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## **Tackling Poverty with Local Assets: A Case Study on Congregational Asset-Based Community Development in a Lutheran Church in Madagascar**

**Abstract:** How can congregational diakonia contribute to community development in the absence of external resources? Community-driven development rests on the principle of development through community participation. Faith-based communities have the potential to be important stakeholders in civil societies and local communities through the participation and involvement of their members and thereby contribute to community development. However, the resources may not always benefit the local communities, as institutional structures in the Church may claim their share. This article studies two Lutheran Church of Malagasy congregations in South-West Madagascar, where an asset-based congregational community development approach called “Use Your Talent” (UYT) is applied. Through qualitative interviews with volunteers and project leaders we analyze the implementation of UYT approach and methodology of asset-mapping and mobilization. Overall, our results point to a contraction in strengthening the local communities and collecting resources for Church structures

**Keywords:** asset-based community development, Use Your Talent, Malagasy Lutheran Church, congregational diakonia

### **Introduction**

As a Christian social practice, diakonia takes as its starting point the understanding that the Church has a responsibility for the well-being of people in the community and society.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of strong governmental or municipal public institutions in the Global South, church diakonia is potentially an important actor in community development. In the following, we study that potential in the context of the Malagasy Lutheran Church (FLM<sup>2</sup>) in Madagascar.

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1 Stephanie Dietrich, “Reflections on Core Aspects of Diaconal Theory” (Oxford: Regnum, 2014).

2 FLM stands for Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy.

The framework for our research on the FLM's development project lies within the theoretical field of diaconal studies. *Diakonia* is understood as "constitutive for the being and doing of the Church."<sup>3</sup> In this context, *diakonia* can be defined as the "responsible service of the Gospel by deeds and by words performed by Christians in response to the needs of people."<sup>4</sup> The definition has a close relationship to community development, which is often defined as a process where community members come together to take collective action and to generate solutions to common problems. It is a broad concept, applied to the practices of civic leaders, activists, involved citizens, and professionals to improve various aspects of communities, typically aiming to build stronger and more resilient local communities. "The key purpose of community development practice is to challenge disadvantage and inequality, and to build communities based on the principles of social justice, equality and mutual respect."<sup>5</sup>

Community development is also understood as a professional discipline and is defined by the International Association for Community Development as "a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organization, education, and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings."<sup>6</sup>

Diaconal community development thus focuses on the role faith-based actors, especially local congregations, can play a role in sustainable and participatory local community development. Behind this lies the idea that Christian congregations have a number of tangible and intangible assets that can contribute to sustainable local development. They are usually comparably stable institutions, with a strong local involvement and ownership, a well-educated and paid staff, broad participation and an existing infrastructure, such as churches and other institutions, like church schools or health centers.<sup>7</sup> Church membership often involves the majority of people in local communities, thus being communities

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3 Stephanie Dietrich et al., "Introduction. The Diaconal Church," in *The Diaconal Church*, ed. Dietrich Stephanie; Jørgensen Knud; Korslien K. Kari and Nordstokke Kjell (Oxford: Regnum, 2019).

4 Teresa J. White, "Diakonia," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Wm. Eerdmans (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2002).

5 Community Development Exchange, "Defining Community Development," <https://web.archive.org/web/20100905042734/http://www.cdx.org.uk/community-development/defining-community-development>. (retrieved on 25 September 2019).

6 The International Association for Community Development, [www.iacdglob.org](http://www.iacdglob.org). (retrieved on 15 October 2019).

