

# Decisive action approach

Jane Kamau reports on a workshop geared to overcome poverty

A workshop held recently in Johannesburg encouraged delegates to share their experiences in the struggle to eradicate poverty in Africa.

Jointly hosted by the Khanya-Africa Institute for Community-Driven Development (Khanya-aicdd) and the European Union's Conference Workshop Cultural Initiative, with the support of the Southern Africa Trust, the workshop focused on a regional project, learning about action learning (LAL), to explore the potential of various techniques to make the struggle against poverty more effective.

The main objective of the project is to develop a shared understanding of effective action learning in Southern and Eastern Africa to improve the development and implementation of policies and practices that effectively benefit the poor.

The abolition of poverty is one of the principal aims of the Southern Africa Trust, an independent regional non-profit agency in South Africa.

Khanya-aicdd works with partners to transform development systems to promote the livelihoods of the poor, using action learning and action research as central techniques. The approach has been used successfully by the organisation and its partners in various projects in a number of African countries, exerting a significant influence on policy and practice in the region.

At the start of the workshop, Khanya-aicdd research manager Stephen Greenberg said that traditional developmental approaches are extractive in nature and the poor are treated as passive subjects whose knowledge is drawn from them and then analysed and distributed elsewhere, without making significant changes in their lives. Action learning strongly recommends the active participation and empowerment of people in the process — a development agenda is outlined by them and not by an external "expert". The process sees partners identifying their problems as well as potential solutions to maintain commitment and ownership in development projects, thereby improving their effect and

sustainability.

Dr Ian Goldman, chief executive of Khanya-aicdd, said: "Action learning is learning from experience and changing what you do from this. The first step is the reflection process — reflect on lessons from past experiences to avoid repeating mistakes."

He said development models in Africa must be rethought, since they are based often on colonial models, to bring development to the region's communities.

"The Southern Africa Trust has become a key partner and has funded various Khanya-aicdd projects, including this one," Goldman said. "Much development in Africa has come from outside and we need to develop our own processes. We need to move towards people leading their own development process, supported by a responsive state and other non-state institutions. Using action learning means we learn from our experience, that of our neighbours, move on and act accordingly. If we do this, we can change the world."

Three practical experiences of action learning projects were discussed at the LAL workshop, all of which are having significant effects on policy and practice in the region. They include:

- A four-country community-based worker project, implemented by organisations in South Africa, Lesotho, Kenya and Uganda, to strengthen the delivery and effect of local services in the natural resource and HIV/Aids sectors through improved systems.

Patrick Mbulu of Khanya-AICDD, who presented the case study, said: "The role of action learning is to adapt to what is working for a policy impact by linking issues at community level. The community best knows its needs."

The project was managed in a decentralised manner to support



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the emergence of a national process in each country, which would mainstream community-based services. As a result, Lesotho is planning a national system of community animal health workers.

- The Chivi Food Security project in Zimbabwe was initiated as a response to persistent local food insecurity and the need to improve services to subsistence farmers. Kuda Murwira, initiator of the project, said: "This was a demand-driven project that made the community aware of the resources available to them which they can convert into wealth and eventually change the agricultural extension system in Zimbabwe. Although the project ended some time ago, you can still see practical impacts on the ground — such as youth exploring income-generating projects like ecotourism."

- A project focusing on the forestry sector and agricultural advisory service reforms was initiated in Uganda and piloted alternative models for forestry advisory services. In 1999 the government of Uganda started a process of major policy and institutional reforms, both in the provision of agricultural advisory services and in the forestry sector. In 2001 a process to rethink forestry extension services began, building on learning from what was happening in the eight districts to design appropriate extension services.

Madira Davidson, who manages Bucodo, one of the community-based organisations supported by the project, said the government and community now work together for the benefit of society. One of the results of the use of community forestry workers is that the cultivation of pineapples and medicinal plants was successfully commercialised as agro-forestry.

The learning about action learning project demonstrates that such an approach can ensure all partners are actively involved in taking development forward, with significant effects on policies and practices that support the livelihoods of the poor.

## Overcoming poverty through inclusive policy dialogue

There are numerous people and organisations working to end poverty, to varying degrees of success. By talking to each other and working together, we are able to multiply efforts aimed at eliminating poverty in southern Africa.

The Southern Africa Trust was therefore established to promote and facilitate regional policy dialogue for an inclusive approach to the challenges of overcoming poverty in the SADC region.

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