

Exploring Appreciative Inquiry Approach for Community Development in Nigeria

MUHAMMAD SHEHU HUSSAIN

Department of Adult Education and Extension Services
Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto
E-mail: mshussain999@yahoo.com

NURA HALADU

School of Rural Technology and Entrepreneurship Development, Rano,
Kano State Polytechnic, Kano, Nigeria
E-mail: nurasco77@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

Community development has been declared a priority by the successive governments in Nigeria, be it civilian or military. In this regard, several organizations, institutions and agencies have been set up to undertake and monitor community development in Nigeria. However in view of the above there is no anything to write home about despite all the efforts and different approaches adopted. The paper explored appreciative Inquiry approach for community development in Nigeria. An overview of Appreciative Inquiry was highlighted and the core principles and assumptions were also discussed which include constructivist principle, principle of simultaneity. The paper enumerated the process of Appreciative inquiry which involves the 4 Ds (discovery, dream, design, and destiny). Community development was also defined in the context of the paper and went ahead to discussed appreciative inquiry and community development in Nigeria. Challenges were also highlighted which include among others lack of awareness, dependency, partisan politics, bad community leadership. Finally the paper recommends amongst others Town hall meetings should be regularly organized so that members will educated and mobilized. In collaboration of the community leadership groups should be formed in the community, avoid partisan politics in community affairs, Adult literacy class should be organized for members of the community who can not read and write.

Keywords: Exploring, appreciative inquiry, community, development, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria got its independence 55 years ago from the British colonial government. Ever since community development has been declared a priority by the successive governments, be it civilian or military. In this regard, several organizations,

institutions and agencies have been set up to undertake and monitor community development in Nigeria. However, the declared objectives and policy statements of various governments in Nigeria have been mere rhetoric and smoke-screens intended not only to diffuse criticisms but to hide what the whole thing has been i.e. a systematic exploitation and dehumanization of the rural dwellers. In Nigeria, over the years the stated objectives and strategies of community development have been pronounced by policy makers and those concerned with the issue of development. But there still exist enormous gap between policy formulation and implementation and the reality of the level of the development of the rural populace. For example, several approaches in terms of community development planning and execution have been adopted. Some of these include development programmes like Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Green Revolution, River Basin Development Authorities, Agricultural Development Projects, Family Support Programmes, Poverty Eradication programme, SURE-P and many others have emphasized the need to tackle the problem of under-development. All of these programmes failed because the target beneficiaries are not taken into cognizance.

In community development practice, it is rudimentary that the solution to community problems is sought first within the community and its resources and capabilities. Hence self-help embodies two interrelated features: (1) it is expected to produce improvements of people's living conditions, facilities, and/or services; and (2) it emphasizes that the process by which these improvements are achieved is essential to the development of the community. Willy-nilly, the "community" is both improved and empowered as a result (Christenson & Robison, 1989).

The thrust of this paper therefore is to explore the appreciative inquiry approach for community development in Nigeria.

An overview of Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry has been described by many in a myriad of ways: as a paradigm of conscious evolution geared for the realities of the new century (Hubbard, 1998); as a methodology that takes the idea of the social construction of reality to its positive extreme especially with its emphasis on metaphor and narrative, relational ways of knowing, on language, and on its potential as a source of generative theory (Gergen, 1996); as the most important advance in action research in the past decade (Bushe, 1991); as offspring and "heir" to Maslow's vision of a positive social science (Chin, 1998; Curran, 1991); as a powerful second generation organizational development practice (French & Bell, 1995); as model of a much needed participatory science, a

“new yoga of inquiry” (Harman, 1991); as a radically affirmative approach to change which completely lets go of problem-based management and in so doing vitally transforms strategic planning, survey methods, culture change, merger integration methods, approaches to measurement systems, socio technical systems, etc. (White, 1997); and lastly, as organizational development’s philosopher’s stone.

Appreciative Inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives “life” to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. Appreciative Inquiry involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. It centrally involves the mobilization of inquiry through the crafting of the “unconditional positive question” often-involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people (Cooperider, Whitney & Starvos, 2003).

In Appreciative Inquiry the arduous task of intervention gives way to the speed of imagination and innovation; instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design. Appreciative Inquiry seeks, fundamentally, to build a constructive union between a whole people and the massive entirety of what people talk about as past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul-- and visions of valued and possible futures. Taking all of these together as a gestalt, AI deliberately, in everything it does, seeks to work from accounts of this “positive change core” and it assumes that every living system has many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link the energy of this core directly to any change agenda and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized (Cooperider, 1996).

