

COLLECTIVE ACTION TO IMPROVE RURAL LIVING CONDITIONS

With the changes that have occurred in the structure and functions of nation states, civil society has taken on responsibilities for a broad range of issues that until 10 or 20 years ago were regarded as exclusively the domain of government. Liberalization, globalization and the opening of Latin American economies have posed both new constraints and new opportunities for rural populations. The advance of democracy is opening new room for action by civil society and this is sparking the emergence of various manifestations of citizen activities in all areas of national life.

Various groups, populations, communities and organizations are now relying on collective action to deal with these new challenges. While there are many success stories to be related, numerous initiatives have failed for a variety of reasons.

To contribute to the understanding of these factors, the Fondo Mink'a de Chorlaví sponsored a competition for projects on the topic "collective action strategies and improvements in living conditions for rural populations". This paper is the outcome of a process that involved a systematic and critical examination of 12 experiments with collective action, enriched by broad debate in the course of an electronic conference.

An understanding of the causes of success or failure for these collective action strategies can provide valuable lessons for strengthening public and private efforts to alleviate poverty, overcome exclusion, promote rural sustainable development and improve the management of natural resources.

The ultimate meaning of collective action

It is time that society moved beyond the notion of collective action as the expression of some communitarian utopia or collectivist theory. The idyllic vision of the rural community of natives and small farmers as the seed of a free, just and compassionate society is increasingly at odds with reality, especially in this age of steady urbanization, liberalization and globalization.

The Fondo Mink'a de Chorlaví was created in 2000 under the auspices of the Minga program of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada), the Inter-Church Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO, Netherlands), the Latin American Association of Promotional Organizations (ALOP) and RIMISP (Chile). The general objective of the Fondo Mink'a de Chorlaví is to facilitate learning processes that will enhance the quality and effectiveness of public and private activities aimed at improving the management of natural resources, reducing rural poverty, and promoting sustainable rural development in Latin America and the Caribbean. In response to the 2001 Call for Proposals, 125 submissions were received from 18 countries in the region. During 2002, 12 projects were selected and implemented in 9 countries. Once the projects were completed, an electronic conference was held, involving 650 people from all countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as other regions. The following report provides a collectively compiled summary of this entire process.

Eduardo Ramírez and Julio Berdegue

Rural development demands solutions to problems that fall squarely within the public sphere. In material terms, such as transforming productive systems, there are problems in coordinating production chains, overcoming barriers to markets (such as those for organic products), and addressing the lack of land and financing, which cannot be resolved through individual efforts alone. In societies where inequalities are so great, enhancing democracy and citizenship requires social mobilization.

This situation calls for a more realistic image of collective action as an instrumental strategy designed to achieve particular objectives that correspond to public goods. This approach involves three important new considerations:

- Collective action is not an end in itself, and is only relevant if it is effective.
- Collective action is not a substitute for, and indeed requires, individual effort and responsibility.
- Collective action is not ubiquitous or permanent, but depends on the circumstances of the time.

Collective action remains essential for developing a more just and inclusive society.

Articulating objectives

Collective action strategies can be classified according to their principal objectives, as follows:

- Improving incomes or some other dimension of the immediate material well-being of the groups involved.
- Modifying social relationships, and particularly power relationships, within specific rural populations.
- Influencing public policies in order to expand opportunities for development and to diminish or overcome factors of exclusion and discrimination.

To these may be added other objectives:

- Developing individual capacities (human capital).
- Strengthening organizations.
- Fostering social networking and collaboration.
- Reinforcing standards and values such as solidarity, reciprocity and trust, which are essential for achieving the common good (social capital).

In the past, such objectives were regarded as means to an end. Today, however, we recognize that they are important objectives in their own right, and that they are essential both for overcoming poverty and for deepening democracy within our societies. In turn,

achieving the objectives and goals of collective action is by its very nature a gradual process.

