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Empowerment Evaluation in Spain: The Critical Friend Role in Working with Rural Communities

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Abstract

Rural communities in Cuenca (Spain) are characterized by a great social dislocation, mostly due to the low population density in these areas. In this way, the existence of groups of citizens able to be active agents of their development process is a critical aspect for any community-based development process in this Spanish region. The Institute of Community Development of Cuenca (IDC) has been working with this type of groups for the last 30 years focusing on the organizational empowerment of the rural communities. Main tools in this process have been the empowerment evaluation approach and the critical friend role when helping the groups to achieve their objectives and reinforcing them. This chapter analyses the empowerment process and how the critical friend role is nourished by the facilitator figure.

Keywords: Empowerment, evaluation, critical friend, facilitator, workgroup;

1. Introduction

The concept of endogenous development (Musto, 1985; Haan & Van der Ploeg, 1992; Van der Ploeg & Long, 1994) has been the source of numerous debates and definitions, although a general agreement was reached that local participation was required and should be encouraged by specific forms of local organization (Stöhr, 1981; Bryden & Scott, 1990). These development approaches are also bounded to concepts such as learning and capacity building, what leads to the implementation of participatory approaches also in the evaluation activities (Díaz-Puente et al.,

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2008). Under that perspective, evaluation tools are used intending both, the evaluation itself and the organizational empowerment of the community (Fetterman, 1994a). These participatory approaches rely on the existence of local organizations (Bryden & Scott 1990; Stöhr 1981), or functional groups of citizens able to be active agents of their own development process (Ware, 1954). However, in the majority of cases, these groups are not created spontaneously but require an external stimulus (FAO, 1999) which corresponds to institutions and external agents that support community development (Cinnéide, 1987; Shucksmith, 2000). External agents intend to open channels of participation through which people identify and prioritize their needs, and to boost the design of measures that will respond to these needs (Porzecanski, 1983; Klsnerman, 1986). This is the case of the Institute of Community Development of Cuenca −IDC−. This Institute includes evaluation tools and facilitation in its work for the mobilization and acquisition of skills in the stakeholders of development programs. Within this empowerment process, capacities regarding the work group are especially relevant since these communities in Cuenca are specially dislocated, greatly due to the low population density that creates isolation in its inhabitants. Empowerment evaluation is a valuable tool in that process since it allows the stakeholders to realize which are their situations, and then, decide where they could go. Thus the evaluator becomes a facilitator in participatory evaluations (Díaz-Puente et al., 2008). After dealing with the empowerment process in the community, this chapter will discuss the relationships between the figure of the facilitator (Valqui, 2004; Kaner, 2007; Vachon, 2001; Hogan, 2003) and the empowerment evaluator as a critical friend (Fetterman, 1994b; 2001; 2005). Both figures will enrich and complement each other in various attributes and features; especially regarding the needed organizational capacity building to successfully face the changes and challenges presented. This chapter analyses four case studies in which IDC has been working many years ago with four different groups. The groups were chosen using the following criteria: 1) the reasons that led to the population creating the workgroup−motivated by IDC or by the population−; 2) the groups' current situations−active or not−; 3) the type of legal structure −cooperative, professional association, etc.−; and 4) territorial representation from the Province of Cuenca. Workshops and questionnaires were performed in each group in order to evaluate the empowerment process carried out by IDC with these groups through the empowerment evaluation approach and the critical friend role as a complement to the facilitator role.

2. Context

The IDC Cuenca and its field of operations are outlined below. It is a non-profit association founded in 1984 with the intention of promoting community development in depressed rural areas within the province of Cuenca, Spain.

2.1. Institutional context: The IDC Cuenca

The association currently has a staff of 19 workers with a range of profiles covering areas such as business, social and environmental sciences, legal, artistic, administrative and engineering capabilities. For over 30 years, IDC has been working to achieve three main objectives: (1) to upgrade human resources and the structure of society in order to encourage a process of development within a framework of equality that improves quality of life and avoids further depopulation; (2) to preserve and enhance the regional identity, rural culture and natural resources; and (3) to promote entrepreneurship through the workgroup and the incorporation of new techniques and technologies improving their economic activities, and thus generating alternatives to improve life quality. These objectives are approached through the use of evaluation tools combined with the critical friend (Fetterman, 2001) and facilitator (-Valqui, 2004) roles fostering the empowerment of the community through a working process with the community. This empowerment is intended to build capacities to enable people work together for improving their quality life.

