

Kenya: working for viability through project partners

Mirza Jahani

Mirza Jahani is the Regional Chief Executive Officer of the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) in East Africa. In this article, which is based on an interview with Jim Smale, he describes the approach of AKF to community development in Kenya: that it is by maximising the potential of communities to achieve social, economic and political viability that sustained development can be achieved. Within this broad approach, holistic early childhood development (ECD) programmes have their key places and roles – and the best chance of being sustained.

ECD has always been a core concern of the Aga Khan Foundation although, in the early years, it tended to stay within the area of education. Our philosophy now is that children's development is multi-faceted and education is one of the several components required in a holistic approach for effective ECD (see box on page 28). This reaches outside of what is obviously necessary to sustain healthy growth in all areas of a children's development. It also embraces family livelihood; communication; the number of siblings; maternal health and well-being; family stress; the roles and impact of fathers; and so on. It means paying careful attention to the local context and culture of families and thereby understanding, and then building on the strengths within families and communities.

However, as a policy maker wanting to be effective, I take this one step further: if communities are indeed to be the source of that enrichment, they have to be viable as communities – and that includes being economically viable. If this is to happen, it means that people have to understand how their community works, how they can organise themselves, what their opportunities are, how they could exploit those opportunities, and so on. That is where the roots of viability lie in marginalised communities and it means community development initiatives are essential. It is only within them that early childhood programmes can be launched and have much hope of being sustained adequately. That is why there is a necessary link between ECD and wider community development.

AKF's Young Children and the Family Programme

In 1983, when the Aga Khan Foundation formulated its education strategy, early childhood education (ECE) was included as an important element – making AKF one of the few international donors to specifically address the development and education of young children at that time.

Initially, the ECE work focused on the creation and testing of curriculum models that promoted cognitive stimulation of young children, and teacher training systems for school-based preschools. During the 1980s, research and the work of AKF and other agencies working on the ground, showed that young children actively interact with, and are influenced by, their surroundings from the very beginning. This enhanced understanding of the important synergistic relationships amongst the different environments in which children grow, demanded a wider approach.

AKF therefore broadened the title of its ECE programme to the Young Children and the Family Programme. This change was based on four principal lessons learned from AKF's work in ECE:

1. that early intervention programmes have a positive effect on later school experiences;
2. that parental and community participation is critical in early childhood efforts because of the interdependence that exists between child, family and community;
3. that women's and children's lives are closely linked and programmes for one should not be carried out without consideration of the needs of the other; and
4. that direct programming for women can be an effective way of influencing children's development and growth.

This is already common practice: work for children is often one element of a wider programme of development. There is a danger of course: if your aim is to be effective in ECD, you must make sure that children remain at the centre. And that is true if you are supporting a broader programme yourself, or if you are supporting an ECD programme that is a coherent part of a wider programme supported by other agencies.

Partners as catalysts

The roots of economic viability may lie within communities but that does not mean that the communities themselves are aware of them, or that they have the skills to identify and nourish them so that viability becomes a reality. Our partner organisations – those that actually operate the projects – have to work with communities to devise and operate projects that move them towards this goal. And it is the extent to which the projects that we fund enable communities to stand

on their own and control their own futures that provides us with the measure of our effectiveness. That is radically different from measuring effectiveness by the quantity of work, the number of beneficiaries, the extent to which a collection of relatively small objectives are realised, cost-effectiveness, and so on.

To achieve such a fundamental change demands a more capable kind of partner organisation to run projects, to make things happen. A partner that is only a specialist in a small range of development areas is too limited, we need enablers and catalysts.

That means carrying out an institutional analysis, finding out if the partner is a doer, a problem-solver, an organisation that is able to direct programmes in an ever-changing environment – because there are no blueprints. It means looking at its leadership to make sure that the organisation will stay on track while simultaneously adapting itself to provide

“

If you see the resources and you see the wealth and the talent of the people in East Africa, you think to yourself there is absolutely no reason why there should be so much poverty.

