather than making a meaningful contribution to education or the development of young people. The decline in the number of children passing their exams is extremely high. A large number of students are failing to complete high school, opting instead to emigrate to neighbouring countries in search of work. The pass rates for those who stay are extremely low, furthering the belief amongst younger generations that school is useless.

ORAP has provided its members with a structure through which they can articulate their situation and needs. They can use ORAP as a vehicle to address these concerns, such as the lack of books, sports equipment, learning materials such as chalk, stationery, paper, notebooks etc. Not only is ORAP providing physical resources for schools, it has also set up the Zimele Institute (more details below) as a resource centre for the 75 schools in ORAP's communities. It provides support through training teachers, organising learning communities and encouraging new initiatives and entrepreneurial approaches in schools and the surrounding communities.

In 1992 ORAP established Zenzele College at ORAP's headquarters in Bulawayo, in partnership with the School of International Training and the University of Vermont in the USA, which forms part of the Global Partnership for NGO Studies, Education and Training. The college not only provides the opportunity for interested individuals to take part in an international internship programme, but it also offers a diploma course in Grassroots Development and NGO Management—a unique educational resource designed to help prepare a new generation of development professionals and leaders in both the South and North.

development of the person and the social structures around that person, of which the family is most proximate, influential and important.

The focus on the family unit as the core of ORAP's development process ensures that several players are engaged at the foundation of any initiative, and that a project or programme has the buy-in of an entire family and its structures. In the event of a death, migration or the exit of an individual from a community set-up, the development process does not leave with them. This thus increases the chances of sustainability and the continuing process being locally-owned, even when external partners have pulled out, as is common in many communities where ORAP has established a community presence.

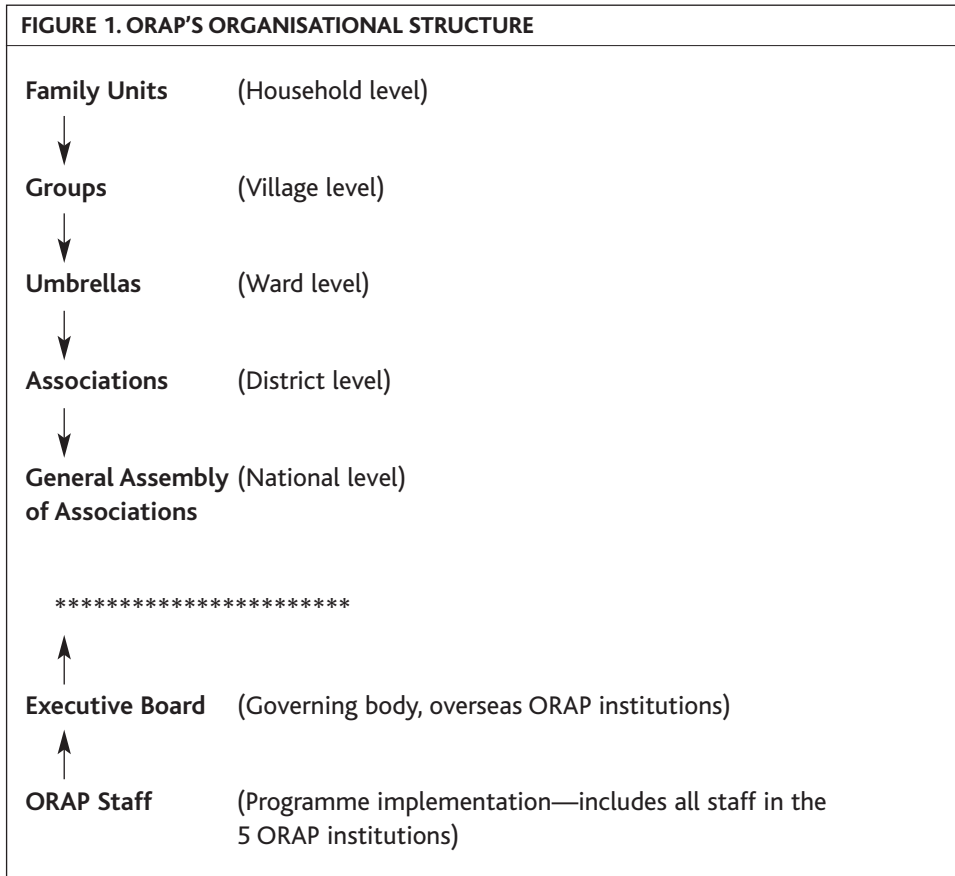
ORAP achieves its mission and vision through projects encompassing development education, enterprise development and micro-finance, environmental management, health care innovation, community grant-making, reform of the education system, food security and water resources management, vocational training, and community mobilisation and capacity-building.

