

December 2007 to February 2008 Progress Report
The Gedam Sefer Community-University Partnership Action Research Project

The importance of community-university partnerships was discussed with different community members. The discussion participants include Idir leaders, five garbage collection associations, two car washers associations, children aged between 7 and 15 of two groups (100), community elders and members including Kebele Caretaker Administrators.

The process has a lot of up and downs due to the community members experience and understanding about non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and some religious institutions. What they experience up to now is that NGOs come with earmarked budgets as donation and as expenses for per diem and refreshments. This has a drawback on the speed of our activity because community members expect to be “paid” for voluntary participation in the work of the GS-CUP.

A. Progress

A.1. The Kebele Caretaker administration is briefed about the Partnership activities conducted by the AAU School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago, the Kebele 03/09 administration and the Gedam-Sefer Community.

A.2 Project Coordinator and Community Outreach workers are employed.

A.3 The office space issue was discussed with community members and Kebele Caretaker Administrators.

B. Engagement with different community members

In collaboration with the community-out reach workers, elders and Idir leaders, different groups of people were approached to be involved and participate in the Community University Partnership Action Research Process.

B.1 Idir Leaders

Leaders of the 18 Idirs within the kebele 03/09 were approached and 11 volunteered to participate in the discussion. After two rounds of discussions, leaders of the 7 Idirs volunteered to be part of the partnership.

B.2 Car Washers Associations

There are about 7 car washers associations within the kebele, but it is only the two associations who volunteered to be involved and engaged (with 22 and 65 members). The car washers with 22 members (Sebara Babur) have a legal entity, and also has a compound given by the kebele administration for five years usage starting 2005. The Mehal Gedam Car Washers Association is processing its legal entity and they use the roadside within their neighborhood.

B.3 Garbage Collectors Associations

There are four garbage collectors associations and one garbage collection private firm within the kebele. All have expressed their will to be involved with the community university partnership and elected their representatives to be part of the partnership and to take the ABCD training.

B.4 Youth Group (approximately 18 to 29 years old)

We called more than 75 youth both in school and out of school youth to have an engagement discussion. But only 18 youth came to the meeting, and the second time only 8 appeared. We decided to retreat for the time being and will start our engagement after we have a firm ground with the other group, such as children.

B.5 Children

Children aged between 7 and 15 were invited to participate and be engaged with the Community University Partnership Action Research Process. The children identified theirs and their community's strength, gaps and possible solutions. They discussed in detail among themselves.

B.5.1 Presentation to the Idir Leaders

Then after, they presented it to the Idir leaders. The Idir leaders expressed their appreciation to the children and promised to work to create a favorable environment to the children upbringing and education.

B.5.2 Presentation to their Parents

After they presented their findings to the Idir Leaders the children proposed to present their findings to their parents so that the parents should know what the children do with the partnership engagement. And also could work together to find solutions. They presented their findings to their parents with flip charts supported with drawings. The parents were moved and appreciated their children's analysis. The first group of parents and the Idir leaders insisted that the number of children involvement should increase and we made a call for more 60 children.

B.5.3. Second Group Discussion and Presentation to Parents

The Idir leaders and the first group of children called these groups of children. From the 60 children called, 41 came and participated in the discussion process. Their discussion results were similar to the first group of children. Upon their request, they elected children to present their findings being paired with the first group of children who presented their findings to the Idir leaders and their parents. They succeeded in the way they presented their findings to their parents. These groups of parents were also amazed by their children's analysis and presentation methods.

Observing the children's moral and the presentation methods, the Kebele Education Desk Head pledged to call all the 13 Schools Principals and attained the children's presentation, so that the school and the school principals should be part of the solution for the children's gaps.

B.5.4 Children's Presentation to the School Principals

Thirteen School Principals were invited to attend the children's presentation. Nine came and attended the meeting. They were all impressed on the way the children assess theirs and their community's assets, gaps and possible solutions. The school principals asked to conduct another detailed discussions on how to use their school

premises for the issues raised by the children (using the rooms outside school hours/days and on vacation).

