

Roles for Practitioners and Educators The Self-Help Approach

One of the dominate roles of the practitioner or educator within a university cooperative extension setting is based on the *self-help* approach. *Self-Help* is based on the premise that the people of the community can, should and will solve their own problems. There are three theoretical reasons supporting the notion of the self-help approach. First, the knowledge required to identify the causes underlying the issues facing the community and strategies to address those causes are best found within the community itself. Second, self-identified strategies tend to lead to more sustainable activities within the community. Third, successful self-identified and implemented initiatives build self-reinforcing social capital within the community. The practitioner, or extension educator, is a facilitator of the process and is aimed at extracting local knowledge and solutions.

The practitioner or educator also has the important role of injecting research-based information into the discussion. There is a debate, however, within the profession about the balance of extracting information from within the community and injecting research-based information from outside the community into community discussions. This debate is often discussed in terms of the appropriate balance between process and content. Here process focuses on organizing, facilitating and providing follow-up to community discussions. Content focuses on the information that the educator or practitioner brings to the table.

The debate hinges on the potential biases introduced by the educator in terms of selecting which research-based information to interject into the community discussions versus the very real possibility that the community lacks the necessary information to make informed decisions. Is the premise that the community contains all the knowledge and information that is necessary to make effective decision reasonable? If it is not, then what are the ethical implications if an educator knows that a community is making a decision based on poor, inaccurate or incomplete information? There is an important difference, however, between the community making a poor decision because of the lack of good information and what the educator believes is a poor decision based on preexisting values or beliefs. The challenge is the criteria which defines the “right” or “correct” information to interject into the community conversations.

The self-help approach has also been said to be most appropriate if the community is not well organized and lacking well defined local institutions (e.g., leadership, organizational capacity, active citizen engagement). Economic growth and development presumes that local institutions are in place and are well functioning. It can be said that without these institutions the community is not ready to undertake economic development initiatives. These communities are said to be in need of “community development”. Self-help is almost a necessary approach in building local institutions and community capacities. These can include leadership and volunteer development programs, working with local businesses to form proactive business associations, or helping local governments better understand their potential roles in community economic development.

The advantages of the self-help approach include: it often builds a stronger sense of community; it often evolves into a holistic approach; it builds a self-sustaining ability to deal with new problems; and it allows for community specific solutions. Ideally, an effective self-help approach to community economic development the practitioner can “work themselves out of a job”. In reality, the roles of the practitioner or educator change as the community matures. Some of the disadvantages of the self-help approach include: it works best in smaller communities or neighborhoods and may become unmanageable with larger communities; change is often slow and can feed a sense of frustration within the community about the lack of “seeable” changes; special interests may cloud issues and cause the true community to take a longer time to appear; since the practitioner is concerned about the community learning to do-it-itself, accomplishing specific tasks may be secondary; decisions may be based on impression rather than fact; process can be more important than outcomes. From a funder’s perspective the changes can appear slow and less tangible. The need to document impacts and outcome can be much more difficult with a self-help focused approach.

Because it can be difficult to document and quantify outcomes with a self-help approach to community economic development the practitioner or educator must pay particular attention to objectives. The lack of apparent outcomes can frustrate members of the community and work against the development of the community. To minimize this potential negative aspect the practitioner or educator must have specific benchmarks in mind that can serve not only as touch points for the community. In addition, the identification of these benchmarks can not only help the community identify goals but also be used to document impacts and outcomes. Examples might be the organization of a sub-committee of the local unit of government that focuses on community economic development, or the local chamber of commerce forming an educational committee aimed at providing business development seminars for members.

If the overarching goal of community economic development within a university extension setting is to “help communities make more informed decisions” then the self-help approach has significant potential. It is flexible by design to work in any community, particularly smaller communities or neighborhoods, address a range of issues, and build the capacity of the community to address issues in the future.