”

what the communities need. And it also means finding out how it is governed, how it is managed, how it makes decisions, how it operates its accounting system, and so on.

Now, the problem is that you don't find these sorts of organisations easily – if at all. But what you do find are organisations that clearly have the potential. You have to work with them to discover what they need to upgrade them so they are capable of delivering in the terms that I have discussed; and you have to make grants for that upgrading.

That is the kind of thing that the Bernard van Leer Foundation did with National Centre for Early Childhood Education in Kenya many years ago, and we in the Aga Khan Foundation now look at institutional capacity development much more systematically than we used to.

Economic viability in practice

At first sight, the potential for economic viability seems poor in many marginalised communities. But there has to be something to build on and, if the community is to survive there, it must be developed. In rural areas of Kenya the two principal assets that people have are their labour and their land. But the productivity of that labour and that land is often not very great – after all the community is marginal because the land is poor. The debate then is whether you take people away from their land so they can use their labour more productively elsewhere, or whether you try and make something of what they have where they are.

The Kwale Rural Support Programme on the coast of Kenya (see box on page 32) set out to see if it is possible to make sufficient improvements in the productivity of the land to carry a fairly large community of people. In general,

the starting point is self-sufficiency in food production and that is followed by a move on to income generation. In terms of food production, small changes in farming practice, the introduction of organic fertiliser, tree planting, soil conservation, improving the availability of water with small catchment dams, and things like that, actually produce massive improvements.

To achieve this, the community must organise itself and to do that it needs support – support that is provided by our partner organisations. They help the community to build robust village organisations that govern themselves, look for possibilities, make better decisions. As you see this happening it may appear that our project partners are simply helping communities to improve agricultural practice, or construct an irrigation dam. But something much bigger is going on. People are learning to express their

needs and aspirations, to contribute their ideas to finding ways forward, to learn to fend for themselves, to take decisions for the good of everyone. I'm constantly amazed and impressed by what people know, and how prepared and committed they are to improving their livelihoods. To encourage them, we directly support them by providing small incentives as they work to achieve what they want – for example, we might provide a pump that is part of a sustainable water system.

Keeping things alive

Whilst the AKF believes that a community development programme is a long term effort, we would normally only give support to individual villages for three or four years. This allows us to move our work to new villages as the older ones graduate. At the end of that time, a community should be skilled and experienced enough to sustain itself

“

On an unannounced visit, we found the community members busy: they were fixing a valve in a water pipeline; they were fixing the roof of the school; they were planting trees. And it was totally self-generated. They didn't know we were coming, there was no dancing and parading for these visitors from outside. It so touched me because I realised that actually we had unleashed their energies and they were getting on with it.

”

economically; run programmes in areas such as ECD; maintain economically crucial facilities such as the water scheme and a credit and loan scheme; and operate an economic infrastructure that will include a village development fund. It may well also be able to afford a small sum to pay a 'professional' village person for advice and support.

That is as far as we have reached and we are well aware that, by itself, a village institution with that capability is not only still fragile and vulnerable but also has clear limits to its potential for growth. However, we expect that the village now has a greater energy and that this can be used for the development of cluster-level institutions between villages. For this to happen, a suitable infrastructure has to be developed – something like a local council, the first

ever local government structure at this level. If that can be achieved, then it's necessary to make a formal link to existing government structures that currently stop at sub-locational level. Making that link is to establish continuity from the grassroots through to central government.

The next step is logical: that the resources have to be fed down the chain from central government into the villages. This is the aim and we are working towards it. Meanwhile, we also see that the chain does not have to be complete: we have already worked with the Kenyan Ministry of Health at the national level, along with many others, to help devise a decentralisation plan. We are able to say: 'In this district, we can help you implement that plan because we have already supported sustainable general development there.'

And we can add weight to our argument by agreeing to make a separate grant for strengthening district health management teams that have developed as a consequence of the work of our partner organisations.

