



Praxis Note No. 34

# Enhancing Civil Society through Empowerment and Capacity Building of Civil Society Organisations:

The East Akim District of the  
Eastern Region of Ghana

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April 2007

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**Keywords:** Ghana, empowerment, community engagement

## Introduction

This Praxis Note provides an overview of a capacity building process to strengthen community-based organisations (CBOs) in Ghana by improving the effectiveness of their work with the poor and marginalised. It describes the approach of the intervention, the main challenges encountered and the successful outcomes.

## Background

The Ark Foundation in Ghana is an advocacy-based human rights non-governmental organisation with the primary purpose of seeking the protection and promotion of the human rights of women and children. This advocacy and human rights organisation contracted the Social Support Foundation (SSF), a Ghanaian non-profit, non-political support organisation, for this organisation capacity building assignment. The Social Support Foundation works in support of the needy and vulnerable in communities and provides organisational development (OD) and organisational capacity building (OCB) for local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs), civil society organisations (CSOs) and CBOs. This paper reflects the practice and not the official report of the assignment led by the author, Louis Acheampong, an OD practitioner. Louis Acheampong would

like to acknowledge the work and support of the senior management team member on this assignment, Kwame Dwamena-Aboagye, the lead consultant from Stratnet Consulting Company, Accra, who designed the project for the Ark Foundation.

The OCB was a major component of the Rights, Empowerment, Access and Participation (REAP) Project of the Ark Foundation, located in the East Akim District<sup>1</sup> of the Eastern Region of Ghana. The focus of the project was on strengthening five selected CBOs to be efficient in implementing their work for the benefit of the poor and marginalised in their communities. The project was supported by the Rights And Voice Initiative (RAVI) as grant operator with funding from the Department for International Development (DFID) for citizen government engagement.

The OD practitioner and the process facilitators designed an organisational capacity building process comprising three modules of intensive training and commitment to coach, mentor and monitor CBOs through their engagement processes over a six-month period.

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<sup>1</sup> A small rural community with high culture of traditional supremacy in chieftancy and royal authority.

This was in line with the specific objectives formulated together with the employer and the beneficiaries:

- to build the capacity of the five selected CBOs and associations to engage in people-centred advocacy from a rights-based perspective regarding specific broad issues of their choice that require change;
- to facilitate a process of bringing together the selected CBOs into a network for presenting a collective voice and for mutual support; and
- to facilitate a process of internal capacity strengthening for the selected CBOs to enable them deliver more effectively and efficiently on their work, particularly regarding their engagement with local power structures.

## Context

In Ghana, devolution to communities and local governments as stated in our laws and statutes means the transfer of power; transfer of means and transfer of personnel. However, the most important aspect of devolution to communities; that is, the transfer of power in Ghana has focused on the institutional transfer of power rather than actively working to give the people the power to demand accountability. This therefore implies that the direction of accountability by local public and private actors has not been downward to the local people but has only been upward to central governments and donors.

There have been major constraints to CBOs' engagement with local power structures under Ghana's decentralization processes including:

- (a) inadequate human rights and civic education and mobilisation;
- (b) inadequate community participation in district assemblies and local council activities;
- (c) illiteracy, poor health and poverty, compounded by HIV/AIDS;
- (d) gender inequity and inequality;
- (e) inadequate capacity in administrative and technical skills of the CBOs at the local level; and
- (f) lack of transparency and accountability in operations of local public institutions.

## The Approach

The practitioners focused on strengthening the five selected CBOs and Community Associations to improve their efficiency, (*organisational capacity building*) and increase their ability to implement their stated aims for the benefit of the people (*programme development, design and implementation*). The OCB process took the five CBOs through basic human rights and rights-based approaches to development. The focus was on building the internal capacity of the CBOs to engage duty bearers on issues of concern for the poor and marginalized, using people-centred-advocacy.

The approach employed for the task included community empowerment, network/coalition building and civic engagement from a rights-based perspective. The main goal was to empower the community (claim holders), as represented by its stakeholders and associations/organizations to engage the power structures (duty bearers) at the local level (primarily the district assemblies and

regional administrations as well as local traditional authorities) to bring change to issues they have themselves identified. Gender and gender equality was central to every component of this rights based work.

The key factors identified by the CBOs and communities were: recognition of poverty as the central development challenge; increasing democratization and political pluralism; internal and external pressures for good governance and transparency in policy making; decentralization; and technological advances (satellite communications and the Internet).

In this regard, civic engagement is seen as the methods and approaches that people and organized networks of people or CSOs use to influence and share control over priority setting, policy making, resource allocations and access to public goods and services.

## Components of the Project

The training course consisted of three modules of training on rights, empowerment, advocacy and Participation through the rights-based approach to development and people-centred advocacy strategies.

Between the modules, there was practical group work involving the CBOs and consultations with other stakeholders. There was also ongoing coaching and mentoring with each participating CBO.

The training course content and methodology was designed to facilitate learning at a number of levels:

- Training and capacity building in the rights-based approach to development

with emphasis on civic engagement, strategic communication, stakeholder consultation, social accountability, lobbying, advocacy and human rights. This covered the provision of knowledge and skills aimed at developing and strengthening the competencies of the participating groups, associations and organisations to effectively carry out their goals.