Core Principles and Assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry

As the practice of Appreciative Inquiry has evolved so also its core principles, assumptions and processes. Gergen (1994, 1982) posits that the theory of social constructionism have strongly influenced the development of Appreciative Inquiry. Social constructionism reflects a belief that there is no one reality or truth; rather, truth is grounded in the multiple and contextually determined realities of individuals’

perceptions, dialogues, and shared understandings. In developing Appreciative Inquiry, Cooperrider was also influenced by numerous research studies from the fields of medicine, sports, behavioral sciences, and anthropology that demonstrated the power of positive images.

The first such finding was the placebo effect, in which one to two thirds of patients showed marked improvement in symptoms by believing they had received effective treatment. A second set of influential findings was from the Pygmalion studies, which demonstrated the relationship between the images teachers have of their students and the students' levels of performance and long-term futures. A third set of studies showed the effects of both positive and negative thinking on the outcomes of surgery: patients with more positive thoughts recovered at a much faster rate (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). Cooperrider and others applied the theories of social constructionism and the power of image to organizational change and developed the following five core principles for the practice of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000):

1. **Constructivist Principle:** Related to the notion that multiple realities exist based on perceptions and shared understandings. This principle suggests that what is known about an organization and the organization's actual destiny are interwoven.
2. **Principle of Simultaneity:** Because reality is an evolving social construction, it is possible through inquiry to influence the reality an organization creates for itself. Inquiry and change are simultaneous and "inquiry is intervention." Thus, the nature of the inquiry itself is critically important where the very first questions we ask set the stage for what people discover and learn and the way they construct their future.
3. **Poetic Principle:** reality is a human construction, an organization or community is like an open book in which its story is being coauthored continually by its members and those who interact with them. Consequently, members are free to choose which part of the story to study or inquire about its problems and needs, or its moments of creativity or joy, or both.
4. **Anticipatory Principle:** This principle postulates that the image an organization or community has of its future guides that organization's current behavior. Thus, an organization's positive images of its future will anticipate, or lead to, positive actions.
5. **Positive Principle:** This principle arose from extensive experience with Appreciative Inquiry. Early Appreciative Inquiry practitioners found that the more positive the questions they asked were, the more engaged and excited

participants were and the more successful and longer lasting the change effort was. This is in large part because human beings and organizations want to turn toward positive images that give them energy and nourish happiness. Based on these principles, eight assumptions form the foundation for Appreciative Inquiry's processes and methods (Hammond, 1996):

Process of Appreciative Inquiry

Green and Haines (2012) opined that appreciative Inquiry usually consist of 4 Ds.

1. The discovery phase which focuses on identifying accomplishments in the community and analyzing what factors contributed to the success;
2. The dream phase requires residents to envision how they could build on these successes to improve the quality of life in their community;
3. The design stage involves the residents in developing strategies to accomplish goals that were identified in the dream stage; and
4. The final stage is destiny, which involves continuous learning and adjusting to carry out the goals.

The concept of Community Development

Historically, the concept of community development was first used in 1948 at the Cambridge Conference on African administration organized by the British Colonial office (Oduaran, 1994) Then it was taken to mean "Mass Education" and was defined as: A movement designed to promote better living for the whole community with the active participation and, if possible, on the initiative of the community, but if this is not forth coming spontaneously, by the use of techniques for arousing and stimulating it in order to secure its active enthusiastic response to the movement.

The most widely quoted definition of community development is the United Nations definition, which says that: Community development is the process where by efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation, and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress (UN, 1963 cited in Shitu 1999, 2002).

Community development could be conceptualized as a social process by which people become more competent to control local aspects of their economic and social change (Adams, 1984).

In this paper community development is seen as a process or efforts of the people in identifying their own strengths and using the strengths to achieve a desired goals be it educationally, socially, culturally and all other spheres of human endeavour

Appreciative Inquiry and Community Development in Nigeria

Appreciative Inquiry rests on the principle that the recognition of strengths, gifts, talents and assets of individuals and communities is more likely to inspire positive action for change than an exclusive focus on needs and problems. Seeing the glass half-full as well as half empty is not to deny the real problems that a community faces, but to focus energy on how each and every member has contributed, and can continue to contribute, in meaningful ways to community development.

Appreciative inquiry is a process that promotes positive change (in organizations or communities) by focusing on peak experiences and successes of the past. It relies on interviews and story telling that draw out these positive memories, and on a collective analysis of the elements of success. This analysis becomes the reference point for further community action.

According to Elliott (1999: 12), practitioners of appreciative inquiry assume that reality is socially constructed, and that language is a vehicle for reinforcing shared meaning attributed to that reality. Communities that have been defined by their problems (malnutrition, poverty, lack of education, corruption) internalize this negativity. Elliott explains: What the appreciative approach seeks to achieve is the transformation of a culture from one that sees itself in largely negative terms - and therefore is inclined to become locked in its own negative construction of itself - to one that sees itself as having within it the capacity to enrich and enhance the quality of life of all its stakeholders - and therefore move towards this appreciative construction of itself.