It is essential that policies and projects in support of collective action should reflect and incorporate the notion that social capital and human capital are not transferred in a linear fashion from external agents to those involved in collective action. Developing these capacities requires promoting and facilitating processes of social learning, through which rural groups, communities and organizations can gradually develop their own human and social capital.

The dominant fixation on "short-term visible impacts" means that actions will be concentrated where it is possible to achieve such results, to the exclusion of the poorest people, the most depressed areas, the most marginalized and discriminated groups, and the most complex objectives, where longer time horizons must apply.

This approach generates "pseudo-collective actions" that will be artificial and ephemeral, designed solely as a function of the needs and objectives of some externally inspired project or policy. For example, projects that seek to bring about a substantial reduction in poverty or gender inequality within three or five years are likely to fail because they disregard the fact that certain objectives can only be addressed as part of a gradual effort to build capacities and to meet increasingly complex objectives. Collective action strategies must respect this gradualist approach to achieving objectives and building capacities. It is essential that we subject our collective actions to a critical examination and measurement of their effectiveness.

Different time horizons for different players

The foregoing means that the time horizons for achieving results in reducing poverty, changing social relationships, deepening democracy and broadening room for citizen participation cannot be short-term. There is in fact a contradiction between effectiveness and the dramatic results that governments, donors and external agents all too often demand. Indeed, the policies of many donors and governments, which insist on "measurable and visible impacts" upon completion of a short-term project, are more likely to exacerbate the problem they seek to resolve.

The complementarity of different types of collective action

The nature of collective action strategies will depend on the topic selected as their principal objective (incomes and material well-being, social relationships, citizenship and democracy). There are many different forms of collective action: for example, locally-

based economic development projects and social movements with a heavy political content. In practice, these can complement each other and may form part of the same overall development strategy.

A productive project or the takeover of a road, as examples of different kinds of collective action, can be mutually complementary if they contribute to the social construction of a shared identity, for example the vision of a desired future and a plan for achieving it. This construction of local identity is important in the current context of globalization, not only because it generates a sense of belonging that helps people to address and cope with the dizzying pace of change, but also because local identity can be an instrument for successful insertion into the globalized world.

This local process of constructing identity and a common vision is also important as a mechanism for broadening collective action and for influencing local, regional or national policies. Yet, we may also point to examples where collective action can spread in a negative sense, such as instances where social mobilization and organization have led to the creation of corporatist or patronage-based political systems.

Whose living conditions are we improving ?

When it comes to evaluating the impacts of collective actions on living conditions for rural societies, it is important to look at the distribution of those impacts among the different layers or groups within those societies. Experience shows that it is a mistake to expect that collective action can by itself resolve problems of power relationships and inequality within the groups involved.

Indeed, the evidence points to the contrary: collective action often exacerbates differences, because those who have the greatest capacities in terms of human, physical, financial, social or natural capital will tend to have access to better and greater opportunities and can appropriate a larger share of the eventual benefits of collective action.

This consideration applies with special force to the issue of gender equity, where many projects have produced meagre results. As a general rule, rural collective action seems to have had little success in reducing gender inequality.

Is this because those actions have failed to incorporate the existing theory and methods on gender and development? Or is it because current gender approaches are not as effective as we want them to be?

If collective action is to help modify power relationships within the groups taking the action, then it is essential to make that objective explicit and to adopt principles, criteria and activities that are consistent with it.

Factors for success and elements of sustainability

The effectiveness and sustainability of collective action strategies will depend on three kinds of factors:

Internal Factors

The relationships among participants and between them and the groups or organizations channeling the collective action are determined by:

- The values that are shared in common by the participants in the collective action, primarily those of solidarity, honesty, reciprocity and trust, in contrast to individualism.
- The rules of conduct observed by participants in the collective action, primarily the fulfillment of commitments, discipline, respect, openness to dialogue and readiness to engage in self-criticism.
- The formal rules governing relationships within the organization or group undertaking the collective action, as well as those that define the rights and duties of its members, the distribution of benefits and costs of the action and, in particular, the provisions for preventing and punishing corruption.
- The internal mechanisms of the organization or group for enforcing agreements, commitments and formal rules governing the relationships among the participants. In particular, the various types of economic incentives or symbolic ones, such as recognition by the community, group or organization, together with a proper structure of penalties for cases of nonfulfillment.
- The presence of innovative leadership that can guide the collective action so that it will not only achieve its goals but will also be sustainable.