7 Kjell Nordstokke, "Mapping out and Mobilising Diaconal Assets" (Oxford: Regnum, 2014).

of place, identity, and interest. The churches can therefore not only be instruments for local development as well as places where actors and beneficiaries own and drive the development. The emphasis on community development goes against a departmentalization of diakonia to special agencies, specialists, or ordained ministers. Rather, it focuses on the power and potential that lie in the work ordinary Christians and local congregations, as agents of diakonia, can execute.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of asset-based community development (ABCD) is particularly relevant to diaconal community development because it emphasizes local assets. The concept originates from a review two Northwestern University scholars, John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, conducted of successful community-building initiatives in vulnerable neighborhoods across the United States in the early 1990s<sup>9</sup>. The aim of ABCD is to mobilize and harness the local skills, resources, and talents of individuals and communities to improve well-being. The approach asserts that communities can use local assets, sometime unrecognized assets, to create local economic opportunities and to improve well-being.

The approach can be considered as value-based with individual capacities at the center of attention. The basic tenet expressed by the original developers reads: “Every single person has capacities, abilities and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed, and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well-connected to the people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making.”<sup>10</sup>

In the ABCD vocabulary the assets do include not only personal attributes and skills, but also the relationships between people. Through personal engagement and networks, the community members become active participants – not recipients – in development. ABCD calls for a broad-based participation where the leaders’ role is to involve community members in actions that are planned and executed together with community members. There is a total local ownership. Institutional leaders should create opportunities for community-member involvement, then “step back.” Exploratory evidence shows that the ABCD can in fact be successful in enabling community members to engage and participate

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8 Stephanie Dietrich, “Ecclesiology on the Move: Rethinking the Church in a Diaconal Perspective” (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2019).

9 John P. Kretzmann et al., *Building Communities from the inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets* (Evanston, IL: Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Neighborhood Innovations Network, Northwestern University; Distributed by ACTA Publications, 1993).

10 Ibid.

meaningfully with each other and can transform people's poverty-influenced mindset to active citizens' mindset.<sup>11</sup>

As ABCD has gained ground in community development discourse, more scholars have started to criticize the approach. The main points of criticism include a weak evidence base and a lack of theoretical depth.<sup>12</sup> The main criticism relates to the concern that ABCD ignores role of societal structures and institutions in enabling or hindering community development. In a study of ABCD in the United States and the UK, MacLeod and Emejulu<sup>13</sup> go as far as to argue that ABCD is a capitulation to neoliberal values of individualization and privatization. Meanwhile, Roy<sup>14</sup> asserts that public-health practitioners in Glasgow do not recognize ABCD as a new approach, but rather as a return to old ideas of recognizing and appreciating the role of community, which predate neoliberalism.

The ABCD approach is potentially relevant particularly for FBOs since they tend to have long-standing histories in distressed areas. That is the case especially in the urban areas of Global North, where congregation leaders have historically played a leadership role in the wider community. However, also the critique of the approach as aligning with neoliberalism may have gained traction in the areas neglected by state and local authorities, where people are often left with their own devices. The case with the Global South could be different. With the weak or completely lacking national and regional state institutions in the poor rural areas of the Global South, NGOs and FBOs could be the only permanent institutions still engaged in community development. There is no "state" to be rolled back. However, in these contexts, ABCD stands in a direct opposition to old-style charity-oriented NGO activities, which are needs-based.

Since ABCD action is based on local resources, a prerequisite for any project is capacity mapping. The ABCD approach criticizes traditional NGO-led development projects based on "needs surveys," which is said to calculate and

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11 Hanna Nel, "A Comparison Between the Asset-Oriented and Needs-Based Community Development Approaches in Terms of Systems Changes," *Practice: Social Work in Action* 30, no. 1 (2018).

12 Gretchen Ennis and Deborah West, "Exploring the Potential of Social Network Analysis in Asset-Based Community Development Practice and Research," *Australian Social Work* 63, no. 4 (2010).

13 Mary Anne Macleod and Akwugo Emejulu, "Neoliberalism with a Community Face? A Critical Analysis of Asset-Based Community Development in Scotland," *Journal of Community Practice* 22, no. 4 (2014).

