

**Advances in Business-related Scientific Research Conference 2013 in Venice
(ABSRC 2013 Venice)
March 20-22, 2013, Venice, Italy**

**ORGANIZATION FOR RESEARCH AND COMMUNITY
DEVELOPMENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH AND
INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION IN THE IMPROVEMENT AND
EMPOWERMENT OF TARGETED COMMUNITIES IN AFGHANISTAN**

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Abstract

The Organization for Research and Community Development was established in response to the perceived humanitarian needs to fill a very significant gap in addressing the unmet needs of the target communities in Afghanistan. This paper will describe the development of the organization and its unique approach to improving the overall health and well-being in its target communities. ORCD achieves its aims by building local capacities, generating evidence in various disciplines, promoting evidence-based best practices, and implementing developmental projects aimed at community development at the grass root level. The decentralized fashion relays chiefly on energetic, dynamic and young professionals as frontline workers. Utilizing a cross-cultural and multi-national advisory board, with representatives from various disciplines, ORCD has been able to break down barriers to accomplish its goals. This paper describes the development of the organization, and how research and international collaboration has contributed to its growth and success.

Key Words: Evidence-based, best practice, decentralization, innovative ventures, new paradigm

Topic Groups: Economic growth; Industry, area, or region-specific studies

INTRODUCTION

The Organization for Research and Community Development was established in response to the perceived humanitarian needs in order to fill a very significant gap in addressing the unmet needs of the target communities. The founders of ORCD believed that the humanitarian measures aimed at improving the livelihoods of people around the globe have not been sufficiently met (Walker, 2004) thus, warranting a paradigm shift which is deemed mandatory for a number of reasons. Despite the international presence in Afghanistan with over 60 nations engaged in providing assistance, it was believed that the money pouring in did not have a sound professional and internationally linked setup for effective management. (Overseas Development Institute, 2003) The suffering of the people has continued despite the efforts which were perceived to be insufficient and poorly controlled. ORCD was indeed conceived as an idea and evolved into a sophisticated approach through which local, national, regional and international expertise is consolidated as one of the appropriate solutions to the noticed misery.

A team of dynamic professionals noticed that almost all aid programs in Afghanistan were administered in a centralized fashion and this was counter-productive, and thus did not produce the desired results. (Strand, 2002) This remarkably hindered the effective use of resources. Continuing with a centralized approach was detrimental to the development of programs but as 'double-edge sword' the potential of local level capacities remained steadily suppressed. Aid programs were inefficient and communities were ignored, and were strapped of a genuine sense of ownership that was critical to the sustainability of the program interventions. The younger generation often the most dynamic, energetic, and most favorable segment remained marginalized, and thus depriving the energy of a significant portion of the population and they remained systematically un-utilized. (Morris, 2011)

Given these unfavorable situations, a number of young professionals in various disciplines (health, agriculture, research, education, community development) believed a paradigm shift was crucially needed. These professionals believed the unmet humanitarian needs should be examined from a broader global dimension. (McGoldrick, 2011) It was agreed that a pool of international expertise should be created to fulfill this new paradigm. An extensive search and identification was carried out both at a national and international level with each expert's skills consulted, analyzed and catalogued. From amongst these experts an international advisory group was formed with its core members from the academia departments since our focal goal is to produce innovative ventures that are evidence-based, cost-effective and efficient. The results of these extensive collaborations and support from international consultants materialized into the establishment of ORCD.

ORCD Afghanistan is now being replicated in other countries, and a global organization is under construction. The success of ORCD is apparent as donors vigorously infused them with funding within the last two years. (ORCD, 2012) Many countries need these types of innovative ventures that can address their issues at the grass root level, and their needs are more acute than ever. ORCD can serve to fulfill their needs at three levels: feasibility study, impact evaluation

and developing projects. The growth of ORCD is a strange occurrence as it is based on the core values of decentralization, and hence, it is without a global office although its paradigm has already been adopted by Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Albania and the United States. This dilemma of rapid expansion into many countries is the main reason that a global head office is needed to ensure the quality or consistency of its core values of sustainability, equality and accessibility. Alas, ORCD Global is born to serve its sister organizations as a liaison office unit that assists them in their consistent growths.

THEORY

Afghanistan is a perfect example to illustrate the unique approaches of ORCD. During the last decade or so, there are over 60 nations from the international community engaging in providing assistance of all sorts without evidence of success of contribution to the local industries. (Rahmani, 2012) ORCD believes that these activities are ineffective management, not evidence-based and centralized that resulted in counter-production and not impacting the lives of ordinary citizens positively. These are the reasons for a paradigm shift and the ground evidences to establish ORCD.

