

# NGOs need to be more businesslike: Part 2



## GLOBAL INSIGHT BY DR TINASHE KAPUYA

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Implementing development projects is technically challenging and demands a degree of finesse in handling relationships at ground level that cannot be presumed or easily taught.

Simon Leshoai, a development practitioner at Seriti Institute, argues that establishing sound community relationships remains the foundation of attaining desired project results. He stresses, however, that community relationships not only supply the much-needed enabling environment, but can also become the stumbling block that stalls progress and sinks intervention programmes.

"Dealing with relationships is an extremely tricky affair, especially in a large community with various groups, which at times, have diverse interests. The idea is to ensure that one understands what is important to the various groups and try to balance and align their interests to those of the project," he says.

Leshoai understands this all too well due to his extensive experience in community engagement activities under the Community Works Programme (CWP).

"Initiating a project in a new area is particularly challenging because you also have to learn the community culture, and identify the key power brokers and community leaders. Forming good relationships with these particular individuals is the key to get community buy-in," he says.

"As an outsider to the community, a project implementer's critical role is that of constant bargaining with the community's power brokers. They are not just chiefs, councillors and political figures, but can also be self-appointed gatekeepers who have assumed the role of community leadership."

Leshoai says the dynamics of relationship building and strengthening can be challenging because some individuals can try to use their positions to extract favours and rent from the project.

"It is always important to maintain your integrity and take a principled stand against corruption and nepotism. The safest way to achieve this is to remain transparent in the way you deal with the community, and to promote a culture of accountability and fairness."

He says this requires a special level of skill because it involves managing some influential power brokers who can easily stall the project if implementers do not yield to their pressures.

Based on a decade of CWP implementation, the key lessons that Leshoai draws from his role is that programme interventions ought to come from the community and be driven by the community. This is underpinned by community volunteerism.

### CASE STUDY: HARRISMITH

Leshoai reflects on his experience in Harrismith, KwaZulu-Natal, which was one of his first experiences in implementing CWP activities. Harrismith had developed a reputation for being a hotbed for service delivery protests, where communities often took to the streets lambasting poor governance.

"However, implementing CWP in Harrismith completely changed the mindset of the communities there because it shifted the responsibility of service delivery from the local government to the communities themselves. The community was responsible for building and maintaining the infrastructure, and this created a sense of ownership. The cultural influence of CWP was to create agency by helping communities realise that they are responsible for their own well-being and have the power to change their own circumstances."

Achieving this kind of impact is attributed to the bottom-up approach, which now forms the basis of conventional wisdom in the development world.

One critical strength that Leshoai points to as a rare skill in the development space is managing large-scale community projects such as those typically established through CWP sites.

"With various communities having different norms and institutions to manage social conflicts, programmes typically have to come with a standard baseline set of rules and procedures that can be used to resolve conflicts within participating social groups. These rules are not meant to replace existing social norms, but rather to extend some of the fundamentals of *ubuntu* to guide and shape social behaviour within the project."