

Communities take development decisions



Photo: Arne Vanderburg

In the international development community most efforts to better the lives of poor people focus on the use of improved technologies, or making better use of traditional practices, to address the increasing variety of problems that people are facing worldwide. The Center for Holistic Resource Management takes a completely different approach, saying that in trying to improve their lives by solving their problems people end up in an endless cycle: when one problem is solved, there is always another to replace it. This constant attention to problems keeps people from looking beyond their difficulties and prevents them from working on a plan for truly improving their condition. Holistic Resource Management focuses on helping people change the way they make decisions - from decisions made to solve problems to decisions that lead people toward a defined future. This future is defined by a holistic goal set by the people who make up the group or community - the whole.

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The "whole" consists of the people, the economic resources and the natural features or resources of a given area. When people learn to practice Holistic Resource Management they begin to make decisions that are at once socially, economically and ecologically sound. Once a group of people have clearly described the whole of which they are part, they set a temporary holistic goal that describes what they want their group or community to be like in social, economic and ecological terms. From that point on, every major decision that the group proposes to make is first tested to see if it will help lead the community toward or away from that holistic goal. As the community becomes more skilled in using this new way of making decisions, they increasingly take responsibility for their own future. While they may still seek advice and tech-

nical assistance from outside groups, everything that is proposed as help by such development assistance groups is accepted or rejected based on whether it will lead toward achievement of the holistic goal.

In order for communities to be prosperous and stable, the people who live in those communities must be fully responsible for all decisions about their future. The only experts on that community or area are the people who live there. If people are going to move beyond their problems they must be able to describe a vision of their future health and prosperity and identify a way to begin working toward fulfilling that vision. Without this vision or holistic goal, communities will endlessly depend on government programmes and outside organisations that specialise in recommending solutions to problems.

Setting the goal

At the Africa Centre for Holistic Resource Management's regional training centre

near Victoria Falls, a group of 11 men and women from the Hwange communal lands are currently learning how to help others in their individual communities practice holistic decision making. In the first three day training session, attention was given to the different ways people make decisions in their lives. Traditional problem oriented decision making was contrasted with goal focused holistic decision making. Using examples from the lands surrounding the training site people could see how conventional decision making has led to deterioration of land and communities as it usually focuses on the symptoms rather than the underlying causes. The main point illustrated was that without a clear sense of where they are going, decisions are randomly made in an effort to try to solve the most obvious problem or current crisis.

For training purposes, trainees then practised forming a holistic goal for a "typical" village community in the Hwange communal lands area. The holistic goal that the group came up with included Quality of Life values such as "self-sufficiency, pride and dignity, stable families, better education and healthier people". The ecological (resource base) part of the goal included "streams flowing once more, underground water rising in boreholes, abundant grass and high biodiversity along with increased livestock and wildlife". An holistic goal is temporary in as much as the people in the whole will continue to make changes until it clearly says what they want for the community, a process that can take months or even years. But first it is important to get the main parts in place and then move on, knowing that from time to time the holistic goal will be reviewed. The strength of the process is in quickly learning how to use that holistic goal to guide decisions. At no point in the goal is there any mention of how something will be done. For instance, in the above example "increased livestock" is given as something the community has said they want. But what kind of livestock, where they will be kept or how many are questions that will all be tested. Experience says that in all decision making, people usually end up in conflict and disagreement over how to do something. The "how tos" in holistic management are all decided by the testing.

Testing decisions

It was in testing some common decisions to see if they would help the group achieve their holistic goal that the trainees from the Hwange communal lands became very excited. Testing means that you ask a series of seven questions about every major decision you plan to make. One question asks whether a proposed decision will or will not help to improve ecosystem processes such as water and mineral cycling. Another asks people to identify the biggest obstacle to achieving their

holistic goal, the weak link, and whether this decision will really address that weak link. Other questions ask whether a given decision will cause the people to become dependent on an outside energy resource, or put them into endless debt to some donor agency. Whether a proposed decision will address a cause or an effect (symptom) is also part of the testing. In all cases, the final question is whether this decision in any way conflicts with the quality of life and cultural values that are in the group's holistic goal. If it fails this last test, then a proposed action will never meet any definition of sustainability. However, an important point is that sometimes you will still go ahead and make a decision that fails the testing because it may be the only thing that will allow you to survive until the next day or next year. But now this will not be done in ignorance and you know what must be done to avoid this in the future.