As a non-governmental organisation, ORAP sees its role as complementing the role of government (whichever government is in power) and as a vehicle for people to realise their own developmental aspirations. Due to the various limitations of government, and the dramatic decline in the Zimbabwe government’s ability over the past few years to meet its goals, obligations and intentions, ORAP has had to be able to shift dramatically to take on more of a service delivery and intervention role (Box 1).

ORAP’s structure

ORAP’s multi-tier structure (Figure 1) begins with a **family unit**. This is the primary level of the organisation, into which neighbouring households organise themselves. Programmes at the family unit level, involving both men and women, include all the usual domestic and craft activities, some for home consumption, some for income generation. Five to ten families make up a family unit.

Ten to 25 families make up a **village group**, the next level of organisation. This comprises several family units undertaking small-scale community projects, such as building dams and weirs, boreholes, wells and irrigation schemes; preserving and multiplying indigenous seeds and trees; and economic activities like grinding mills, retail shops, pig-raising, cattle fattening, poultry, sewing and leather tanning.



Five or more family groups form an **umbrella** which brings together the groups' experiences. The **association** is the highest structure at district level and it represents all the umbrellas. At the moment there are 22 associations operating at grassroots level covering Midlands, Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South provinces. Programmes at the association level include blacksmithing, carpentry, vegetable gardens and early childhood development programmes. Six of the associations now have development centres where these activities are located and which also give training in industrial, agricultural and craft skills. In these centres rural people of different ages and gender are trained in how to build, make garments, fabricate metal, and do carpentry. After obtaining these skills people are able to sustain themselves individually and communally.

The village groups work together via a tradition of collective work called Amalima, where all the group members attend to each family's fields in rotation. Most jobs are done collectively: gathering firewood and fetching water, among other things.

Rural communities are encouraged to identify and define their problems and, if possible, find solutions to them. This helps create self-reliance. ORAP then tries to provide educational, technical and financial support, sought from within the community and from external donors and partners.

At the local level, decisions are made by ORAP's members through the structure of family units, groups, umbrellas and associations. These decisions mainly have to do with on-going initiatives that members carry out, exchanges of learning through dialogue or site visits, the initiation of new programmes and projects, and ORAP staff issues. Meetings of these groups also offer a chance to provide feedback on the direction of the organisation as well as to take community positions on issues. Up that chain, members are selected to represent the communities through the gathering of the (23) associations at the quarterly meetings of the GAA—the General Assembly of Associations. At the GAA, the views of all the districts are brought forward and debated. Additionally, information to be disseminated down the structures is distributed. This includes learning on new initiatives/programmes that associations can benefit from, useful tips for farming, etc.

The GAA is a part of the governance of ORAP. Once every three years, the GAA appoints members from within it to sit on the board/management committees of ORAP's various institutional divisions. This is to ensure that the strategies and operations of the staff are in line with the interests of ORAP's members at the grassroots level. These members participate in processes such as strategic planning, feedback to operational staff, budgeting etc. They also carry the views of the GAA to each division of ORAP to increase the execution of the vision and mission of the organisation.

Thus there is an ORAP member presence and influence on every structure within ORAP—on all boards (including four permanent representatives from the GAA who sit on the Executive Board), and on all the community structures.

Organisationally, ORAP achieves its vision through the following five divisions:

1) ORAP Development Co-ordination Centre

The Development Co-ordination Centre is one of ORAP's units involved in grassroots development. It is the major unit involved in most of the programmes described earlier on. These include food security and rural livelihoods, water resources and management, micro-enterprise development, capacity building and community mobilisation, and conservation and environmental management.

2) Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe (CFWR)

Often referred to as the Western Region Foundation, CFWR was established by ORAP as a grant-making body to the various communities with which ORAP works. It gives grants to community groups aiming to undertake development initiatives such as schools' infrastructural development, establishing community centres or providing sources of clean water (such as boreholes) to communities. It gives grants based on the perspectives of grassroots communities and their needs.