2.2. Regional background: The province of Cuenca

The province of Cuenca is located in the central-eastern portion of the Iberian Peninsula, in the Autonomous Community of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain (figure 1). The province covers 17,141 km2 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2008a) and has 217,363 inhabitants (INE, 2009). Regarding rural areas, almost 80% (186 municipalities) have a population density of less than 10 inhabitants per km2, and 111 municipalities have less than

4 persons per km2 (INE, 2008b), well below the national average of 90.6 inhabitants per km2 (INE, 2010) and the European Union average of 113.5 inhabitants per km 2 (INE, 2010). Spain's Sustainable Rural Development Program for 2010-2014 (regulated by Law 45/2007) classifies three of the five regions of Cuenca as development targets due to low population density, the predominance of agricultural activity, low income levels, the significant extent of its geographic isolation and the difficulties of regional restructuring. The two remaining regions are classified as intermediate rural areas (Ministerio de Medio Ambiente Rural y Marino [MARM], 2010).

2.3. Working groups

Location of working groups within the study area is detailed on figure 1. Regarding the working groups, Villarejo-Periesteban is a municipality with 600 inhabitants. IDC started to work there with empowerment evaluation in 2000, evaluating the infrastructure and capacity needs in the area. After this process, some farmers started a cooperative to build a gas station for the farmers and dispatchers, in order to get cheaper fuel, and thus, make these products more competitive in the market. The cooperative started with 48 members, nowadays it has 178. In 2005, IDC started to work with a farmers group founded by farmers from seven different municipalities. IDC started an evaluation work with these farmers focusing on the low yields they get, and trying to find new crops allowing better revenues. IDC also facilitated through workshops and further evaluations the implementation of new crops by this farmers group, which became a professional association of farmers, called APACAAL, and located in Huete. After this facilitation process, in 2009, farmers returned to the old crops due to the lack of involvement with the association. Las Valeras is a municipality with 1500 inhabitants located 38 km far from Cuenca, the capital city. The woodworking industry is the main economic activity, and in 2002, IDC carried out an evaluation focusing on the quality of this industry and its role on the competitiveness of this economic sector. After this process, the entrepreneurs realized the importance of creating and association within the municipality, but finally, only 18 out of 60 decided to create the association. Nowadays the association does not exist. El Picazo is a municipality with 800 inhabitants, where horticulture is the main economic activity. In this case, IDC applied the empowerment evaluation tools through some training courses, where the farmers evaluated the technological development of their farms, and developed possible ways to improve the quality of their productions. After these courses some farmers decided to implement some technological improvements on their farms, which leaded them to more quality production. These farmers decided to create a quality label in 2002 in order to make a difference on their production. Nowadays the farmers consider that this quality label is not generating enough difference on their production, and the stopped to use it.
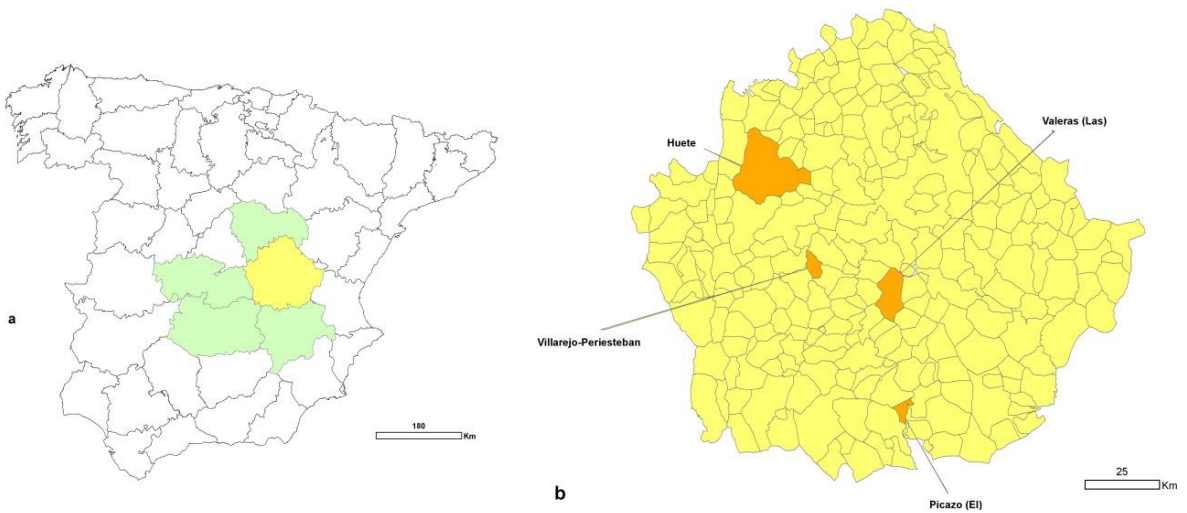

Fig. 1. (a) Peninsular Spain and location of Cuenca province, and the Autonomous Community of Castilla-La-Mancha. (b) Cuenca Province and location of the four analyzed working groups.