C. Community Partnership Involvement

The community involvement is composed of volunteers and volunteer groups. Accordingly, the two car washers associations have elected four representatives each to be involved in the community partnership and also take trainings on ABCD. The four garbage collectors associations and one garbage collection firm elected eight representatives. The seven Idir elected seven representatives, while children elected six representatives. The former core group with 19 members was invited to attend the community partnership, but only 12 of them were willing to continue and other eight newly added community representatives formed the new community group. Now the community partnership group has a total of 49 members.

The community elected a eleven members committee to lead the community activity and facilitate conditions for the activities legal grounds. Accordingly, the committee took different assignments. The major and the first task were to draft a bylaw. The bylaw sub-committee has prepared the draft document and submitted it to the core committee to discuss and to submit it to the community's general assembly to discuss and to endorse it.

D. Challenges

D.1.The major challenge is the community's and the kebele officials' perception about the Community University Partnership activities. Despite all the efforts to explain about the difference between the NGOs and the Partnership's activities, all misunderstood the partnership as an NGO. When the Kebele officials are asked to cooperate and be involved with the process, they bring the experiences of NGOs and indirectly tend and try to tell us that we should earmark a budget and also to bring a legal license from government institutions.

D.2.The office space and meeting halls are the major challenges that emanate from NGO practices, since NGOs are used to paying hall rents and prepare sophisticated refreshments, and pay for transportation expenditures. But our activity is accompanied with modest refreshment facilities, and we do not give transportation and sanitation expenses and do not pay per diem.

D.3.The youth, women and some adult community members expect us to mark a budget for immediate consumption, thereby misunderstanding the difference of the community-university partnership with NGO practices.

D.4.Some community members were working against the action research process by disseminating false information such as the activity is a politically motivated agenda. The reasons they were saying this was that we are working in close collaboration with kebele officials both present and previous officials. Some also disseminate false information that the group is a protestant-motivated group, since one of the community workers is a protestant, while the other one is an Orthodox. For this, we identified one woman who has been an active deterrent and invited her to attend the children's presentation. We believe that she is convinced this was different from what she has expected.

D.5. Some parents warned their children not to attend our meetings. For this group of people, we tried to encourage them to attend the meeting and give their judgment. Of this, particularly more than ten mothers expressed their comments and pledged to disseminate the proper and correct information to the community members.

E. Opportunities

The commitment of the children, some Idir leaders, garbage collectors, and car washing association members is a good opportunity for the success of the partnership. Through the children and Idir leaders, we believe that the school principals will continue to give us meeting space to continue our dialogue with the children and other community members. The kebele Education Desk Head will also be a good stepping-stone to facilitate room facilities for project envisaged and to be planned in collaboration with the children for weekends and for summer programs.

F. The Way Ahead

The partnership should

F.1. Explore the possibilities of having an office space for the partnership.

The idir leaders and some elders have asked the kebele caretaker administrators on behalf of the partnership. They both explore the possibilities, but all the possibilities are to be looked after election.

F.2. The partnership bylaws to be discussed and approved by the general assembly. In discussing with the community members (who are voluntary members of the partnership), we reached into a consensus that the community should have its own bylaws on how to lead and also cooperate in the community-university partnership. Based on this, the Core Committee elected a bylaws preparation sub-committee. The subcommittee has prepared detailed bylaws that could make it a civic association in the long run. The bylaw also advises the community partners to form three sub committees. These are CHILDREN subcommittee, FAMILY subcommittee and YOUTH subcommittee.

F.3. In-depth analysis and discussion with children, car washers, and garbage collectors on how to prioritize their strengths, gaps and find possible solutions. The children (100) have conducted a series of discussions and also have presented their findings to different groups (parents, Idir leaders and School Principals). They have also started discussions on how to prioritize their issues with Social Work PhD 1st year students.

F.4. Prepare project proposals on project ideas that will show quick results together with the community members by themselves in collaboration with the AAU School of Social Work. After the children and other groups prioritize their issues of concern, project proposals will be prepared in collaboration with the community members and MSW students to be assigned for their field placement.

F.5. Plan training programs on ABCD and other community mobilization and dialogue

F.6. Organize subcommittees based on the bylaws.