From funding early childhood initiatives through to funding initiatives that develop these kinds of possibilities is a major advance in terms of our effectiveness. We use our money to better and more lasting effect, we draw on our experience at strategic level and we simultaneously monitor what is happening so that we can make additional key interventions at the most relevant times.

Looking to the future

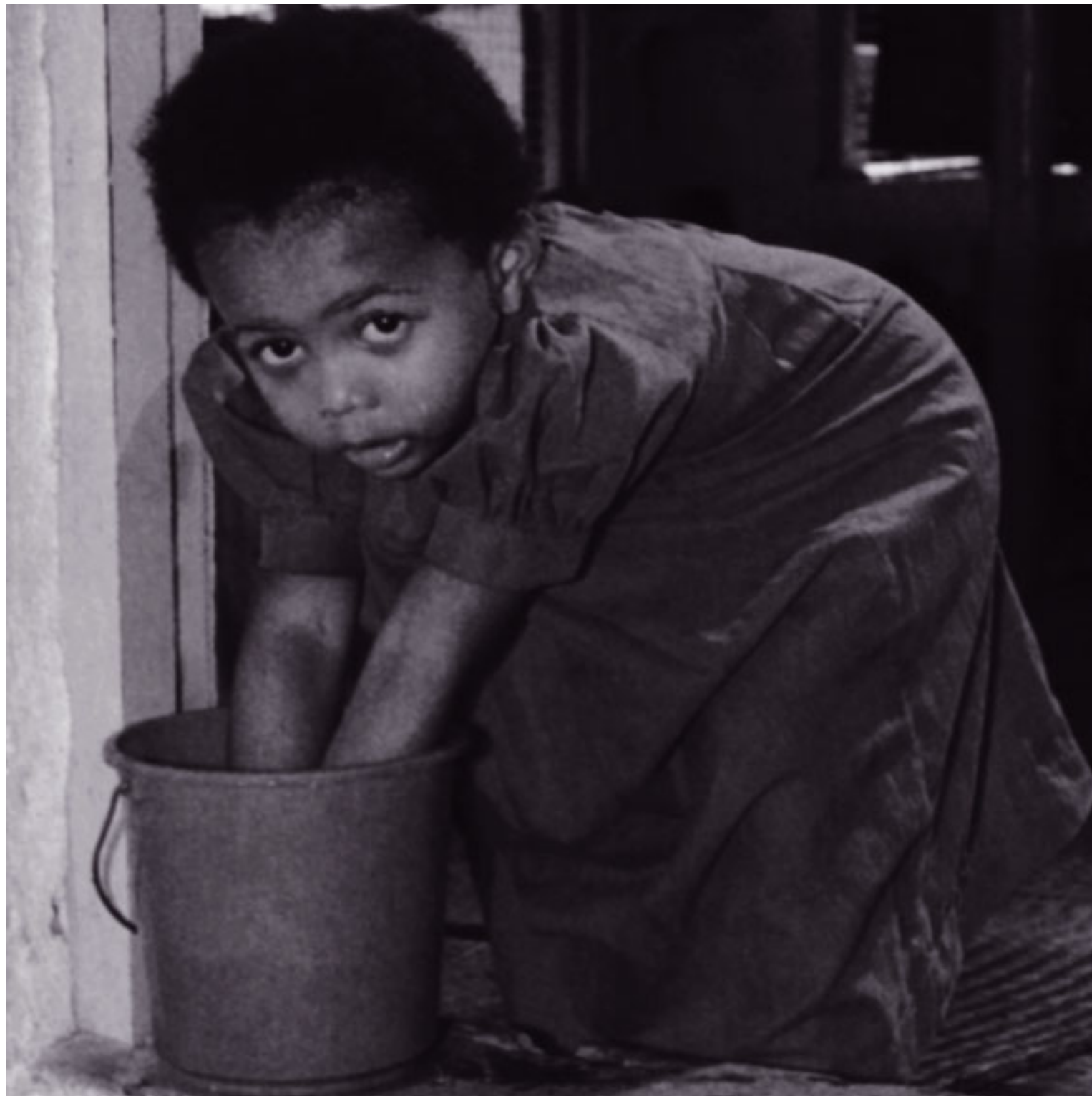
To make ourselves more effective, we have to plug gaps in our knowledge and experience. These are more in the 'how to do it' than in the 'what to do'. One example is the question of how to forge that missing link in the chain between grassroots village organisations and government. We'll spend a lot of our time looking at that.