3) Nencode

Also called Usizo, Nencode is ORAP's micro-finance arm, providing small loans to ORAP members and the general public with the aim of promoting enterprise development. Nencode is a registered micro-finance institution with the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe.

4) Business Unit

ORAP manages several businesses with the intention of generating revenue to support ORAP's development initiatives. These businesses include a farm (Figtree), a service station (Bulawayo) and a hardware store (Bulawayo).

5) Zimele Institute

This is ORAP's youngest division. Due to high levels of poverty and underdevelopment in the Matabeleland and Midlands regions, many people, especially young people, do not see any positive prospects for themselves in the future. Rural-urban migration, and in turn, emigration to Botswana and South Africa, is very high. This does very little to address the wider issues facing Zimbabwe—those of nation-building and reconciliation, and of enabling people to be included in any form of development.

ORAP's belief is that communities are developed primarily at the family level, and that the disintegration of the family undermines the development process. Unless there is a compelling reason for families and communities to retain their young people, community brain drain will continue to eliminate every village's development potential.

In 2005, ORAP therefore launched the Zimele Institute to play a leadership role in addressing the educational and learning dimensions of its work in rural development, with a special focus on young people (see Box 1 for more details).

ORAP's approach to poverty eradication and sustainable development

Initially, ORAP's work was focused on mobilising community groups to address infra-structural projects that directly affected the development of an area. These included the building/establishment of assets such as buildings, water sources, sanitation systems, development and training centres and even household structures like kitchens, houses, grain storage facilities, etc. Some of these activities still continue today.

Over time, ORAP developed other vehicles for development that helped to address the needs of community members. These included a community grant making institution to be a direct bridge between large, foreign-based grant making institutions and local communities. The Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe (CFWR) was established through the collective savings of ORAP members and matching contributions from external funders. It is still operational and growing in its activities, scope and approach.

Another area where ORAP paid special attention was that of financial services. A micro-finance programme, and later, institution, was established to attend to that area of need. The institution gives loans primarily to groups formed by ORAP members to support their micro-enterprise initiatives.

In keeping with the member-driven approach, ORAP is also using local groups and structures to address challenges in a wide range of sectors such as education and health care (through Zimele Institute). On the one hand, the ORAP members organise at the local level and identify entry points through which an intervention in a particular area can work. Through the Zimele Institute, this has been done in the education sector with particular success, and an experiment is being carried out to see if the model can be used in the health sector.

Who is involved in ORAP?

There are various stakeholders in ORAP's processes:

- Rural community members, through the structures shown in Figure 1. ORAP's groups are not only executing bodies for projects and programmes, but are also channels for dialogue on developmental initiatives, philosophy and approaches. The intention is for the rural person who is a member of ORAP to be the principal shareholder in the organisation and, in turn, for the institutional dimension of ORAP to ensure that it serves the interests of rural, community members.
- Staff: across all its various divisions ORAP has a total staff of close to 150 people. They are meant to be the professional facilitators of the needs and vision of the members of the organisation. Over ORAP's 28-year history, this role has gone through a series of evolutions and continues to change as ORAP itself develops. Some members of staff come directly from local communities and, in essence, represent the

community's interests at the executive level. Some are hired purely as professionals to provide a specific skill—accountants, mechanics, etc.

- Local and national government (Box 2): government departments play a role in ORAP's work, primarily as partners and as regulating authorities. ORAP interacts with many government departments including:
 - The Ministry of Social Welfare
 - The Ministry of Agriculture
 - The Ministry of Education
 - The Ministry of Health
 - The Ministry of Finance (the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe)
- Local authorities such as Rural District Councils also play an important role in ORAP's work as their mandate is to represent and ensure the implementation of government policy at the local level.
- Funders and grant makers: ORAP receives considerable financing from external sources, such as bilateral donors, grant-making foundations, technical partners and so on. In general, ORAP's total estimated annual budget is over US\$5 million in direct funding, excluding in-kind donations and leveraged support. Donors have a big impact on our work and the nature of the relationship depends on the agency in question. Some agencies allow a large degree of freedom in executing projects, while others require a great deal of involvement and say. There is constant debate within ORAP about how to best manage relations with donors and finding a balance between meeting their needs and expectations, and those of ORAP's members in the local

BOX 2. EXAMPLES OF INTERACTIONS AND COLLABORATIONS WITH GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES

ORAP is registered as an NGO/welfare organisation with the Ministry of Social Welfare. From time to time there are consultations between the ministry and ORAP to ensure that the organisation remains compliant with national laws and policies.

