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Résumé à partir des notes de séance.

L'économie, en Asie, s'est largement ouverte à l'économie de marché, grandit très vite et fait régresser la pauvreté. Le discours des intellectuels européens sur la solidarité passe mal car il est associé avec marxisme ou socialisme. Pourtant, le capitalisme apporte beaucoup de restrictions à la démocratie fondamentale, et l'Etat impose ses monopoles. Cette situation provoque un activisme communautaire contre la marginalisation. Lui-même mène diverses activités dans ce sens : Dans le cadre d'un Centre d'entrepreneuriat social dans son Université pour développer la prise de conscience et les capacités ; dans le cadre des réseaux de la société civile en Asie qui concerne des milliers de personnes ; dans un travail communautaire en milieu rural malaisien pour accompagner des personnes marginalisées, dépossédées de leurs terres (35 villages, 3000 personnes).

Lors de son « voyage apprenant » dans le Sud de la France, il a constaté que le processus était similaire. Le processus solidaire international doit faire l'objet d'un travail de rassemblement des expériences et des personnes pour proposer un nouvel agenda démocratique dans l'avenir. Des études de cas ont beaucoup à apporter, partout dans le monde. C'est à croiser avec les résultats d'autres ateliers, comme les monnaies alternatives (atelier 4) et tout ce qui peut encourager la participation des communautés. Sur cette base, le Forum asiatique de 2013 est assuré d'un impact positif et important.

Sa proposition est que l'atelier 7 poursuive les voyages apprenants, par les NTIC et par des relations directes jusqu'en 2013, pour faciliter un réseautage international, régional et national, vers un mouvement mondial de praticiens de terrain, ce qui lui donnerait beaucoup plus de force.

LEARNING JOURNEY IN SOUTHERN FRANCE

By Datuk Dr Denison Jayasooria

Southern France has a beautiful country side with mountain range and vine yards in the valley. It has a pleasant cool climate and peaceful environment away from busy cities like Paris. This part of the county side is also lowly populated.

Ben Quinones of the Philippines and I had the opportunity of being a guest of a local NGO called 'Pactes Locaux' together with three other international participants from April 16 till 21, 2009 prior to the International Forum on Globalisation of Solidarity which was held from April 22 till 25, 2009 at Luxemburg.

'Pactes Locaux' is a French network of people involved in local development which has adopted a solidarity and cooperative approach in addressing socio-economic concerns through sustainable initiatives.

We stayed in a small village in Southern France which was about two hours from the city of Toulouse called Alet-les-Bains where the Pactes Locaux coordinator Martine and family live. Martine and her team organized many local visits in the Southern France region where we visited many local development projects.

Arising out of our visits let me draw seven key lessons learnt which has relevance and applicability to other situations and context. Learning lessons and critically reflecting on its relevance is of utmost importance in modern times.

Lesson One – EXPERIENCE OF FRENCH HOSPITALITY.

We experienced the kind hospitality from Martine and family as well as their team members. We were made to really feel at home with ample food and fellowship. For someone like me who does not drink alcohol there was always apple juice made available.

In addition the local hospitality team looked into all our comforts and ensured that each time there were translators available. Martine's husband even went fishing and prepared a delicious dinner with what was caught from the local river. Others from BASE Sud Audois such as Peter & Martina Wollny, Irene, Judith including Alain Laurent of Pactes Locaux facilitated the local visits.

What this experience illustrates is that although we are strangers who have come from different countries, cultures, and language groups but because we share a common purpose we are all now members of a new solidarity family.

Lesson Two – COMMON LEARNING METHODOLOGY

This is the first programme I have attended where I did not have full details of the schedule. Ben Quinones convinced me to come and informed me that it was a very important meeting but no details were given other than an invitation letter indicating this was a preparatory meeting to an international conference. I emailed Martine and finally received a programme but because it was in French I did not understand the contents.

However on reaching Southern France we discovered that what they had planned was not a series of meetings in a conference room in the traditional style but one which was modeled after a learning journey. We were going to travel around to actual project locations and meet the actual socio-economic.

This was exciting as we traveled and met key people who had a practical ‘hands on’ experience. Basically it was meeting groups, communities and individuals who were well grounded in their local context, who had a good grasp of local and global concerns and who were doing something to address their socio-economic conditions.

