

Knowledge-based community development

Esfandiar Abbassi, Systems Analyst, IKEN, Iran

Expressions such as “knowledge management,” “learning organization,” and “innovation mindset” have entered the productivity lexicon in a fundamental way. In productivity circles, there is a discernible shift in emphasis from tangible assets, like land, capital, and machinery, to intangible resources, such as knowledge, ideas, and organizational capacity.

It is also widely recognized that knowledge management is not a concern of big businesses alone. In this rapidly changing and highly competitive electronic age, SMEs and local communities also need to consider knowledge as a basic requirement for better decision making. However, adopting a knowledge-based approach in community development is a formidable challenge.

In commerce and industry, IT, the Internet, and a whole set of knowledge management systems and practices have provided an almost universal framework and tool for knowledge exchange and application. At the local community level, however, social and cultural differences among various stakeholders (i.e., male, female, young, old, local, and professional) present serious barriers to effective knowledge management. Through the Internet, television, and other multimedia facilities, most local communities now know more about what is available in distant cities than they do about local capabilities and opportunities. This knowledge imbalance is posing a critical challenge to promoting and encouraging local self-help activities.

One answer to this challenge is the Facilitation for Integrated Community Development (F-ICD) program of the Iran-based NGO called Indigenous Knowledge and Ecovillage Network (IKEN). The F-ICD is the outcome of a three-year systems-action research (SAR) study commissioned by the Iranian Ministry of Jihad for Agriculture (MJA). During this period, a process of participatory resource management and development planning has transformed Khorhe, a rural community of 300 households in central Iran, from an economically depressed village into a vibrant and productive community. Training in the F-ICD approach is now available to local extension workers nationwide. Provincial- and district-level workshops are organized by MJA extension staff. More than 200 local activists have already received training in F-ICD.

A typical three-day F-ICD training program covers the following: Matrix for local research, thinking, and innovation (MRTI); Interpersonal communications skills; Producers’ thinking process (PTP); and Vision building and intercommunity networking. The F-ICD program elements are noteworthy in four respects:

1. It focuses on the intuitive potential of the human mind, regardless of a trainee’s literacy skills or educational level. MRTI is a visual and memorable tool to help local people acquire, organize, and use knowledge for innovation.
2. It sensitizes people to the potential of local knowledge in problem solving, like environmental conservation, caring, sharing, creative thinking in resources development, and honesty in social and business dealings.
3. It provides information on all aspects of production, marketing and sales, and distribution. PTP is a visual checklist to teach local people productivity planning.



A scene from Khorhe village

4. It provides a new vision of the village as an international community where the people, although they live and work in a village, are also aware they are part of the national and global communities.

The F-ICD experience in Iran has confirmed that the use of knowledge management principles and tools can effectively facilitate a process of endogenous and sustainable community development without substantial outside professional involvement. Some of the local initiatives undertaken in this program have included: the introduction of new marketing techniques; product design for job creation; organizing cooperative school bus shuttles; and reviving natural farming. However, F-ICD performance has not been uniform across the board. It has proven more effective in communities where the socio-cultural conditions approximate those of Khorhe village. This brings to light the importance of a “contextualized” approach to community development. IKEN is currently working to gain the MJA’s support for conducting SAR studies in regions with distinctly different socio-cultural characteristics. 