Elliott (1999) calls the "heliotropic principle". Just as plants grow towards their energy source, so do communities and organizations move towards what gives them life and energy. To the extent that memory and the construction of everyday reality offer hope and meaning, people tend to move in that direction. Parents and teachers are familiar with this principle; research demonstrates extensively that children's

performance is shaped by teachers' and parents' expectations more than it is by children's own innate ability.

Appreciative Inquiry struggle against the prevailing problem-focus to community development and it's accompanying "deficit mind-set". Schooled as most of us are in identifying, analyzing and providing solutions to problems, a neglect of this analysis may seem naive and misguided, especially if we work for agencies established for a problem-solving mission. Yet such a problem-oriented focus, shared by external agencies and donors alike, may serve to set a negative dynamic in motion whereby communities are overwhelmed by a focus on needs and problems which, in turn, stifle initiative for recovery. Without a doubt, some problems require urgent responses. Other problems, however, may lose their urgency, or be solved indirectly when an unrelated change in activity or circumstance takes place and the energy that was focused on the problem becomes re-focused. Ashford and Patkar (2001.) challenge the problem solver in all of us by quoting from the analyst Carl Jung: All the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble. They can never be solved, only outgrown. This "outgrowing" proves on further investigation to require a new level of consciousness. Some higher or wider interest appeared on the horizon and through this broadening of outlook the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms but faded when confronted with a new and stronger life urge.

Focusing on strengths and capacities is one way in which communities can outgrow a problem, or redefine its solution as a product of renewed collaborative action. It would be misleading to underestimate the challenges of accomplishing this, however. Power asymmetries, the intrusiveness of ideology, and varying levels of commitment to the process may all frustrate effective communication. Yet, Elliott (1999: 285) argues that the process seems to offer community members a more-powerful opportunity to get involved on a more equal basis. Role reversals take place in such settings, at least for the duration of the inquiry. Power asymmetries in the routine of everyday life may return, but "the object of the inquiry is to splice stakeholders so firmly in the process that when pre-inquiry hierarchies are re-established, they are in fact qualitatively different.

Challenges

Like any other participatory approach Appreciative Inquiry is a new approach for community development in Nigeria has the following challenges:

1. Lack of awareness: most members of the community do not know of any role expected of them in other words they do not see themselves as critical stake holders in the development of their communities and as such do not have any role to play.
2. Dependency: most of our communities depend on external agencies for their community development. Our communities relied solely on either governments or other donor agencies for their development.
3. Partisan politics: communities faced a lot of challenges as to the politicization of activities where by people are marginalized on the basis either political affiliation or seen as enemies of the government.
4. Bad community leadership: when leadership of the community is one that does not carry people along or is such that do not see reason in involving the members of the community in any thing that affect their lives.
5. Apathy: most members of the community will show I don't care attitude and will not actively participate in the process because of one reason or the other as such will hamper the process.
6. Lack of Mobilization: these are very critical for any community development as such when people are not mobilized they will not participate and if there is no participation then programmes or projects are bound to fail.

Recommendations

In view of the foregoing the following recommendations are made:

1. Town hall meetings should be regularly organized so that members will be educated and mobilized on the roles expected of them and how the development agenda of the community should be pursued.
2. In each and every community there are members who have one skill or the other as such they should be recognized and roles assigned to them towards their specialization and as such form a think tank committee for the identification of such members of the community.
3. In collaboration with the community leadership groups should be formed in the community that will be saddled with the responsibility of enlightening members on their roles in the development process. A process whereby every member of the community will be responsible in educating or informing his fellow member on the importance of coming together to achieving a desired goal.

4. Every member of the community should be seen as a stake holder in the process and his cooperation is needed towards actualizing the goals of the community. Members should be seen as critical
5. Adult literacy class: should be organized for members of the community who can not read and write or continuing education should be organized for who are unable to finish their studies so as to complete and this will give a platform for also educating the members on the development agenda.

Conclusion

This paper discussed Appreciative Inquiry as a promising strategy for community development in Nigeria. It makes system change processes remarkably pain-free compared to traditional processes. Innovation emerges by fostering both continuity and transition from the best of the past and present into the future. However, if the approach is utilized it can bring out development in the community because the strengths of the members are appreciated. However, the decision to embark on a particular project or programme must originate from the people themselves or through careful analysis of the felt needs of the people concerned. It is a cooperative search for the strengths, passions and life-giving forces that are found within every system those factors that hold the potential for inspired, positive change.

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