

# Anthropology as a Tool for Facilitating Agricultural Development

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*From the Editors: Joel Matthews has often written to us in response to articles in EDN. His comments are always insightful. Now we are glad to share an article by Joel, sharing ways that tools used in cultural anthropology can also be used to facilitate people-centered agricultural development. Joel has worked, taught and researched in West Africa, and currently teaches in the department of Engineering Technology at Diablo Valley College.*

## Introduction: Worldview, culture, and development facilitation

Most international development assistance comes from wealthy regions such as Western Europe, and countries such as the US, Canada, and Japan (Development Initiatives Poverty Research 2017).

Unfortunately, most of these development initiatives have been relatively unsuccessful. Paradoxically, it may be the very fact that aid workers tend to come from countries of relative affluence that limits their effectiveness in poorer countries. This article examines ways that social science, particularly the tools of cultural anthropology, can facilitate first-world development initiatives that more closely align with the principles of people-centered sustainable development. (Not all sustainable development is the same. David Korten (2002) contrasts “conventional” sustainable development, which is focused on national economies and economic growth, with “people-centered” or “alternative” development, which focuses on the empowerment and wellbeing of relatively powerless individuals and communities. In my estimation,



**Figure 1.** Discussing farming opportunities with a group of dryland millet farmers in Niger. *Source: Joel Matthews*

ECHO network members tend to fit comfortably within the alternative approach, but each facilitator must understand the implications of his or her philosophy of development.)

Why do aid workers hailing from wealthy countries sometimes undermine effective development facilitation in poorer countries? My experience suggests that these aid workers tend to hold incorrect assumptions, which are based on conditions in their home country. Paul Hiebert explains this type of cross-cultural misunderstanding by asserting that the fundamental division between “modern” and “traditional” societies makes communication between these groups difficult (Hiebert 2008). In order to understand this phenomenon, we must examine worldview and culture.

Culture consists of a collection of ideals and behavioral norms that allow members of a particular community to function in that setting. Cultural values include ways of eating (e.g. with hands vs. with a fork), definitions of modesty (one-piece swimsuit vs. a hijab), and modes of communication (drawn-out story telling vs. abbreviated texting).

Worldview, on the other hand, can be understood as the framework through which members of a particular culture perceive reality. For example, the worldview of western-educated people typically leads to the assumptions that reality exists objectively, and that the world functions according to the principles of physics and chemistry rather than by spiritual energy, karma, or astrology.

Differing interpretations of reality explain why, for example, western-educated facilitators tend to explain success or failure of farming ventures in terms of knowledge, techniques, and plants, while members of communities in non-western or developing countries may explain failure in terms of malevolent spiritual forces or social discord (Bradshaw 2002, Myers 2011, Verhelst 1990). While a modern worldview allows scientists to discover universal laws that govern cause and effect, it also tends to reject explanations that are not based on those laws. (Christians, however, accept the laws of physics while acknowledging that the universe is a created, and thus a spiritual domain.)

To hold a more expansive understanding of reality, we must reject some of the rigid naturalistic assumptions of modernity, and recognize that Newtonian physics does not, and cannot, represent all of reality. This philosophical shift reduces our need to confront the values and ideals of others as faulty, because we acknowledge that other ways of understanding reality can be as valid as our own. In fact, this acknowledgement is an important key to facilitating the complex process of community development that includes mental, spiritual, and social aspects. (This is why learning is at least as much a part of successful facilitation as teaching.) In the remaining sections of this article, I outline a process that will contribute to a deeper understanding of the development context, leading to higher levels of sustainable transformation.

# A basic outline of anthropological fieldwork techniques adapted to development facilitation

**1. Pre-field investigations.** The first step in gaining an understanding of the field context is to study appropriate literature. Agriculturalists naturally study the agricultural context, but are less likely to examine cultural issues. However, unless facilitators plan to work in a laboratory it is quite impossible to separate culture, values, and worldview from agriculture. I suggest that would-be facilitators take a basic cultural anthropology course that includes fieldwork techniques, or start their own reading program. This is necessary because facilitators are, first and foremost, cross-cultural workers. It is a good idea to begin a reading program with an introductory text such as *Cultural Anthropology* (Haviland 1993), then move to specific field techniques such as *Participant Observation* (Jorgensen 1989), *Case Study Research* (Yin 2003), or *Finding Culture in Talk* (Quinn 2005). These general texts have not changed much over the years, so older, cheaper books such as the ones listed here are adequate. Facilitators should also be familiar with basic development texts by key thinkers such as Robert Chambers, and development critiques written by native scholars, such as *Dead Aid* (Moyo 2009), and *Africa Unchained* (Ayittey 2005). Finally, it is important to read books and articles detailing the history of development in the region. This last category of literature helps facilitators avoid the common error of proposing a particular solution without awareness of what has been tried before.

