

THE UTOONI EXPERIENCE

MEDIA PREDATORS PREY ON GRASSROOTS

Utooni is a media event. Utooni was the lead story on CBS News report on the UN's 40th anniversary. The UN earned the coverage out of an old beat up pickup given to Utooni by UNICEF! Utooni has attracted stars -Harry Belafonte's daughter among others, who come, as agents for those in the development business be they NGOs, bilaterals or multilaterals. Utooni has been filmed, videod, published, stripped and photographed endlessly. Utooni is attractive to development and media predators for they can cruise on tarmac to within thirty kilometers and then rough it! It is very much within the reach of touring dignitaries therefore.

The dignitaries pay media to sing their praises on Utooni. Yet for those who participate in its development, Utooni is not just medium and message. It is life. It is living. For those who want to dig into possible real development -defined as life itself- in this corner of Kalama Location of Machakos District, Eastern Province, Kenya, a journey into the interior of Utooni may give some apt lessons. The balance of this paper gives an outline of Utooni project. It is an outline for a development process more complex than can be adequately covered in the space and time allowed.

ALTHOUGH IN THE BEGINNING WAS A MAN

Utooni started organizing the community in 1978. More precisely, a Mr. J. Mukusya returned to the community after a short and varied work experience and started DIALOGUE ABOUT DEVELOPMENT with the community. Mr. Mukusya is a young man. It is therefore not surprising that the community looked at his activities and ideas with a dose of skepticism. How could this young man articulate development! After all there were more educated, experienced and knowledgeable people in the community.

Mukusya's initial message was beguiling by its simplicity. It was only that the COMMUNITY HAD TO WORK OUT ITS PRIORITIES and how they were to be implemented WITHIN THE CONSTRAINTS OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES. Development is by communities for communities, he preached.

THEN A COMMUNITY

Utooni started in 1978 as a simple six family work group based on the traditional mwethya (work group). Then it was only interested in growing vegetables, significantly not for nutritional purposes but to earn cash. By the end of the year the group had attracted other members so it formed a committee to run its affairs.

Utooni was lucky to have leadership in the original group, which had some experience outside the community. Through this leadership, the group sought commercially better tomato seeds. Within a year they had thought the way to grow was to form a horticultural society. In Kalama Location, there was a coffee cooperative already. The Horticultural Cooperative was formed in 1979. In spite of getting a very good crop of tomatoes in the year,

the expected help in marketing, by the District Cooperative Union, did not materialize and the coop had vast losses. This led to turning away from the cooperative track as a vehicle for development. Utooni has operated as a community development project since.

Between 1978 and 1980 no formal development work took place. The community discussed, argued and planned. Since the community and the leadership (in the person of Mukusya) were jealous of being hijacked into other people's development priorities, they were very cautious about entanglements. The first outside support they solicited was from the Ministry of Agriculture for soil conservation tools. Since the "locally based" technical assistant was not interested, the community in 1980 sent its own for training in laying out contour terraces. This was appropriate for they were convinced that the first development priority was to conserve the land resource. This enabled the group to actually construct terraces, which were within the capability of the community for the major input was labor. It was extremely important that the first collective activity succeed. IT DID.

In 1980, the leadership turned to World Neighbors for assistance in conducting a community development needs survey. This was done the same year. In descending order of priority development needs were identified by the community as: 1. Water 2. Social problems 3. Family health 4. Income generation 5. Food production 6. Livestock improvement 7. Tree planting/soil conservation 8. Food storage and 9. Training. Those who currently harp on training, as the true way to development should note that at least in this community, it ranks last.

Having prioritized development needs, Utooni began the first subsurface dam. It was to be used to expand the vegetable nursery for the expanding group. It was also to provide water for livestock so that labor would be released for development activities. The National Council of Churches of Kenya and Machakos Catholic Diocese Development Office provided small scale funding.

From 1980 the community decided that all funds got from a donor for some activity would be matched in the community. This is over and above the organizational costs and direct labor contributed by the community. This however does not mean that project benefits only go to members who can come up with the matching funds. The members decide who is to get the benefit. If they cannot pay, the project loans them money from a community fund. It also does not mean that the leadership has priority on donor-derived benefits. If anything they tend to be last.