A second challenge is to refine our advocacy role. That means further developing our capacity to hear what is coming up from the grassroots. In East Africa now there are opportunities for people to form groups and to debate and to question openly. This is supported by

a strong media that helps debate about how things should be done in areas such as developing a civil society. Our principal role here is to promote better policies, working with major partners.

A third challenge is to embrace the World Bank (in Kenya) and other large development agencies' willingness to examine examples of effective implementation of programmes and policies, and work with those who have the experience, the knowledge and the strategic perspectives. The most exciting opportunity here is the recent agreement by the World Bank to provide a large loan to the government of Kenya. The loan includes the condition that international organisations with extensive experience can advise on the effective allocation of those parts of the loan that are intended to support community development. The Government of Kenya has already taken the first step of inviting six NGOs to collaborate, including AKF and the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

The core task is to identify a group of NGOs that know what to deliver and how to deliver it so that it makes a difference. They then have to demonstrate to the World Bank and the Kenyan government



that the investment of loan money is best guided by their experiences. We have got to get this right: it is a major test of our effectiveness; and on it depends our invitation to the policy making table in the future.

For me, the role of an effective grantmaker is to be part of a chain that links to the village level committees and institutions. They work out what it is that they need, and we provide what is necessary for them to fulfil those needs themselves. For example, we might bring in a partner agency that is prepared to work with the villagers on their terms so that they absorb the technology and the ideas, and then are able to carry these forward. Of course there are problems in meeting certain needs. The most obvious one is when you have to connect villages to government services. In the short term, some elements of the supply side can only be sustained by the government – how can poor communities afford immunisation for example? In the long term most elements must come from the government. But the economic benefits of providing the means for highly capable village structures to deliver are obvious. ○

The Kwale Rural Support Programme

The Kwale Rural Support Programme (KRSP) enables communities to develop their potential. People from the programme talk to community members and explain what the programme is about. They explain that they are there to help but that there are certain conditions. These include that the villagers have to organise themselves into a village development organisation with a membership of at least 75 percent of the village; then elect a committee. That committee has to be representative. That means geographically if the village is scattered; and a balance between men and women. The Chair must be elected, as must the Vice-Chair and a Treasurer. If necessary, the programme trains them to actually get to that point.

After that KRSP enters into a partnership with the village. The terms of partnership are that KRSP will provide for one major economic asset that the villagers will identify by determining what their needs are via participatory

rural appraisals (PRAs). The asset must be of immediate benefit to more than 75 percent of the population of the village. Typically, because this is a dry area, that would be a dam. The programme then makes a grant for that asset.

The first PRAs are conducted by the KRSP team. But over time the villagers themselves should be able to conduct those sorts of exercises. The PRAs give them information about their own environment and their own social economic status. To be effective, they have to be done regularly so people see change and improvement for themselves.

One very interesting thing that's now evolving is that there are 70 villages involved in the programme, but there are hundreds of villages in the whole of Kwale. The question now is do you need KRSP to go around doing each village in turn, or can you get the developed villages somehow to offer services to other villages? This is something the

programme is currently struggling with.

As some of these community groups are maturing, they are beginning to identify health and education as issues that they want to take on next: 'OK, we know about better farming and we have water – but what about our children? And what about immunisation? And what about our school, it's pretty bad?' The response of KRSP is: 'Well we don't do that but we know someone who does and who can show you how'.

We are now thinking hard about whether the programme can enable communities and their organisations to take on the structural responsibility for education, health, and so on. After all, this is what towns do, so why not villages? It would mean the village committees really being responsible for everything, perhaps with sub-committees responsible for particular things.