14 Michael J. Roy, "The Assets-Based Approach: Furthering a Neoliberal Agenda or Rediscovering the Old Public Health? A Critical Examination of Practitioner Discourses," *Critical Public Health* 27, no. 4 (2017).

emphasize the emptiness in an individual or a neighborhood. That is considered harmful for community development since it conceptualizes people solely as potential clients and consumers. However, it is uncertain whether vulnerable communities have enough internal resources to solve their problems by themselves and whether ABCD discourages them to seek necessary help.

Kretzmann et al.<sup>15</sup> developed a capacity inventory in which the idea is to collect both individual skills information (skills people have learned at home, in the community, or at their workplace) and community skills (the kinds of community work the person has participated in and then asks what kind of work they would be willing to do in the future). The inventory also includes tracking enterprising interests and experience (whether the person has considered starting a business and if they presently are engaged in a business of any kind).

So far, there is very little research on actual implementation of ABCD projects in the Global South. The critical question concerns whether ABCD project can actually live up to the principles of engaging community members as active participants and total local ownership. In this article, we analyze how a particular ABCD project, Use Your Talents (UYT), can contribute to community development in the absence of external resources. We are particularly interested in the critical points of ABCD described above, namely, how local assets are identified, whether all community members are engaged in the project, and whether there is a true local ownership of the project.

In the following we start by discussing the societal and religious context in Madagascar while also presenting the FLM's diaconal community development project Use Your Talents. The next sections present the data and the methods. The analysis consists of eight cases used to answer our research question. We conclude by assessing diaconal community development projects' potential to build up local communities with local assets.

## **Societal and Religious Context in Madagascar**

Madagascar, a large island in the Indian Ocean off the eastern coast of southern Africa, is one of the poorest countries in the world. Among the population of 25.5 million, in 2018 75.1% were living in poverty, that is, living on less

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15 John Kretzmann et al., *A Guide to Capacity Inventories: Mobilizing the Community Skills of Local Residents. A Community Building Workbook* (Chicago: The Asset-Based Community Development Institute. Institute for Policy Research, 1997), <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/Documents/Workbooks/CapacityInventories.pdf>

than \$1.90 per day.<sup>16</sup> Madagascar is also among the Least Developed Countries on the United Nations' list.<sup>17</sup> The country's economy is growing, but it has not been able to decrease the poverty rate because of high population growth, urbanization, political instability, and misgovernment of the country after the political upheavals in 2009, which resulted in 5 years of political deadlock and economic sanctions from the international community. Poverty and underdevelopment stem from the fact that 80% of the population live off of agriculture, where the growth has been low and volatile in recent years.<sup>18</sup> That is the case especially in the Southern Toliara area, which has greatly suffered from draughts. Toliara, with its some 160,000 inhabitants, is the capital of the Atsimo-Andrefana (Southwest) region, located 936 km southwest of national capital of Antananarivo. The city is a major port for commodities such as sisal, soap, hemp, cotton, rice, and peanuts, while people in the surrounding rural areas live exclusively from traditional agriculture.

Protestant Christianity claims 25% of Madagascar's population.<sup>19</sup> FLM is among the biggest Protestant Churches in Madagascar. Historically, the Norwegian Mission Society and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America brought Lutheran Christianity to Madagascar after 1867. Until the 1950s, when 1800 Lutheran congregations were unified as the FLM, the Church was very much shaped by the Norwegian missionaries and Norwegian funding. Currently, the FLM is an independent and self-governing church on all levels, although still strongly linked to its Norwegian heritage in various ways. With more than 3 million baptized members and about 5000 congregations, it is the third largest church in Madagascar and one of the fastest growing Lutheran churches in the world.<sup>20</sup> It is divided into 25 synods, including one synod in Europe.

In 2008, with a financial support from the Norwegian Mission Society,<sup>21</sup> the

16 The World Bank, "The World Bank in Madagascar, 2019," <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/madagascar/overview>

17 Department of Economic and Social Affairs Economic Analysis. United Nations, "LDC's at a Glance, 2017," <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category/lpcs-at-a-glance.html>

18 Marianne Skjortnes, *Restoring Dignity in Rural and Urban Madagascar: On How Religion Creates New Life-Stories Bible and Theology in Africa* 18, *Bible and Theology in Africa* 18 (Peter Lang, 2014).