3. Results

Some of the main results of this research are now outlined. Results are structured around two main topics: the organizational empowerment process, and the critical friend role.

3.1. Concerning the critical friend and facilitator role

The critical fried role is contrasted and expanded through the analysis of the role taken by each of the facilitators involved in the process of these four groups. One of the most important roles to take at the beginning of the process is that of a leader (Díaz-Puente et al., 2008; Sorensen & Epps, 1996). Although the individuals involved in the different activities have a common need and participate freely, the facilitators are the ones who present proposals, encourage action and suggest approaches. In fact, during the workshops, initiatives suggested by the facilitators were always scored positively and identified as "good projects that generated many opportunities". Until the attitude of commitment of the group is enough to perform all these functions, the authority of the facilitator is sometimes hierarchical. However, once the group has started to work, the authority becomes cooperative in nature – similar to the critical friend role−. The workshop attendees claim that, on the one hand the facilitator "suggests different activities", and on the other hand participants end up "deciding" which ones to carry out by them. At that moment the critical friend role is more evident because the facilitator is cooperating with the group, but not leading it. Facilitators –such as critical friends− have real interest in the success of the program because they believe in the positive contributions it will have for the communities. When the group begins working, critical situations may arise when dealing with certain personal attitudes which have to be addressed on an individual basis (Vachon, 2001). In these cases the role of coach becomes necessary: "At the beginning, Javi came every weekend to show us how to do things…". Facilitators take the role of coaches regarding needed capacities or unknown tasks that the group should accomplish. In addition, facilitators must prepare people to gradually introduce other skills and attitudes, for example, by spreading responsibilities, obligations. Both aspects are well present in the critical friend figure. As the group is being consolidated, the facilitators will stop being leaders and will become guides for the group, providing professional and technical services (Fuks, 2009): "When we had any doubts, we called Javier…". "They helped us with the paperwork for requesting subsidies, advising where we needed to take it, who we had to call…". The role of leader should be assumed by a member or members within the group. However, the leader does not have exactly the same role as the facilitator had at the beginning. All the members of the group should be actives and take action by themselves, while leaders should purely ensure an organisational environment (Sorensen y Epps, 1996). Since the leadership is carried out by a member or members of the group, facilitator's authority should begin to move from cooperative to autonomous. The group keep deciding by itself, but its behaviour should be more independent regarding the facilitator. The skills they have acquired needed to be tested. The success of the facilitator role involves the group being able to continue and develop into an autonomous group once the facilitator has gone (Valqui, 2009). When the facilitator leaves, the group should not only suggest ideas and objectives, it should also discover how to achieve them; find out opportunities; carry out needed training actions; seek advice in specific situations; and motivate and continue to grow in confidence and involovement. The group should carry out all the functions that the facilitator did. This is the reason for the transfer of the facilitator's roles to the members of the group through the empowerment process is so important. If this transfer is not carried out properly, the group will have a limited existence. During the workshops, it was observed how people made reference to the lack of some of these capacities, stating that "when the facilitator left, the meetings finished…"; "the need for someone from the outside to encourage, motivate and drive them…" and how "they miss the specialised support".

3.2. Regarding the organizational empowerment

Through the working group and the facilitator figure, people and also the whole group, mobilize their skills so that they become the protagonists of their own development (De los Ríos et al., 2011). The improvement in technical skills is very highly scored among participants in the groups analysed. However, the skills that help them to face at future problems have higher scores. Among these skills the ability to propose new challenges in the community is the most highly scored, followed by the ability to take responsibilities, and the ability to solve

problems. At that concern, the results obtained from this analysis shows that, in spite of the capacities built within members of the groups, not enough work was carried out in order for them to have complete independence. 3 out of 4 groups did not work together no longer after facilitator left the group. Suggesting ideas, improvements or plans have not value if they are not viable or not suitably organized (Prendiville, 2004).

4. Conclusions

IDC facilitates the creation of working groups through empowerment evaluation tools. An organizational empowering process intending groups became completely autonomous is carried out through the facilitator and critical friend roles. During this process—variable across groups (Prendiville, 2004)—it is necessary for the individuals to understand the importance of group work and to be able to acquire those capacities, skills and attitudes that allow them to be absolutely independent once the facilitator leaves. In order to achieve this, the facilitator should be able to transfer those capacities, skills and attitudes to the individuals and the whole group. At the beginning of this process the leader role becomes very important to assure the group development. Then, as the group grows, members should take the leader role and they have to make decisions on their own. At this moment the facilitator becomes a group guide. Finally, when facilitator has gone, the group should be completely autonomous, and members have to be able to implement all the capacities built in this process. Concerning the role of the critical friend in the organizational empowerment carried out in this process, the leader and guide roles nourish the cooperation role normally taken by critical friends as empowerment evaluators.

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