ORAP has recently embarked on a multi-year programme to support the rearing of small livestock as a means of wealth creation. In the process, ORAP is working closely with the agricultural extension services of the Ministry of Agriculture and research centres in various locations, as well as enabling local villagers to sell some of their animals at national auctions and sales. All this is a result of close co-operation with government departments.

The Zimele Institute currently works with 75 rural schools in three of Zimbabwe's 10 provinces. A close partnership is needed with the government for this intervention to succeed as there is much sensitivity around giving any organisation access to school children. Approval from government was needed, along with other governmental clearances. However, the relationship with the Ministry of Education has blossomed into a strong partnership as ORAP's investment in schools is extremely complementary to the government's policies on education. The institute is currently part of a newly formed multi-stakeholder committee on education convened by the government. ORAP is now a leading player in helping to shape government policy and practice for education in certain provinces.

community. How to stay true to external partners, as well as the purpose of the organisation at large?

ORAP's effectiveness to date

Our belief is that ORAP has been very effective to date and has succeeded in being a vehicle for development for local communities that is responsive, accessible and facilitative. Some have used the metaphor of shade to describe ORAP's role, as in the shade that a tree provides to protect a person from the scorching heat.

In 23 districts around Zimbabwe, ORAP has:

1. Helped to establish sustainable, self-driven community groups that spearhead development initiatives. In Bubi District, ORAP groups helped to initiate income generating projects in livestock and market gardening. These groups are now self-sustaining and have taken on a larger role in society than just subsistence farming. They now practise a form of corporate social responsibility, funding programmes and activities in local schools, and teaching farming skills to youth and new groups. Other NGOs that come to work in these communities (such as World Vision) find that the programmes they initiate in communities where there is an ORAP presence not only take off much faster than other areas, but have a significantly increased success and sustainability rate. Thus there is a larger dividend from ORAP's contribution at the local level than just the initiation of a project.
2. Helped to link rural communities to the main/formal sectors of society—government programmes, donor-funded programmes, international programmes and opportunities, educational opportunities etc. (Box 3). For example, local communities that have self-organised into ORAP groups are able to access loans from government programmes (such as loans for small and medium enterprises development) which would be extremely difficult for them to access as individuals.

BOX 3. MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

In 2007, ORAP help 50 women members of the organisation to participate in the 4th World Congress for Rural Women in Durban, South Africa. The women made presentations on their work, marketed their cottage industry products and made relationships with people from around the world that are still benefiting local communities. Of course, the learning experience itself was extremely valuable and had many other intangible benefits.

Through the Zimele Institute, ORAP has also enabled over 30 students to gain access to government and private universities in Zimbabwe and abroad. Using ORAP's institutional clout, students can get placements, whereas in applying as individuals they are often excluded, unable to meet the bureaucratic requirements. ORAP members can instruct that one of its institutions ensures that children from ORAP's communities with appropriate grades and qualifications be assisted to advance to higher levels of education. Thus ORAP plays a facilitation role and acts as an agent between rural communities and institutions such as universities and colleges.

3. Facilitated interventions in a wide range of areas, from economic development to skills training. ORAP has established seven training centres (and plans at least five more in the coming years) where local people can attend training courses on carpentry, welding, agricultural activities, cottage industry manufacturing etc.
4. Fundamentally changed people's perceptions of development, and their understanding of poverty. Many rural people are often referred to as "poor" based on external definitions and indicators. Often, these are strictly economic definitions. Once a person considers themselves to be poor, they often feel unable to change their situation for the better because poor people usually have little or no means of changing their circumstances. ORAP, in dealing with its members and many of its partners and donors, has shifted the idea that poverty is strictly a material concept and has enabled its members to see wealth and value in the many aspects of traditional ways of organising.