19 Benjamin Elisha Sawe, "Religious Beliefs in Madagascar (2017)," World Atlas, [www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-madagascar.html](http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-madagascar.html)

20 World Council of Churches, "Malagasy Lutheran Church (Flm)," [www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/malagasy-lutheran-church-flm](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/malagasy-lutheran-church-flm). (retrieved on 15 October 2019)

21 In addition to Norwegian Mission Society, FLM's partner, other Norwegian missions, and their church partners in Africa were attracted by the Use Your Talents idea. Following a workshop in 2012, Use Your Talents expanded and included these countries and churches with their

FLM launched the “Use Your Talents” (UYT) project, which presented a new approach to development work. The UYT idea, following the FLM’s vision of “doing good works, develops all people and the whole being,”<sup>22</sup> is based on voluntary work inspired from the practice of revival villages (Toby) and on biblical narratives that value God-given gifts and their use for the benefit of all people<sup>23</sup>. The Church’s aim is to raise the awareness of its members and people in the community of their potential, capability, and ability to contribute to the common well-being by using their talent as a privilege, a gift, and a special mandate from God. UYT relies on initiative, existing skills, knowledge, and coping strategies of individuals and/or groups in the Church and the community. The idea focuses on what is available instead of what is needed. In that respect, UYT is considered an asset-based community development project.<sup>24</sup>

UYT also aims to change the attitude and the practice of Church members and people in the community concerning community development.<sup>25</sup> The UYT approach emphasizes the idea that the Church is an agent of change and a behavioral model in the community.<sup>26</sup> The UYT is a model of voluntarism that empowers individuals to create communities of hope for a better future in a mutual and collaborative way.<sup>27</sup> It encourages community development through the creation of groups of talents (skills, abilities, and resources) and the Church’s collaboration with local authorities.<sup>28</sup> Because the activities are locally inspired, financed, and organized, its implementation, period, and geographic coverage depend on the actors.

The FLM officially adopted UYT as its development strategy and approach and is recommending its implementation in all congregations as their main

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partners, and in 2013 it became a capacity-building project named Use Your Talents Knowledge Development Project. The aim of this knowledge project is an exchange of experiences and improvement of the approach, Use Your Talents, mainly between partners in the global South.

22 Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy, “The Malagasy Lutheran Church Vision” (2007).

23 Danladi Musa, Helene Ralivao, and Justin Emile Rakotondranaivo, “Report of the Use Your Talents Project. Midterm Review” (2010).

24 Sigurd Haus, *Use Your Talents: The Congregation as Primary Development Agent* (Oslo: Digni, 2017).

25 N. Omega Razanakoto et al., “Use Your Talents Final Report. External Final Evaluation” (Norwegian Missionary Society and Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy, 2012).

26 Ibid.

27 Kari Korslien, “Frivillig Arbeid I Kirken: Kartlegging Av Forskning På Frivillighet. Erfaringer Og Anbefalinger for Videreutvikling Av Kirkens Frivillige Arbeid” (VID vitenskapelige hogskole, 2019).

28 Lalaina Rakotoson, Kotondrajaona Rajoelisololo, and Jeannette Rasoarimalala, “Assessment of the “Empower Flm” Program through Its Two Components: “This Is Our Church” (Touch) and “Use Your Talents (Uyt).” Final Report. (Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy and Norwegian Mission Society, 2015).

