Developing Leadership Capacity at the “Grassroots” Level to Alleviate Poverty in Kenya

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Abstract

Poverty is the greatest challenge to economic development in Kenya. It negates many of the positive gains that occur. Estimates indicate that about 56% of Kenyans (~17 million) live in poverty (Government of Kenya, 2003). Although poverty greatly hinders sustainable development, frequently, too little attention is paid to alleviating its fundamental causes.

Kenya’s Kilifi district is one of its poorest regions: 66.8% of its residents live in abject poverty (Government of Kenya, 2002). So, Kilifi was selected as a region in which to pilot a poverty alleviation program. Social and institutional mapping was done to identify key actors engaged in poverty alleviation and to describe their capacity. The process identified strategies used and how to strengthen their effectiveness. Six weaknesses emerged, including lack of involvement by community members in planning programs, i.e., local priorities were not taken into account and donor-driven projects were favored over “grassroots” or community-driven initiatives (Christiansen, 2000).

Subsequently, a program was designed to empower Kilifi’s communities by facilitating their development of poverty alleviation strategies and practices based on local needs. With support of Kenya’s government and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the program focused on five areas, e.g., ensuring gender equity on community leadership councils. This poster presentation describes all six weaknesses and the five program foci.

As an outcome, development agencies are now more responsive to community-driven needs and priorities. They have redefined their entry strategies. Networking among development actors has improved and the duplication of services decreased. Also, inter-sectoral coordination has increased. Moreover, the Kenyan government adopted this approach as a way to more effectively fund communities at the grassroots level as Constituency Development Fund Committees (CDFC).

Keywords: Community Leadership, Kenya, Poverty Alleviation