Humanitarian efforts need effective management system that are professionally setup and partnering with many international experts. ORCD find this an important factor to be able to access resources not possible as a single entity, and that by sharing costs and skills it can advance its agendas without obstacles and biases. Moreover, the mission of ORCD can be maintained neutral without religious and governmental influences. For example, the local Bangladesh's environmental non-profit organizations despite resistances from governmental agencies were able to successfully impact laws to prevent environmental damages. All of these successes were due to collaborative supports from many international players in a systemic and accountable management. (Ahsan, DelValls and Blasco, 2009)

Research is potentially effective in contributing to the achievement of community development related objectives by empowering communities especially the marginalized groups. (Barr, 2005) For this reason, ORCD adopts feasibility study approach before initiating a project to identify the most need and ensures that the designed interventions could be feasibly implemented. This is called the adoption of "science to service". (August, Gewirtz and Realmuto, 2010) Research is important because it identified not only the 'what' but also the 'how'. This sort of evidence-based practice is seen successfully translated in a community-based obesity prevention program. (King *et al.*, 2011) It is because of research that Berhane and Gardebreek (2011) was able to identify that the full benefits of microfinance in Ethiopia could be realized only if the borrowers maintain a longer relationship.

Decentralization approach is considered the most favorable technique to truly impact the lives of ordinary citizens positively. However, this is not always the case in Afghanistan as the past has indicated that almost all aid programs here were administered centrally without sufficient improvement about the livelihoods of people. ORCD believes that decentralization brings the effects of competitiveness to improve services, management system and organizational effectiveness. (Kolehmainen-Aitken, 2000, p. 24) This approach is so important that already the

political arena is adopting this practice. (Lockwood, 2002) Unlike centralization, the approach can be sensitized at a regional or local level to fill an enormous gap in addressing the unmet needs of the targeted communities by effective usage of limited resources.

The sufferings of the Afghanistan people could continue even with efforts of the aid programs. The time has come for a paradigm shift to adopt a sophisticated approach that encompasses multinational management, evidence-based best practice and a decentralized approach. ORCD is entrusted with this idea as the appropriate solution to the noticed misery of the people at the local, regional, national and even international level.

METHODS

The methodology of ORCD is based on its simple and clear objectives as reflected on its mission statement and vision. It aims to perform community initiatives for cultivating and isolating efficient and cost-effective outcomes. It believes that this is only possible through managing risks and leveraging by adopting an approach that is based on evidence and best practices from around the world. Thus, ORCD seek a mixed and international collaboration of experts that used feasibility or evidence-based studies and a strong management team.

First, ORCD has been actively and still is seeking international partners that hold professional qualifications and expertise to share common goals. It considered this as a strong foundational step especially from a global perspective to establish a robust international network that it can tap essential resources from. ORCD has already established sister organizations under similar vision and mission in different countries. As Wang *et al* (2010) said that almost all decision-making at the grass root level is complicated by many shareholders and it is best to have everybody 'on board' initially. Hansen and Spitzeck (2011) have shown that many positive effects can be achieved with cooperation between non-profit organizations and corporations. This is because the proper positioning of projects or mechanisms help to stimulate and identify innovative solutions that can have a wide global impact.

Second, ORCD would like to achieve its desired strategic goals by conducting research in various fields and designing solutions accordingly. Hence, prior to starting a project in the province of Afghanistan, ORCD conducts research in the form of feasibility studies. The aim of the research is to determine which segment of a particular population is most needy. In addition, it also explores interventions that could be applied easily before implementing in that area. ORCD uses the findings from the research to ensure that the 'would-be implemented' project is align with the needs of the target population, and that all interventions have a higher level of acceptability among the population. Hoagland and Williamson (2000) stated that it is important to conduct a feasibility study prior to warrant a project is practical and sustainable.

Last, ORCD believed a successfully operated company or organization depends on the management and implementation perspectives. It is because community development and research is a complex process. Therefore, ORCD tends to empower the peripheral structures through a decentralization process in the earlier phase to prevent wasteful navigation. The aim of this approach is to enable peripheral level team members to 'problem-solve' using local

solutions. (Aarons, Hurlburt and Horwitz, 2011) Finally, there are intrinsic and heuristic values to adopt a decentralized approach because it would lead to a better practice of sustainable development.

FINDINGS

ORCD has already established four provincial offices in Afghanistan in less than two years of existence, and they are strategically expanding until all provinces are covered. This rapid expansion was due to the gain of trust and support of national and international donors that are committed to local capacity building. Some of these donors include Federal Republic of Germany (GiZ-DETA), Aga Khan Foundation, and the UN Women. The projected operating budget for ORCD would exceed USD 600,000 in 2013 compared to the USD 110,000 in 2012, and this is a significant improvement of donors' funding for a start-up organization.