By the end of the first serious implementation year, 40 water jars were built. Of these, 20 were financed by donor funds and 20 by the community fund. Each member contributed Kshs. 300 (US\$20). This was over and above the project membership fee of Kshs. 5 (US\$ 0.35) and project share payment of Kshs. 20 (US\$ 1.35).

WITHOUT BUREAUCRATS

No outsiders were ever involved in the initial development work of Utooni. The Ministry of Agriculture technical assistants did not aid in the activities. In fact it was not till July 1985 that the technical assistant showed up at a site when the Utooni people were working. He was there only to guide the District Agricultural Officer who was visiting the area for the FIRST time.

The support, which was given to Utooni by the Ministry in 1980, was in materials - shovels, mattocks and jembes - used in the construction of terraces. The leaders had to travel to

Machakos to beg for the materials. No officials followed it to check on their use or even whether they got to the people they were intended. This is sad commentary on the Ministry's staff and its donor driven tools program effectiveness.

The local administration personnel were never involved until 1986 for they saw the organization as a threat to their hold on the population. Things got so out of hand that the local administrators, assistant chiefs and chief, were complaining to the local MP that they did not know what Utooni was all about. The implication was that there was some kind of subversive activity going on. It had to take the intervention of some consultants with the District Commissioner to slow what was building up as an administrative and political attack on the Utooni community project.

BUT WITH ALLIES

By 1986 Utooni had funding experience with as varied donors as National Council of Churches of Kenya, Catholic Diocese of Machakos, UNICEF, British Embassy Small Grants, American Embassy Small Grants, World Neighbors, British Boy Scouts, Oxfam, and development conscious individuals.

The leadership at Utooni initially sought out National Council of Churches of Kenya, who had a program in the District for subsurface dams. The Diocese of Machakos, which had a Dutch Volunteers water engineer, assisted with design and location. NCCCK gave cement for these in 1981. Mukusya for a time was taken as the NCCCK field staff.

Several points are worth noting. First it was Utooni leadership, which went looking for help from an NGO which was around but which did not know Utooni. Second, Utooni had dim memories in the collective mind about the importance of subsurface dams both as sources of water and also as a conservation technique. The community had agreed to work on them for the two reasons, household and livestock water. Third, the NGO, NCCCK saw a resource person for maximizing its field operation and grabbed him.

The net result of all the above points is that the community and the NGO were flexible enough to identify mutually beneficial actions. Why did not the Ministry of Agriculture think of this?

When the history of development of Kenya is done, UNICEF's role in publicizing appropriate technology out of Karen - one of the richest suburbs of the capital city Nairobi! - will feature. Mukusya and Utooni got to visit this site in 1981. Within the UNICEF system of appropriate technologies nothing was then being pushed as hard as the galla water jars. UNICEF pushed them in conjunction with water filters. The argument was that once households built the galla water jar to collect roof water, they would need the filter for roof water had filth or their management of the collected water would introduce filth.

Utooni, in its characteristic fashion challenged this UNICEF system. They accepted building the water jars but rejected building the filters. Filters would have cost Kshs. 400 (US\$ 27). The community felt that this was too expensive for the benefits, which were supposed to come from filtering contaminated rainwater. The community accepted that building water jars would be a major qualitative jump as far as the contamination of water in the community was concerned. Rainwater was a great improvement over the contaminated ponds, springs, dams etc. Filtering it would not be cost effective. They thus rejected filters.

If one can argue that the first activities i.e. subsurface dams and water jars were predictable,

the next project at Utooni was dramatic and extremely radical in terms of the parameters within which Kenya thinks of rural development.

LENDING EACH TO EACH

Having begun to deal with soil and water conservation, which made a platform for better food production, Utooni decided that to improve nutrition of the community they needed more milk in the community and more fertilizer to improve crop production. Thus a credit scheme.

