**Joseph Francis, Director of the Institute for Rural Development at the University of Venda**

By Barbara Shepard-Kim



The interview began with Joseph Francis recalling how he became involved in community engagement and rural development. Although he is an animal scientist by training he has always had a “passion to connect animal science with society.” Originally from Zimbabwe, his passion led him in 2002 to pursue postdoctoral research at the University of Pretoria’s Postgraduate School of Agriculture and Rural Development in South Africa. For him, the university’s mission to be at the center of tertiary education for rural and regional development in Southern Africa as well as “community engagement at UNIVEN emphasizing the need for embedding scholarship in the academic work” is a natural fit. Located in one of the most rural regions of South Africa, Dr. Francis is the Director of the University of Venda’s (UNIVEN) flagship Institute of Rural Development.

As Dr. Francis began to work more with communities, he realized that although good policies were in place to direct rural development and university-community engagement, “involvement of people on the ground remained extremely elusive and a cause for concern.” To work on filling this knowledge gap, he successfully applied for a facilitation grant from the WK Kellogg Foundation aiming to “mobilize and galvanize society to self-drive community development.” The key question asked was “how can the university contribute and create an effective development approach that brings on board different interest groups within the villages in Vhembe District where UNIVEN is located?” Work from this grant and with the help of many players in the community created the program that is now called Amplifying Community Voices (ACV).

The ACV endeavors to "take the university to its rightful owners – grassroots communities" by creating all-inclusive decision making platforms. Dr. Francis strongly believes that “when we are discussing any issue that is affecting a village we need to ensure that the voices of children, youth, women, men and leaders are captured in the process.” Through engaging traditional leaders, elected leaders, and many other constituencies in the area, the ACV approach was developed, seriously taking into account gender and age as critical components.

Through participatory reflection circles that students and staff facilitate in partnership with “Foot Soldiers” or “Village Development Champions” (community representatives at village level), issues militating against local development are deliberated on in a democratic manner leading to community-owned decisions. Various participatory tools and techniques are used to engage interest groups. University students and staff are trained in such techniques and mediate the discussions. Their role is to “democratize the discussion space, so that everyone in the discussion group has a chance to say what he/she thinks about the issue under discussion.“ After the discussion, the outputs of the engagement are then used to plan intervention programs.

Since its inception in 2006 more than 75,000 community members and 100 students per year who are usually members of the Amplifying Community Voices Students Association (ACVoSA) have participated in the work. UNIVEN received additional funding to upscale the program from the national Department of Science and Technology in 2010. Also, in 2014 Vhembe District Municipality and UNIVEN received a joint grant from the Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority (LGSETA) to facilitate the development of the local economic development strategy for the entire Vhembe District. In addition to this funding, the University has also used its own resources to train local government workers in ACV principles and engaged work.

One of the keys to success has been the ability to identify local leadership institutions that are ready to enter into partnership for development. It is worth noting that the ACV was developed in partnership with Makhado Municipality, which is not UNIVEN’s closest neighboring local government institution. This was made possible because “the municipal leadership was ready then to enter into the partnership. They were prepared to try something new.” With the success of the initial phase of the project, ACV has expanded to include work in other Municipalities and traditional leadership Council areas (e.g. Masia, Manenzhe and Sinthumule) within Vhembe District.

Another determinant of success was identifying leaders for development in local villages who served as key partners in the facilitation process. “Over the years we have observed that these people we recruited and worked with as volunteer community change agents are being absorbed into some governmental structures such as Ward Councilors, Ward Committees and Community Development Workers. I believe this is a clear demonstration of the visibility and recognition of the power of the work that we are doing.” In addition, students who have participated in the ACV seem to easily get absorbed by organizations that do development-orientated work.

When asked about the challenges associated with implementing the program, Dr. Francis spoke about gaining the trust of the community and being flexible when the potential partnering communities weren’t ready for the program. He argues, “Through persistence you eventually find things starting to move.” Another challenge was unsatisfactory faculty involvement, although participation has grown, presumably due to the successes that the program has scored to date. He recognizes the tension on faculty time between teaching, research, and community engagement. In addition he notes that community engaged work may not be for every faculty. “It requires a lot of passion, dedication, commitment, and working well beyond the call of the clock” and may not be possible with other obligations on faculty members’ time. Despite this recognition, one of his hopes for the future is that “most of the faculty on campus honestly embrace engaged work as critical in their day-to-day activities.”

Apart from more faculty engagement, Dr. Francis would like to see students, such as members of ACVoSA serving as the main leaders from the university involved in community development with faculty playing a predominantly advisory role. Moreover, he yearns to see “communities in the driver’s seat, implementing their own development programs, initiating, developing projects and securing funding for themselves, generating their own funding” He concludes, “that would be a self-sustaining system.”

*Joseph Francis is the Director of the Institute for Rural Development as well as an Associate Professor at the University of Venda in South Africa. He has worked as a university academic for more than 18 years, during which time he has extensively engaged with grassroots communities in various countries in Southern Africa, including Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. He holds a PhD, specializing in integrated crop-livestock systems, obtained from the University of Zimbabwe.*