External Factors

The relationships between the organizations conducting the collective action and the other stakeholders directly influencing that action, are determined by:

- The capacity to cooperate and work with various stakeholders. The success of collective action will be undermined where indigenous, campesino or rural organizations become the focus for a series of different agencies offering different kinds of support.

Successful collective action requires that all parties cooperate and that they be prepared to yield some ground and some benefits in the search for broader agreement, so that everyone can live and compete in a more interrelated world.

- The existence of "engines of sustainability" that will generate incentives to ensure the permanence and continuity of collective action strategies. These include dynamic markets where collective action seeks to improve the material living standards of the rural poor, or broader social movements where the aim is to win recognition for the political demands of rural communities.

Contextual Factors

The broader framework of incentives, opportunities and constraints within which organizations must design, plan and carry out collective actions is characterized as follows:

- In cultural terms, the exchange of the community paradigm for individualistic development models, with some room for the emergence of cooperative models under the paradigm of solidarity.

- In economic terms, efficiency and competitiveness as conditions for survival as economic agents, with limited but still feasible room for collective action along the lines of "cooperating to compete".

- Democracy as the predominant political system at the national and local levels, with changes and movements that are conducive to deepening democracy and expanding civic responsibility.

Conclusions

Collective action is taking place within a new context and under the influence of new paradigms. The context is increasingly individualistic, and the paradigm is ever more removed from that of a communitarian utopia. As in any new situation, there are new problems, and yet there are also new possibilities and opportunities. It is essential, then, to generate new interpretive frameworks that will help us to understand and improve our efforts through different interpretations of reality.

Collective action is necessary to address the individual and social needs that belong to the sphere of public life and that cannot be resolved if social action is reduced to the forms championed by neoliberalism. It is the principles of solidarity and cooperation that must underlie collective action.

Strategies for rural collective action generally target one or more of three principal types of objectives: improving material living standards; modifying power relationships within rural groups, communities or organizations; and deepening democracy and strengthening civic responsibility. These are complex objectives, and achieving them fully requires the existence or the development of sustained capacities in terms of human capital and social capital. These capacities cannot be simply transferred from abroad and instilled within the groups involved in the collective action; rather, they emerge from a process of social learning, which in turn requires time to mature.

From the foregoing we may draw two conclusions. First, collective action strategies require forms of organization based on the principle of achieving objectives gradually, starting with those that are less complex (building human and social capital) and moving on to those of greater complexity (eliminating poverty, modifying power relationships, deepening democracy). Second, the policies and strategies of some international agencies, governments and institutional donors, which demand immediate and visible results against complex objectives within three to five years, may be dramatic but they will not be effective, much less sustainable.

Collective action is no guarantee by itself that opportunities or benefits will be distributed in an equitable manner among the different segments and strata of rural groups, communities or organizations. In particular, experience suggests that rural collective action has failed to achieve the expected results in terms of promoting gender equity. On the contrary, collective action often leads to the exacerbation of inequalities within rural societies. If the intent is to change power relationships in the direction of greater equity, this must be made explicit and actions of the magnitude necessary to achieve that goal must be taken.

The success or failure of collective action strategies intended to improve living conditions for rural populations will depend on internal factors (values, standards of conduct, formal rules, mechanisms for enforcing rules and commitments, type of leadership), external factors (communication and cooperation among various stakeholders, linkages to "engines of sustainability" in collective actions) and contextual factors (in cultural terms, individualism versus solidarity; in economic terms, competition versus cooperation; and in political terms, autocracy versus democracy).