Traditional lectures and power point presentations were avoided. We had the opportunity to visit, ask questions, hear local actors tell us their stories and later we were able to draw lesson and conclusions including applications to our own context. This was indeed a dynamic learning model and we caught the inspirations from the people who shared their stories.

These are outstanding stories and they are each unique to their local context but they provide valuable lessons for people in other cultural and socio-economic context. Five of the field visits have made a tremendous impression on me.

The first field visit was **the visit to the book shop** at de Sarrant (Gers) and meeting Didier Bardy and his wife Catherine Mitjana. While they ran a bookshop as a way of generating income however this self financing project also attempts to create a literary society in their local community. They organised special events such as meet the authors or small publishers in promoting certain reading material which had an important social agenda for community wellbeing.

The second field visit was **the meeting local Mayor Eric Andrieu** at Villeroque-Termenès. Over the past twenty years Eric and his team through local community participation in his town and cooperation among 18 others Mayors developed a network of Cathar historical and cultural sites with its own branding as ‘Aude Pays Cathar’. This economic project resulted in a successful tourism venture and saved the local economy. There is a unique blend of reviving the local rich heritage especially in medieval history (culture, food and music) and developing a business model which brought economic investment to this region.

The re-cycling project called “Le Parchemin” is the third field visit which made an impression on me. This local association provides employment to 64 people of whom 48 are socially disadvantaged people. While the main focus is on recycling of materials it also serves as a training programme for the unemployment to enter formal employment through a two year

training programme supported by the local government and other funders.

The fourth project visited is **a cooperative owned fruit juice and jam making factory**. This was established by 15 small producers in 1993 but by 2008 had 220 small farmers utilizing these facilities. The factory has the required equipments and technical support for small producers to develop their own trade mark which enables them to move from just being farmers to develop their own down stream products such as bottled juices and jams.

The bakery using organic called Café au Fournil at Luc was the fifth project visited. This is another interesting economic venture by a couple which was supported by the local government as they were using materials which was organically grown in the region by local farmers to produce bread. It is a very modern bakery and located in a newly established industrial zone by the local government close to the main road.

Lesson Three – TAKING LOCAL CONTEXT SERIOUSLY

All these five different projects were established in a particular historical and socio-economic context. While the context might differ with that of other countries, however their methodology and how these were established can serve as valuable lessons for others in another country and socio-economic context. It is therefore useful to draw the lessons through the experiences of the various actors and how they operated and took advantage of the opportunities available to them.

In these stories the context is largely rural towns and villages in Southern France which do not have much economic activities. There is a migration of the local population to the urban centres in search for job opportunities and a better quality of life. In response to these concerns the Central government had reverted to decentralized initiatives which whereby the local communities took the lead in addressing local development and concerns. Therefore this environment provided the room for ordinary people at the local levels to do something about their social-economic conditions. They had to do something to renew their economic and social wellbeing.

Often the danger in many countries is that when we read of successful socio-economic stories we want to transplant them to other places without really examining their relevance and applicability. However the learning journey experience shows us what might work in one context, might not do so in another context.

Therefore what is most urgent is to identify the stages and methods employed by the people in arriving at their conclusions and in determining their projects. This includes the various different steps and stages they underwent such as understanding the context, analysis of the concerns and identification of local resources. Determining how they came to a conclusion which enabled them to succeed is also necessary including the structures established such as governance model and inclusion of community participatory approaches. At times they might have failed but even through the studying of these failures one can also learn how not to repeat them again.

Lesson Four – ORDINARY PEOPLE TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

These five projects further showed us that there was a very strong level of local people taking the

lead in addressing their concerns. These projects were not top down but emerged from the ground by the people who were faced with the hard reality of unemployment.

These individuals and communities could have emerged negative in their outlook and blamed their governments and those in political and economic power. However they mobilized the local community and other like minded people in seeking to address their problems. The community and cooperative aspect is a very strong dimension in these projects.

These are participatory initiatives and they result in mutually encouraging, nurturing and providing support to one another at the grassroots. It is only when people take the lead that it will be sustainable at the local level and they will provide the collective support and energy to ensure that it succeeds.

The Cooperative Juice factory which was started by 15 small scale producers, now cater for 220 such small producers in the region. This shows how collective strengthen can match a big factory producing similar juice and jams in a factory style. The major difference here is that the producers of raw materials such as fruits now seek to get better returns by producing juice and jams using their own trade brands. The small players can compete with the big players. They continue to operate in the market and are not swallowed.