Credit was targeted. It was to help the community to buy grade animals and fertilizer. The logic of this choice is flawless. Milk would improve nutrition. Fertilizers would improve nutrition as well as assure a surplus food for the market. In the short term, artificial fertilizers were needed to kick food production to a higher plane. However, the milk cows would also produce organic manure, which in the long term would replace artificial fertilizer.

Who was to capitalize the credit scheme? Mukusya had been talking to World Neighbors about the nature of community-based development from 1979 to 1982. World Neighbors brings to its projects a fundamental commitment that it is communities who design and implement their own development. To World Neighbors, any NGO interested in development work, should be no more but a supplier of grease to assure smooth running of the development so designed. They thus agreed to capitalize the loan scheme with Kshs. 40,000 (US\$ 2667) in 1982. This loan scheme had a default rate of ONLY 2% from 1982 to 1985. It is therefore the complete antithesis of the region's rural credit experience where default rates are between sixty and ninety per cent whether the funding source is NGO, government, bilateral or multilateral not to mention the vehicles, accounting staff, plush offices, and field extension workers costs associated with such failures. All decisions on its operation and collection and reallocation (from 1986 it became a revolving fund) are handled by the community.

ENERGIZING AND CREATING

By 1982 Utooni decided to create formal structure to handle their activities. One has to remember that during the first year - 1978 - only 200 families (or about 1,600 people) were involved. After two years about 10,000 people were involved. By 1985 Utooni activities covered the sublocations of Katanga, Iiuni and Mukuyuni. No formal census has been done yet to establish current coverage but it is not unrealistic to estimate it as close to 20,000 people.

To handle these numbers of people, the following sector specific departments were created in 1982, Livestock Development: Food Production: Water Conservation: Social Problems: Family Health: Food Storage Technology: Soil Conservation and Tree Planting: and finally Training. A committee runs each department.

The nine identified areas of development needs give the project its management structure of committees, which oversee the various sectors. All the committees are coordinated in a supra committee made up of the chairpersons and the two facilitators (Mukusya and Muia each with respective responsibilities for fund-raising and accounts). This is the planning body.

In terms of management style, no major decision is made for the project without open discussion in a member's forum. The individual committees hold these meetings and coordinate with the related or supra committee as necessary. Facilitators or committees cannot make any decisions without authority of the public meetings. All project benefits e.g.

where to build a subsurface dams or who to give a cow, are made in a public meeting usually held during a working day after completion of a job.

Decisions on what is to be done are therefore discussed at the community level. If a problem is identified it is assigned the specific sector department to discuss, solicit further views and or send it for further discussion and resolution at community level. Once a department has specific recommendation it moves the issue up to the central coordinating committee whereby activities, funds and work schedules are harmonized.

Such a rigid description of how decisions are made does not do justice to the leadership style, which allows and solicits community prioritization and involvement in execution.

What has Utooni achieved? In our opinion the BASIC ACHIEVEMENT has been in ORGANIZING AND ENERGIZING THE COMMUNITY. This is unquantifiable.

This basic achievement should not be used to mask the obvious development outputs, which are there on the ground for all and sundry to see. By the end of 1985, 58 water tanks worth Ksh. 185,600 (US\$ 12,375); 171 water jars worth Ksh. 136,800 (US\$ 9,120); 54 improved toilets worth Ksh. 75,600 (US\$ 5,040); 40 Jersey cows worth Ksh. 2,000,000 (US\$ 133,334); a subsurface dam worth Ksh. 100,000 (US\$ 6,667); five river barrages worth Ksh. 800,000 (US\$ 53,334); a gravity piped water scheme worth Ksh. 3,000,000 (US\$ 200,000) were completed. The costings are only for materials. Community labor is not costed. Utooni argues that the labor cost is about one and a half times the materials cost. This is backed by experience in similar projects.

These activities costing close to US\$ 1,000,000, undertaken by the community over a five-year period, WITHOUT FOOD FOR WORK - which many now see as the only avenue for getting community action - are impressive by any quantitative measure.