ORCD presence is active at the national development level in fields of agriculture, health and education. Not only is ORCD a trustable partner of donors but also, the communities willingly welcome its involvements. This is made possible by maintaining strong technical and financial management systems that aligned with internationally accepted standards. Furthermore, the guidance of international advisors from the USA, UK, Canada, Middle East and Asian countries potentially boost its efforts and added prestige to the organization. ORCD is a non-profit organization in Afghanistan without any political and religious agendas.

As an active member of the Alliance of Health NGOs network, ORCD is registered with Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Public Health, and Ministry of Women Affairs in Afghanistan. The reputation of ORCD far exceeded the national level, and its model is copied as sister organizations in Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Jordan, Nigeria, Albania, Nicaragua and USA. For this reason, a global office is underway to serve as an umbrella for all ORCD organizations in the world.

Lessons Learned

- Assessment of the market is a very effective strategy for determining priorities of a project
- Establishing inexpensive locally adopted interventions would have much likelihood of replication as compared to those requiring a higher cost
- Maintaining effective relationship with communities, district authorities and beneficiaries is key to the success of the project
- Mobilizing national and international specialists as well as their technical assistance is highly useful for bringing a positive change in the lives of ordinary people
- Involvement of stakeholders especially provincial-level governments in the design and implementation of project is equally important and their collaborations should always remain one of the guiding principles of the project implementation
- The insights of communities about the timing and milestones activities related to any project is central to smooth implementation of project

- Orienting community development councils (CDCs) on the criteria of selecting beneficiary is highly effective in reducing errors in determining beneficiaries who are most in need of services

Accomplishments

The flagship of ORCD is a project funded by GiZ-DETA, and was successfully implemented in the Baghlan province. This is an initiative that assists farmers to improve their livelihood, income and food security through improved production and marketing. Farmers are provided with updated and efficient farming procedures, and good seeds stock. They are persuaded to grow vegetables instead of poppy. Throughout this project, ORCD has assisted 250 farmers in the rural areas. The success is owed to an extensive survey and research into the development of local sustainability.

Apart from the above success, ORCD also had the following major accomplishments during 2012:

1. Successful implementation of a baseline household nutrition survey in Kandahar province
2. Increase the confidence of target communities in Baghlan province for outstanding performance in health service delivery
3. Nomination to Work Life Balance Award
4. Successful completion of pilot literacy training program for 25 women in one of the remote villages of Afghanistan where literacy rate for female is almost 99.9%
5. Effectively utilizing media through organizing live programs on radio for supporting the projects implemented by ORCD
6. Conducting trainings to vulnerable women in Daikundi province aimed at women empowerment
7. Establishing shelter program and provision of legal counseling to women at risk in Afghanistan

DISCUSSION

The today's success of ORCD Afghanistan was inspired by the events of aid programs administration over the last 10 years. Traditionally, these programs are managed in a centralized fashion that was counter-productive and produces futile results. Resultantly, they have prevented the effective allocation of donated resources. Although this centralization management was crucial for the growth of the programs but it is like a 'double-edged sword' with consequences:

- The possibilities of local capacities are hold back
- The aid programs at most are inefficient and ineffective
- The local communities are ignored, have not ownership or empowerment, and consequently the sustainability of the program is affected

- The dynamic structure of a favorable younger generation continues to be marginalized and not reaps any benefits about the programs

Finally, a group of like-minded young professionals from various fields got together and created a new paradigm. This shift of paradigm actualized into the formation of ORCD. The founding fathers of ORCD believe and trust that humanitarian needs must be tackled from a global scale with research, international consultation and decentralized management.

Challenges

1. Finding qualified staff at peripheral level is key to accelerate decentralization. ORCD has faced problems in expediting decentralization of project due to scarcity of local level qualified staff. It is mitigating this problem by temporarily centralizing a provincial level setup until it gains sufficient capacity for managing the projects independently.
2. Lack of funding opportunities for ORCD because it is a newly established organization. ORCD is challenged to compete with experienced organizations because many donors tend to give funding to those with long experiences.
3. Insecurity and treacherous geography especially in rural areas make its work more demanding.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The lessons learned from ORCD could pave the way for building a rewarding business model that can be applied in other countries to improve the economic and social health of struggling communities. The model of business is desirable because it increases development outcomes via constant feasibility checks and studies. It solves an important challenge often encountered by most organizations, and that is, the issue of sustainability (Swart, Raskin and Robinson, 2004) via a multi-national talent pool and decentralization process. The new paradigm has already provided Afghanistan with transformative changes that are scalable to larger projects and areas. This is evidenced by the acceptance and expansion throughout the provinces of its best practice. Furthermore, many countries are adopting its dogma and establishing themselves as sister organizations in alignment with the new values. They believed that this is the best pathway of meeting humanitarian needs finally. ORCD is quite possibly the answer to augment a sustainable development, and satisfying new criteria of donors that are already looking for companies with innovative solutions and ventures.

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