Suppose that, upon discovering that many rural Haitians suffer from malnutrition, a Canadian graduate student decides to establish community gardens in Haiti. If she simply reads all she can find regarding plants and techniques appropriate to the region, she will be unprepared to deal with Haitian realities. If she is like many facilitators, she may assume that demonstrating technical efficiency will be enough to cause folks to line up to begin their own gardens. Once in the field, however, she may be perplexed by the reticence of local inhabitants to adopt her methodologies. At this point several options will present themselves to her: she can dismiss Haitians as backward and unmotivated; she can redouble her efforts to change people's perceptions; or she can seek to understand why people are ambivalent toward her. The latter approach will allow her to understand the choices and reasoning of rural Haitians. Once she achieves this, she can seek to present new ideas in ways that are compatible with the realities on the ground.

**2. Discussions with development professionals.** It may not always be possible to find a development professional that is familiar with your proposed context, but you should be able to find a cross-cultural worker that has experience with a related people group. Missionaries are often the most helpful because they aim at deep cultural understanding. You will want to hear stories from the field before going abroad, and have a chance to ask questions or share ideas. You will also want to discuss issues with cross-cultural workers once you arrive on location.

Returning to the case of the community garden advocate, let us assume that she finds an experienced cross-cultural worker with whom to discuss community gardening in Haiti. What questions should she ask? First and foremost she will want to hear examples of what might have gone wrong with previous projects. For



**Figure 2.** A millet farmer experimenting with irrigated gardens in Niger. *Source: Joel Matthews*

example, if a planned maternal nutrition center in the capital city did not materialize, she will want to understand the barriers to its success. She may discover that the project focused on technical aspects of maternal nutrition while ignoring important cultural issues. The resultant gap in understanding may have precipitated mistrust.

**3. Participatory Observation.** Once you have arrived on location and have secured the necessary permissions, you will naturally want to get to work. Many facilitators tend to be in a big hurry, not realizing that important aspects of facilitation include establishing a foundation of cultural knowledge, language acquisition, and friendships. Without cultural knowledge, you will constantly offend and confuse people. Without language, you will not communicate. And without friendships, even if you can communicate, people will have little interest in talking to you, let alone following your advice. Field anthropologists use participatory

observation to learn about their surroundings and to gain the trust of local people. This technique involves immersing yourself in the context to such a degree that, if possible, you eventually become part of that context.

For example, while I was teaching at a university in Kenya, my son wanted to play soccer with the university team even though he was an outsider (he was neither Kenyan nor a student at the university). During practice he sat down and watched the Kenyans play. The first two days he was ignored, but on the third day a couple of guys were kicking the ball around after practice and he fetched it for them. After that they invited him to kick the ball with them. Soon he was talking with various members of the team, gradually learning Swahili words. Finally after about three weeks he was invited to practice with the team, and within about three months (apparently forgetting that he was neither a Kenyan nor a university student there), he was formally invited to join the team. The keys to the entire process were humility, patience, observation, learning, language acquisition, and friendship building. This is exactly how the process of participatory observation works.

**4. Unstructured Interviews.** Once you have learned basic cultural norms, picked up rudimentary language skills, and built trust, you will be ready to begin systematically gathering information. You may want to hire a local assistant to help conduct interviews. Unstructured interviewing is another key technique used by

field anthropologists to gather information, particularly when looking to develop a hypothesis or to test a theory. Unstructured interviews are relatively open-ended discussions that focus on a limited number of topics, and they are very different from surveys.

For example, where a marriage surveyor might ask, "How many times a week do you argue with your spouse?" a fieldworker conducting an unstructured interview might ask, "How do you deal with conflict in your marriage?" As can be seen, a survey allows the rapid checking of boxes (which usually highlights issues that the surveyor has already decided are important), but the unstructured interview involves narrative discussion and discovery. Ideally, you will record unstructured interviews so that lengthy responses can be reviewed later; however, obtaining permission to record interviews requires a high level of trust.