There of course are facts indicative of basic development impact in the community. Consider the fact that it was estimated that on average families were using 60 liters of water in 1982. It was estimated that they were using 120 liters of better quality water by end of 1986 from as varied sources as roof catchments, subsurface dams and gravity fed systems. Consider also that diarrhea which used to be the most endemic disease at health facilities is not reported now. When it occurs, it is handled at the family level. Consider further that basic new cropping patterns involving traditional crops, hybrids, vegetables, fodder, fertilizers and manure are now the norm rather than the exception. Consider also that the project organized famine relief before the cooperatives and government and there was no need for other outsiders to come into the area during the 1984 drought. As a result there was not speculation on grains as was found in less development oriented areas. Consider the savings to the community simply because Utooni buys what must be sold and holds it in the community. They are self-sufficient in crop and tree seed. No multinational need apply to supply these.

Finally consider that crop storage and pest protection is now widely spread and that the members are required and supervised by the community to ensure that each family reverts to the traditional practice of holding sufficient quantities of grain in store for at least two seasons so as to beat the cyclical local patterns. All these are basic contributions to development, which do not lend themselves to easy quantification.

BY PARTICIPATION

To ensure that members participate in all group labor activities, and on time, a fine of KShs. 4 (US 0.25) is charged for lateness. This goes into the community fund used to match donor funding. Community members who work outside the community are charged KShs. 150 (US\$ 10) per workday. Minimum daily labor pay is Ksh. 15 (US\$ 1) in the environs. Thus the high charge is deliberate. It seeks to ensure that the project does not become a place where the local rich take advantage of the community labor input. At the same time premium is put on using the laboring days for learning about development.

ADAPTED TECHNICIS

Within four years of inception, four of the priorities had programs on the ground. These are water, with galla water jars and subsurface dams, income generating with vegetables, improved food production with better seeds and practices and livestock with improved cockerels and grade milk animals. The project had learned and evaluated the various technics from the menus offered by various development agencies.

For example it had looked at the limitations of the galla water jar and had moved on to building bigger (750 gallon) ones. By 1984 it had moved to 1700 and 3,000 gallon tanks developed within the project after evaluating all available designs.

As early as 1983, it had found the synergistic nature of development. For example, when the department of Social Problems was formally started in 1983, it was primarily to handle issues related to the sexual division of labor. An explanation is apropos.

Kamba culture locks some tasks to specific sexes. For example, drawing water is seen as a female activity. In 1983, the community decided that it was to work five days every week to construct a gravity water system to a primary school where later it was to build a community technology center. To ensure availability of labor in concentrated form, the community had to solve the old problem of some homestead jobs being locked to the man or the woman. The community knew there would be serious family conflicts if there was no dialogue to establish that those who were left home all day would take care of all home activity. Community dialogue got all the members to agree to end the traditional sexist division of labor. This not only released labor for the construction of the gravity water system but also led to more equal distribution of labor between the sexes within other activities.

FOR THE DEVELOPMENT SYNERGISM

By 1980/81 the second priority of social problems was extensively discussed in the community. It was concluded that social problems were related to low incomes basically. This could be tackled immediately with community resources through improving agricultural production by learning from the better farmers. A coherent community extension system was started outside the formal Ministry of Agriculture system within the community. Traditional food crops like sorghums, millets, sweet potatoes, cassava, and some new ones like amaranths, soya beans, improved pigeon peas, improved cowpeas etc. were introduced. But perhaps the most important better farming innovation were the reclamation projects of farm and grazing land by terracing and planting of fodder grass and traditional and introduced nitrogen fixing trees which also happen to be important in honey production.

As the community went down the list of its priorities, it increasingly found that they were interrelated. For example, as it sought to handle family health, the problems of access to balanced diets within the resources of the community intruded. The shortage of reliable sources of protein was seen as a major problem. The project decided to activate priority six,

livestock, so as to generate milk in the community. The decision was also made to improve local chickens. In 1981 it was able to link up with the Diocese of Machakos cockerel exchange project. On cattle, community individuals were trained by the Ministry of Agriculture so as to locate the experience in the community and outside the formal extension system.