Using this process to test several proposed decisions, trainees are gaining the awareness that they can take charge of their own lives. For example, one proposed decision tested was a group coming in from the outside to offer aid to deepen boreholes which are going dry. This was rejected as it dealt only with a symptom of a deeper problem. Education and training did pass the testing as it was determined that there was a need for people to understand that bore holes drying up was just a symptom of deteriorating land and that through better decision making they could reverse this deterioration. They also tested the current production of wood carvings that people in the community sell on the main road to South Africa. This did not pass the testing because they realised that for a single large carving, they were consuming large amounts of a wood that was limited in quantity and that would bring in a relatively small income. What did pass the testing was producing more, but smaller, higher quality carvings that could be sold at considerably higher prices.

Reducing the number of livestock and getting still more outside advice on range management were both tested and rejected as a means to reverse the land deterioration. People could easily see that too many animals was not the problem as the training area we were in had been fenced off from livestock for many years and was even more bare than the surrounding stocked lands. They realised there was no point in reseeding the rangelands when there was already an abundance of seed in the ground as evidenced by the growth of grass and weeds annually in all lands they disturbed regularly through cultivation. Proposed ideas of contour ridging to conserve water were rejected, using the cause or effect test, because these were clearly only tackling symptoms of a non-effective water cycle - the same thing which was causing the boreholes to go dry.

Tools

Tools refer to any action or artifact used by people to produce an effect. There are no tools that are preferred, recommended or even banned in the practice of Holistic Resource Management as nothing will be used or done until it is first tested to see if it will lead toward achieving the holistic goal. Every creative idea or technology is considered equally - whether from the world of western technological development or from a more traditional, indigenous base. And once a decision is finally accepted, it is closely monitored to ensure progress is still being made toward the holistic goal.

Monitoring and replanning

As people in the Hwange communal lands begin to use holistic decision making, they will start monitoring all decisions that pass the testing. In decisions directly affecting the land, which many of the ones in this area will be since they are trying to reverse land deterioration, they will be assuming that each decision is wrong. They will then develop criteria, or indicators, that will tell them when their decision is not leading them to the holistic goal. As soon as one of these indicators is observed (such as increased bare space between plants or even small signs of increased erosion) they will replan. An important point in holistic management is that the objective is not to see whether one reaches the holistic goal, but to make decisions, monitor and replan to make sure that the holistic goal is achieved.



Photo: Arne Vanderburg

Peter Phiri, training coordinator for the regional centre near Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe.

Currently, there are Holistic Resource Management training programs occurring in a variety of locations including Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, India, Australia, Mexico, Canada and the United States. For anyone wanting to know more about Holistic Resource Management, they should contact the address given below, or the Africa Centre for Holistic Resource Management, PO Box MP 266, Mt. Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe (phone/fax: +263 4 732360).

Role of research

Since no idea or technology is automatically excluded as being too "high-tech" or on the other hand, "too simple", the need for western models of research and technology development is as strong as ever. As people seek ways to achieve their holistic goal, they need as many alternatives as possible from which to make their choices. But the difference is in the weight that is given to these alternatives. It is accepted that practices developed by indigenous peoples through many years of experience in a given setting, may be more valuable for that setting than a learning that comes from even the best planned development agency funded research programme. As a result, all alternatives are tested toward the goal and are valued equally. This also means that outsiders proposing research and technological solutions must become skilled in explaining to a given group of people how what they are proposing will actually help the community achieve their holistic goal.

Limitations

To date we have found no limitations to the use of holistic decision making. As it is a process for making better decisions in any setting, there are currently no situationally dependent changes recommended. There are accepted differences around the world, from culture to culture and even within cultures on how people learn, and it is important that anyone trying to facilitate others learning Holistic Resource Management be extremely familiar with local learning styles and traditions. It is the Center's preference that all training at local levels be conducted by people who are from the specific geographical and cultural region where training is taking place. That is the reason that the efforts to spread Holistic Resource Management are directed toward the training of locally based trainers.

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