For example, social connections and networks can be seen as an asset and used to improve people's circumstances. A person has greater confidence in their own ability to change a situation if he/she feels as if they can exploit the assets around them for development purposes. Traditional knowledge is another asset that ORAP emphasises. Without it, self-reliance is almost impossible as solutions must always be imported to solve local problems. Over the years, hundreds of students and practitioners have spent time with ORAP studying this approach. A large number have actually returned to work for influential institutions shaping programmes and policy based on the experiences gained and insights they developed from working with ORAP through the ORAP approach.

5. Become a reference point for rural development in Zimbabwe, for both local and international stakeholders. ORAP has been included in multiple publications and studies as a result of its model. No studies have directly linked these publications (and others) to the dissemination of ORAP's model, but it would be very interesting to conduct a study to verify if ORAP has influenced similar organisations and movements around the world.

In a lot of districts, ORAP has ceased making direct investments or injections of capital in the form of projects funded by external donors/funders. A demonstration of the success of the ORAP model is that in those areas, the development process has not come to a standstill, but rather has progressed without that support and members have remained largely engaged in the ORAP process.

One of the greatest indicators of success has been the impact and importance of ORAP during Zimbabwe's economic crisis from 1999 to date. Most organisations working in the same communities as ORAP have ceased to exist. Others have left (mainly international NGOs) to work in other countries where they find the operating environment more conducive. ORAP has remained, as it is rooted in its members and has been a relevant player in generating solutions to an unprecedented economic and social difficulty in Zimbabwe. There are hundreds of thousands of people who are hopeful about the future as a result of ORAP's existence and engagement with local communities.

Enabling factors, challenges and constraints

Many of ORAP's enabling factors have been covered above. As a membership-based organisation we would like to believe that the participation of local communities is our greatest enabling factor. Our philosophy is not to impose development programmes or approaches on people but rather to facilitate dialogue that leads to a way forward.

Collaboration with stakeholders has been very important as it has provided not just sources of financing, but also learning, ideas and partnerships. Over the past five to seven years this has somewhat declined due to the situation in Zimbabwe. However, it remains an important enabling factor because nothing can be achieved in isolation. *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (meaning that a person is only a person through/because of other people: I exist because you exist) is the core facet of the *Ubuntu* philosophy from which ORAP derives its values and approach.

Without the financing of external partners, a lot of ORAP's work would not be possible, yet there are times when funders' interests conflict with those whom ORAP was established to serve. As mentioned above, one of ORAP's constant tensions has been to balance the influences of local members with the interests of funding agencies and partners (Box 4).

Being a grassroots movement and an NGO at the same time provides enough challenges in itself. For staff there is often some degree of confusion or tension over how to execute ORAP's vision when conflicting viewpoints arise. Do you: (i) pay attention to the organisation providing the financial resources; or (ii) pay attention to the actors who enable the programme to be successfully implemented on the ground?

Most funding agencies are used to dealing purely with NGOs that act as delivery mechanisms, who write proposals, raise funds and implement projects then produce a report.

BOX 4. INTERNAL VERSUS EXTERNAL TENSIONS

Although ORAP fundamentally believes in self-reliance and sustainability, in times of natural disasters and emergencies, relief work is essential. During the heavy drought periods of the past ten years, there has been a large failure rate in the crops of most communal farmers. ORAP has thus had to engage with international partners involved in drought relief work. The operational guidelines of these organisations often clash with the interests and values of ORAP as a movement. Some of the criteria used to identify "vulnerable" people mean that ORAP members who have been engaged in development initiatives for years and have amassed some savings often fall outside these brackets of vulnerability. This is a good thing, except that in times of drought, almost everyone needs food support and ORAP members will often not "qualify" to be recipients of this food. This causes a conflict because ORAP itself becomes the lead agency in the distribution and administration of the programme, and yet has to sideline its members as recipients of the food aid based on the criteria of a third party (often external/international) organisation. If ORAP ignores the guidelines of the partner agencies, it risks breaching signed agreements and losing all food aid to that community. This has created enormous tensions between community/ORAP members, ORAP staff, partner agencies and the wider community (non-ORAP members). The challenge is how to manage this process, ensuring maximum value to all stakeholders and minimal divisions and conflict. This is probably an area of competence that ORAP as an organisation has to spend more resources and time developing.

Often such organisations can override the process of being genuinely accountable to the local groups they work with. ORAP, on the other hand, tries to be sensitive to local stakeholders, although it must be said that this meets with varying degrees of success.

