
➔ **RWANDA:**
**UBUDEHE COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY ACTION HOLDS HOPE FOR
REBUILDING A SHATTERED SOCIETY**

In a Nutshell

Rwanda provides a promising example of working with rural communities on local development. During the national PRSP process, a pilot project turned to the traditional grass-roots practice of collaborative self-help, known as *ubudehe*, as a basis for planning and implementing development initiatives. The government and donors embraced the strategy, recognizing that communities were capable of defining their own problems, priorities and solutions, and should be backed by supportive policy actions and access to resources.

In the process, a major shift occurred through simplified procedures that made funds more accessible, and ensured that local ideas and commitment could be quickly translated into tangible results. Rwanda now intends to expand the pilot, strengthening community structures and capacities nationwide.

The Story

Prior to colonization, Rwanda had a highly organized traditional system of community development and self-reliance centred on collective action. It was known as *ubudehe*. During Rwanda's PRSP preparation, *ubudehe* was revived as a key strategy to address poverty and support decentralization, drawing on the understanding that the poor often best understand the problems they face and know their priorities, but do not have sufficient information or resources to design effective solutions.

A pilot initiative in the province of Butare involved direct funding of projects identified by communities, including livestock rearing, small animal husbandry and manure production, as well as simple infrastructure such as wells, public standpipes and market stalls. First a community would gather to pin down its most urgent problems, and then it would devise a cost strategy, keeping in mind the need to consider those among the poor who are most vulnerable.

In each instance, one poor family would be selected for consultation on its main concerns and proposals for a solution. Madame Mukagasana Liberata, for example, a 35-year-old widow in one village, had two sons and only one hen, placing her close to the bottom of the economic ladder. She concurred with the community that poor harvests due to infertile soil had become a pressing problem. But most rural people cannot afford to purchase fertilizers and receive limited extension services. So Madame Liberata's community, based on her input, decided to raise goats to provide manure for cultivation. They identified the activities required to carry out this project and calculated a time frame for each activity as well as a budget. With the facilitation of a community development worker, they devised team rules to guide their operations, including implementation and monitoring.

Even before the completion of the PRSP, community initiatives such as these became more meaningful when the government struck an arrangement with the European Union to offer on-site funding of up to \$1,000 following a simple project process analysis. This was considered more directly effective than waiting for the consultation to finish and subjecting community initiatives to the bulky bureaucratic procedures of the government, NGOs and donors.

Working in this way has marked a departure from the heavy-handed, top-down style of the government and the largely prescriptive approach of many donors and NGOs in the past. Yet it has been successful: the government now intends to adopt the Butare pilot countrywide, which will help existing community structures and capacities to flourish. The risk, however, is in the way the system is tied to project grants; it may generate a culture of entitlements rather than genuine self-help.

Still, Rwanda is a nation with deep government commitment and a strong national belief in the importance of taking ownership of its own destiny. There has been political support from the highest levels for the PRSP process, which was launched by the President in 2000 in the National Assembly. This was a symbolic gesture of endorsement and a recognition of the need for partnership with all stakeholders. It also served to legitimize a country-driven process, giving it political momentum and the hope of sustainability. Without strong political backing, the PRSP and the community-based articulation of a local vision for development would not have been possible in a post-conflict country like Rwanda, where national unity, reconciliation and security concerns take precedence. Yet given Rwanda's history of uneven development and acute resource scarcity, a significant and rapid decline in poverty will be a key element in a stable future, one that involves rebuilding community cohesion along with overall national confidence and pride.

Results and Critical Factors

- Instead of introducing new practices and relying on outside expertise to promote local development, the Butare pilot integrated existing community strategies to address development challenges. This helped to empower local communities and ensured strongly anchored local ownership.

- The government's recognition of the need to encourage its people to take greater charge of their own destiny and its commitment to the PRSP process provided an incentive to donors to offer support through government channels, while giving communities the confidence to take the lead in their own development.
- By simplifying rules and procedures for accessing funds, and by allowing direct and rapid support for community projects even before the end of the PRSP preparations, mutual trust grew between local communities and external agents. The experience also expanded community capacities to communicate and negotiate the course of development from their own perspective.
- With assistance from the government and development partners where necessary, Rwanda now intends to adopt and replicate the community-based approach across the country. It will be used to develop a core training module, which will be integrated into the training component of the national decentralization programme. The Ministry of Local Government will also seek to institutionalize participatory planning and management through community development committees as one of the strategies for poverty reduction.

Further information

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