- Facilitate organisational capacity building, strengthening and performance effectiveness of the associations and CBOs.
- Facilitate engagement with the power structures on particular issues of choice to arrive at the desired outcome.
- Working through a collective, consultative and participatory approach to facilitate the formation of a network of these participating local organisations. Supporting this network process in establishing links and relationships with other locally based coalitions in other areas where similar initiatives are taking place.
- Conduct regular on site visits to the participating associations, LNGOs and CBOs for coaching and mentoring.
- Design and development of the necessary information education and communication materials for the above stated purposes.

## Positive developments and outcomes

The CBOs, in consultation with their communities and some stakeholders, selected their issues of concern and are working to address these issues. Their focus is to ensure significant change and

sustained development for their constituents.

With the help of the OCB intervention and the process facilitation activities over the six-month period, the five selected CBOs have:

- conducted field and stakeholder consultations and assessments in each of their communities;
- selected civic engagement activities for each community (visits and discussions with local authorities); and
- initiated local networking and designed their own information, education and communication materials on rights-based approaches and civic engagement, which have been posted on notice boards and in public areas.

The East Akim District Assembly now gives audience to the community groupings and even permits representatives to participate in Assembly meetings. The district assembly has organized a discussion forum on the development of the community and the engagement issues raised by the CBO and their respective communities. Whereas prior to the process, there was no citizen–community engagement at all, now most actions involve some beneficiaries of the OCB process.

CBOs are now confidently engaging with the duty bearers on community and social development issues.

### **Gender impact**

An increased number of women taking or are fighting for political leadership positions. Six women are campaigning for election in the district level assembly, compared to only one four years ago.

### **Changed attitudes**

A youth group CBO is currently leading the community in advocating for a clinic to be built for their community, and they are pursuing this not only as a need, but as their right to have access to quality healthcare. The youth group is leading the process through dialogue rather than violence and hooliganism, and are achieving positive results. As a result, the district assembly has instructed engineers to visit the community to structurally assess and design the facility. This took place within three months of the civic engagement OCB process.

In another community, a contract for the construction of a new borehole has been signed following community and CBO pressure. For four years, the community had been suffering after a new highway was constructed between the community and their borehole. Women and children have been involved in several vehicular accidents as they frequently cross the road to fetch water.

This CBO was invited with some community leaders to the district assembly to witness the signing of the contract, which is very unusual for a district assembly in Ghana. These developments also took place only three months into the civic engagement activities.

### **Challenges**

As the members' awareness was raised on effective leadership and CBO governance, conflict arose in one CBO. The members believed and complained that the attitude of the Chairperson was non-conforming. The facilitation team made time to resolve and follow up this conflict.



Shared power within the community has also brought up tension between one of the beneficiary CBOs — a youth group — and the traditional leaders of their community. The CBO is now gaining recognition in the community for the improved services and the ability to approach community leaders and stakeholders to demand rights and accountability. The district assembly and the district health management team now call representatives of the CBO to their meetings to hear their opinions and feedback. This is entirely new in the community, and the traditional leaders are not pleased. They complain bitterly that the youth group has taken away their status within the community. At one of the first meetings, for example, the CBO was praised by the district director of health services for their bold initiatives.

## Summary of Impacts

1. The five CBOs have now registered formally to enhance their capacity and voice to engage in advocacy from a rights-based perspective. Two of the groups have been able to submit proposals to other agencies for funds to undertake HIV/AIDS education in their communities.
2. Local citizen participation in decision making and development process at the district level has increased without intimidation and threats to the Youth and community groups.
3. Enhanced awareness and utilization of gender and gender equality perspectives in beneficiaries' work and local development processes.
4. A rights-based advocacy approach to development helps all actors and

stakeholders to confront themselves before engaging others on issues. A member of a CBO was questioned by their community to submit reports on some activities he led a year ago during the consultation processes.

Citizens' participation and contributions toward community development increases as they become aware of their importance of the development process and the benefits that will accrue to them.

## Conclusion

This OCB process involving the five CBOs and their community members helped provide a broader view of development that is not limited to infrastructural development, but also institutional change and the voice of the people. This also provided learning opportunities that enabled them to bring change to their communities regarding specific rights-based issues of concern as a step to broader participation in, and engagement with, local power structures. The community then devised their own strategies to help the CBOs and the communities they serve to contribute to enhancing transparency, providing access to information and know-how and fostering changing attitudes.

Community members were made part of the monitoring/follow-up and mentoring and coaching activities, and teams for reviews and evaluations have been formed.

The OCB process ended in April 2006 with a briefing and discussion meeting with the CBO, community representatives and local authorities and stakeholders in the East Akim district.

I returned to the project community in August 2006 for a project review meeting,

and it is evident that effective facilitation and participatory approaches increased project impacts, ensured ownership and sustainability. Community confidence in the CBOs is high as the members of the CBOs are sustaining their strength and efforts toward poverty alleviation through increasing the voice and participation of the community.

Unexpectedly, the CBO network has taken their own initiative to design and produce their own posters to increase awareness on their issues, and two of the member are standing for elections to be part of the local government system, which, they commented, they had never thought of being part of until their involvement in the OCB process and the civic engagements that they participated in as a result.