Without a cooperative factory these small producers would continue to remain as just fruit growers or they would have been bought up by the bigger producers. This collaboration also enables them to specialize with their own recipes and therefore enhances quality, taste and variety compared to just a factory style production.

Lesson Five – A CHAMPION OR CATALYST EMERGES

It is significant to note than in all the projects visited there is a champion or catalyst who is the visionary and who is the major source of inspiration and strength to the project. They are the champions who manage to turn negativity and passivism into optimism and hope. Inspiring stories are created by ordinary people who emerged with exceptional insight, moral authority, commitment, dedication and endurance to see the creation of something out of nothing.

In the case of the book shop the man in the fore fronts is Didier Bardy and in the background is his wife Catherine Mitjana. In starting the bookshop they saw a major reduction in their personal salaries but they found fulfillment. They use the book shop as a meeting place and they facilitate many community gatherings around books which serve as public education and literacy programme. They are the driving force and people are now rallying around them and there is greater awareness on reading and investment in books.

Mayor Eric Andrieu is the visionary and inspiration not only at his township but also among the other Mayors and communities he brought together to have a shared vision and a common project for community good though the revival of Cathar narratives. The project now networks over 1,000 small and micro businesses and has brought about economic regeneration. Mayor Eric has a tremendous gift in not only mobilizing grassroots support but he has also managed to secure the assistance of leaders in politics and administration in government.

What is important at the national level is to create an enabling environment, which encourages and supports local champions. This enabling and empowerment will continue to be a source of strength and inspiration to the whole communities. Their stories must be documented and circulated to serve as an inspiration so that many more innovations will emerge from the grassroots for community good.

Lesson Six – A STRONG ECONOMIC COMPONENT

It is important to note that all the projects visited had a strong economic component. As we heard the stories and visited the projects it was noted that financial sustainability was absolutely necessary.

In the case of the bookshop they had to sell books to keep it going, likewise in the case of the bakery using organic raw materials. They had bills and staff to pay and keep their overheads. In a similar way the Cathar concept of 19 historical sites had to attract tourist and visitors in order to keep all the related business such as bed and breakfast, tour guides and agencies, eating outlets and all the commercial links.

What is unique is that the income generated is circulating and renewing the local economy. This is because one enterprise has ‘a knock on’ effect upon others and all these economic activities are providing new employment opportunities for local people thereby impacting local development.

Of the projects visited only the recycling project could generate only 30% of its earning from the sale of recycled items. The rest was secured as grants from various sources including local government. However if one saw the grants received from another perspective as the recycling centre was providing training and integration to the unemployed then this too could be regarded as income for services provided as 48 people are being trained through this programme for integration into the permanent employment market.

Lesson Seven – MORE THAN AN ECONOMIC AGENDA

It is important to distinguish solidarity based economic projects which is an alternative economic model with that of a market driven and capitalistic economy. All the projects visited are not solely for profits maximization. Social agendas are a significant component of the solidarity economic including a dynamic local participation to ensure that profits have a positive impact on the local economy and development.

All the five projects showed that monetary factors are necessary, however as in the case of the book shop the public educational dimensions in introducing new topics, authors and publishers are as important. Furthermore the bookshop has become a meeting place for the community over books and food sold in the premises.

Likewise the Cathar project revived interest in local history and heritage resulting in increased confidence and pride among the local population upon themselves as a people. In a similar way the recycling project provided valuable lessons in not wasting resources in an affluent society and thereby contributes towards creating a culture that seeks to recycle usable items. The bakery on the other hand has not only produced delicious food items but has increased public awareness on

organic food as well as healthy lifestyle.

These projects clearly illustrate that corporate social responsibility is not just about publicity or good image but one that is committed to a social and environment agenda for the common good and sustainable development.

Conclusion

Exposure, field visits, interaction and discussion serve as effective learning tools in a participatory learning process. The visit to Southern France has created a deep sense of excitement on the potential of local people taking action to mould their destiny. Too often we are waiting for directives from the top or funding from elsewhere and failing to see the resources available at the grassroots and among ourselves.

It is therefore imperative to stir the inner spirits for greater confidence in the power of ordinary people for local action and development by enabling, encouraging and empowering them. This is our challenge and opportunity in partnership for wholistic transformation.

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