TO FIGHT FAMINE

1984 was one of the worst famine years in Kenya. Anticipating the problem in the community, the Utooni conducted a community food needs survey and procured the needed food directly from the District Commissioner who was supervisor of the Government of Kenya famine relief supplies. This was sold to those in need at cost. This marginalized local speculators who were selling at very high prices. Little of the relief food was utilized as food for work in some creative ways. The majority of the project members worked on the subsurface dams to get it. Farmers with poor farms - no conservation structures, low yields, little crop diversification, etc. - were asked to work on their land under the supervision of the community extension system, to qualify for food for work.

The Social Problems and Health Committees surveyed the community during the drought to evaluate the health status, family planning status, seed distribution, and to identify urgent forward planning needs. Their conclusions led to a program of VIP toilets, the need to build a community health facility next to the technology center to handle technical family planning among others, and provision of apparel to poor families whose children did not have appropriate clothes. Between then and 1986, 56 VIP toilets are completed, the health facility is complete and so is the technology center.

This year of drought matured the project for it was handling all the priorities in ways, which will take too long to describe. It was intervening not only in the production system of the society, but was introducing technics in health, agriculture, agro forestry and reforestation, education, and most basic mediating to the values held by the members about what is possible. It was handling many donors. Perhaps it is more accurate to say it was seeking technics and finances in a style, which assured that no donor or institution, external to the community, was setting the development agenda for the community. It was making sure that community derived contributions MATCHED/SURPASSED donor contributions. Thus there was to be no dependency. Significantly no external personnel were hired.

By the end of 1986, the project had established its own food mill, completed subsurface dams storing about 15 million gallons, built a health center and a technology center, and introduced indigenous and exotic trees, new vegetables, improved chickens and grade cattle to the farming systems. But perhaps most basic, it had energized the community to be arrogantly sure about what was to be done. There are no yoyos in Utooni.

AGAINST PREDATOR PUBLICITY

Yet by 1989 all is not well with Utooni. Publicity led to many donors wanting a slice of the VERY SUCCESSFUL Utooni action. The slice would be their program. Many who wanted to be associated did try and to shape the development agenda. They wanted to fund THOSE ACTIVITIES WHICH FITTED THEIR AGENDA. In so doing they began to create conflict within what was a peaceful and participatory community development process. Some sought to mobilize women for, it was argued, they were oppressed. This led to quarrels within the group about the representation at different levels. At times some women were put up front although a community process had not legitimized them. One donor with a very strong western feminist bias sought to get the committee structures changed to fit her sexist notions

on sexual proportional representation. This was against the reality in the community, which shows that women are truly and systematically represented in all activities and leadership of the community development structures.

Other donors sought to use those who built Utooni to mount district wide activities similar to Utooni. The core leadership was therefore hijacked. Since it was now mobile and salaried, it was contaminated and therefore open to attack by the community. Since there were many donors and their media praise singers staying with the leadership on their tourist development safaris, some in the community kept asking for the cargo which they believed was distributed to the leadership at night. After all why would so many come so often without cargo, they asked. Ironically this was supported by the cultural tradition. You never visited without gifts. The leadership had to spend valuable time explaining that the praise singers and the tourist developers were only showing solidarity with the community success. This did not set. Many further resented the fact that leaders were called to be facilitators in far places. The leaders in their view became of the other.

Some community members started queries on leaders lifestyle and possible corruption. In short the community turned on itself like the proverbial spider that eats its progeny. In all this, those in the development business have contributed to the rot by their demands on the community and the leadership. It is in this spirit that one shares Harold Miller's view that money married to and by media corrupts sustainable grassroots development.

The Utooni experience in relevant community driven development and its current problems graphically illustrates that at all times such development must be protected from the media which is usually brought into the scene by donors. Donors crave the publicity mainly for Northern fund raising purposes and for internal performance indexing reasons. The upshot usually is that the publicity attracts others to be identified with the success. They come with funding needs and activity development processes, which, not only stretch the leadership but also put management needs on community structures. The demands fracture the social fabric. This breeds conflict within the communities, which ultimately kill the spirit of community, based development. This is not a new finding. However, many donors have ignored it.

Mutiso1986