In some cases, there are donors who are adamant about how projects are implemented, even to the extent of wanting to be involved in the payroll process! In such cases, they are often blind to some of the latent complexities which those on the inside of an organisation are aware of and have to manage appropriately.

In other cases, donors do place limitations on how a project is implemented, much to the disdain of local communities, whose resentment is often directed towards staff, breaking down the trust that is essential to all parties. In other situations, the impact of donor control ends up being on community members themselves, often raising differences that damage social fabric, the very fuel that provides the energy for ORAP's work.

Four times a year, ORAP staff hold consultative meetings with the members of ORAP's associations (the General Assembly of Associations) to try to ensure that their interests are being met. In between these meetings, the different divisions of ORAP have more regular interactions with the communities and groups that they work with, and as best as possible, the idea is to pass on these viewpoints to donor agencies so that they may appreciate and take into consideration local perspectives.

As an organisation, we do need to go through a very deep reflective process that can help us to be more effective in resolving these tensions and in managing the conflict between local communities and donors' interests.

In Zimbabwe, there is always a financial constraint to scaling-up in that it takes resources for people to come together, plan and map out a way forward. In an environment of limited resources, this is a tremendous challenge and ORAP does often find this to be a limiting factor.

Organisationally, one of the biggest constraints comes from the very factors which contribute to our success: being in existence for almost 30 years; having a membership that directly affects over one million people; being a big institution that incorporates five relatively large divisions that could each theoretically be stand-alone organisations; managing growth and remaining true to founding principles and vision; co-ordinating and managing internal collaboration; dealing with external changes brought about by technology, economic and political changes, globalisation etc. All of these factors can constrain our effectiveness as often people are so caught up in a cycle of production they do not spend enough time reflecting and strategising, regardless of how effective the production is.

As ORAP has grown, it too has become bureaucratic and less responsive to its members. Being a fairly large institution whose name has been in the "marketplace" for many years also means that over time people have developed their own perception of what ORAP is. In some cases, our surveys have found that many people think ORAP exists primarily to distribute donated goods (food, machinery and equipment, books and school supplies, etc.) to rural communities. So a new generation of people start to relate to ORAP through a donor-recipient framework and not as shareholders and members.

Additionally, as ORAP has grown, the number of staff has increased. Founding staff have left or moved on and institutional memory is no longer as intact. It is also much harder to continue to foster a shared vision amongst a staff of 200, as opposed to a staff of 20.

In 2008, ORAP plans to undertake a process of reflection that will enable us to be more strategic about how we work, and also to answer some of the difficult questions that we face as an organisation that serves a movement. We also plan to look at core values to assess how they are being responded to. There are other important questions that we need to address, such as: are our approaches still as relevant in 2008 as they were in 1988? Will the current ORAP model be needed by rural communities in the future? Part of this process has already begun but it may take a few months to complete.

Key lessons on organisational effectiveness and funding

As an organisation, these questions will be better answered as our reflective process concludes. But the most essential lesson we have learned is that of respecting the wisdom and input of local community members. Including local community members as empowered members of boards, task groups, committees, etc., has been instrumental in our work. In some cases, having local members lead planning processes has ensured that successes have been maximised.

Sitting in an office with Internet access and telephones, these consultations may seem so slow and a hindrance to “progress”. But we have learnt that taking that time has ensured that real development takes place instead of the implementation of a series of projects. As an organisation we have often missed the target, but the learning process has been constant; this is our greatest lesson on how to be effective in sustainable development.

We also need to be more reflective about our relationships with donors. We have many questions about dealing with donors. What should be our approach when engaging with a donor? Are there any non-negotiables? If so, what defines them? Operationally, do we need to re-organise ourselves to ensure that there is better in-house competence and a sharper focus on donor relations (similar to investor relations in a large corporation)?

We suggest that it may be useful to establish a process by which donors interested in supporting ORAP’s work actually spend time in local communities where ORAP functions *before* making an investment. This would help give donors a greater appreciation of the ORAP process and of what their funds will be going towards. It may also enable donors to be more sympathetic to ORAP’s approach, needs and other complexities in a more powerful way than a written proposal. Ultimately, it may also put to rest some of the donor’s concerns and thus allow them to relax some of their more stringent requirements and restrictions.

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