Hausa farmers in West Africa allowed me to record unstructured interviews, which averaged 20 minutes each, only because I was known and trusted by them. Interestingly, the local Hausa women did not trust my female Hausa assistant, and preferred to talk to me without her. This is a testimony to the power of friendship and trust. [If you notice people are hesitant to talk, look for and try to remove barriers to trust and communication. Cultural and gender dynamics may influence how freely people are willing to communicate.]



**Figure 3.** A Hausa facilitator demonstrates the productivity advantage of *Zai* (right) over traditional (left) millet farms. *Source: Joel Matthews*

### **5. Debriefing with key individuals.**

Once you have conducted interviews you will need to do some analysis. This step is crucial for developing and testing hypotheses, without which you will not increase your understanding beyond a cursory level. You will want to hire a few local people who speak the language and

who also possess enough formal education to help with analysis of the interviews. Debriefing is an iterative process; after each discussion of observations and tentative conclusions, you return to interviewing with a greater understanding of the issues, which in turn allows you to ask more insightful questions. Typically this process is repeated until "data saturation" is achieved, which means that no new information or insights are gained.

One feature of any community is the division between powerful and powerless individuals, and local leaders typically maintain control of major activities and priorities in a way that reinforces their control. Meeting with someone who knows

and understands the issues can help you see these invisible structures buried within every community. Without this key knowledge, we as facilitators may wind up promoting the wrong activities.

For example, my discussions with village women revealed that among the rural Hausa, the separate societies of men and women make it difficult, and possibly counterproductive, to ask men and women to work together. Nigerian women informed me that they never collaborate with men on business ventures because their husbands, brothers, or uncles would appropriate the profits. Similarly, I discovered that men are rarely involved in rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) because the men's money boxes "have termites." I also found that, whereas women wanted activities that bound them together as a group, men wanted activities that they could carry out on their own. Without a proper debriefing, a facilitator is unlikely to perceive these subtle issues.

**6. Facilitating a vision statement.** Working as development facilitators should not be a platform to promote our pet ideas. Rather, we should focus on facilitation, which means helping community members assess *their* activities in terms of *their* vision for the future, and then helping them achieve that vision (Chambers 1983, 1997). This does not bar facilitators from introducing new plants and techniques, or presenting ideas such as how the Bible can be used to guide decision-making, but we should play a supporting, rather than a directing role. You may need to facilitate discussions detailing a vision for the future because without a clearly articulated vision, groups will find it difficult to organize their priorities and activities. Be sure to bear in mind what you have learned regarding social divisions within the community. Avoid mixing vulnerable subgroups with dominant groups, which will inevitably steer the vision toward the benefit of the latter. If you mishandle the process, you may worsen inequality by subjugating vulnerable groups to local elites. On the other hand, if you skip the process altogether, you may wind up leading the community down *your* path to the future, rather than *theirs*.

## Final steps in development facilitation

Let's assume that a facilitator wanted to help a functioning women's gardening cooperative improve their productivity. She would want to spend several days observing the women's gardening activities while discussing motivations, decisions, plant varieties, technology, marketing, etc. Very few indigenous women's groups would be comfortable allowing a stranger to follow them around asking questions. However, once the facilitator had learned the language, achieved cultural competence, and developed friendships, she would very likely be offered an invitation to do just that. This is the point at which facilitators can suggest new ideas that fit with farmers' goals.

For example, while working among a group of farmers in Niger, West Africa, I suggested *Zai* holes, bee hives, and live fencing, all of which had been successfully established on my experimental farm. Although some farmers adopted *Zai* (Figure 3) and bee keeping, they never adopted live fencing (Figure 4).

This was a disappointment, since live fencing can protect gardens from animals and thieves, and can also provide much-needed fire wood, building materials, fruits and nuts, and animal forage. Nevertheless, I had to let that go. In the end, it is more important to facilitate a process than a specific set of activities, because once community members understand and control that process, they can steer their future in any way that suits them. That is, after all, the whole point of people-centered sustainable development.



**Figure 4.** Researchers harvesting poles from a live fence on my experimental farm in Niger. *Source: Joel Matthews*

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