development policy and strategy. In 2004, FLM established a development structure in the form of a committee called FANILO (Fampandrosoana Anivon'ny Loterana = Development within FLM; it also means “light”) to develop and promote the concept UYT and to include development activities as part of the church work/mission in bringing the good news to the world/God’s kingdom, for ownership and sustainability of the activities. Taking into consideration the size of the church and the task that awaits that development structure, the FLM created the UYT project at the national level. Church leaders were sensitized and trained to cooperate in establishing the committees. UYT seemed to be assisting people in increasing their income<sup>29</sup> and even changing the mentality and personality as well as the economic and social status of women.<sup>30</sup>

## Data and Method

The data for this study were collected in the South West FLM synod of Toliara. Based on existing contacts, we selected two parishes, one of which is situated in the city of Toliara and the other one in the nearby rural area where the Lutheran church is the only church in the village. Both parishes were known for having implemented the UYT program. The data were collected through semistructured interviews conducted in October 2018 and through observation. In both the urban and the rural parishes, we interviewed local pastors as well as volunteers and lay leaders. In addition, we interviewed three Church leaders and one academic UYT trainer. Altogether we interviewed 12 individuals (Table 1).

The interviews were conducted in English and Malagasy, with the academic trainer acting as translator. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed into English. The Norwegian data authority NSD accepted the ethical standards applied in data collection and processing of the data.<sup>31</sup>

The method we applied was thematic content analysis, because of its suitability for research with a relatively low level of interpretation, in contrast to, for example, grounded theory or hermeneutic phenomenology.<sup>32</sup> Content analysis, as a way of dealing with data, seeks to apply inductive methods of

29 Musa, Ralivao, and Rakotondranaivo.

30 Zo Ramiandra Rakotoarison, “Women, Use Your Talents! How Does the Fiangonana Loterana Malagasy (Malagasy Lutheran Church) Through the Use Your Talents Project Empower Women?” (2013).

31 NSD project 707533: The role of leaders in asset-based, faith-based community development actions in congregations in the Lutheran Church of Madagascar: A case study, approved 16 October 2018.

32 Charles P. Smith, *Motivation and Personality: Handbook of Thematic Content Analysis* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Table 1 Description of interview data.

Role, sex	Context	Date	Duration (min)	Language
Volunteer, deacon (F)	Urban	5.10. 2018	55	Malagasy
Pastor (M)	Urban	5.10. 2018	73	English
Pastor (M)	Rural	6.10. 2018	115	Malagasy
Lay leader, FANILO coordinator (M)	Rural	6.10. 2018	77	Malagasy
Youth leader (M)	Rural	6.10. 2018	77	Malagasy
Synod president (M)	Urban	6.10. 2018	74	Malagasy
Women's leader (F)	Urban	7.10. 2018	62	Malagasy
Volunteer, deacon, shepherd (F)	Urban	7.10. 2018	59	Malagasy
Women's leader, deacon, shepherd, treasurer (F)	Rural	8.10. 2018	53	Malagasy
Retired synod FANILO coordinator (M)	Urban/ rural	8.10. 2018	59	Malagasy
Academic UYT trainer (M)	Urban/ rural	9.10. 2018	55	English
UYT project leader	Urban/ rural	12.10. 2018	48	Malagasy

coding, based on the content of the communicated data (interviews), and it seeks to establish categories of themes appearing in the empirical material. In the context of this study, the categories were classified under cases where the UYT approach was applied. We were able to identify eight cases: noni project, training of hairdressers, distributing school kits, latrine project, goat farming, clothes collection, fisheries development, and saving clubs. We first present the semiurban and urban cases and then the cases from the rural area.

## Results

### Noni Project

The production of products based on the cultivation of noni plants was mentioned by several informants as an example of an UYT approach in the urban congregation. Noni (*Morinda citrifolia*) is a fruit-bearing tree in the coffee family known by different names across different regions (e.g., great morinda, Indian mulberry, beach mulberry, and cheese fruit). In Madagascar, the fruit is called noni, and it is used, for example, as in capsules, skin products, and juices.

The initiative for the Noni project occurred on the synod level, involving the

sharing of seedlings and some training organized by the women's organizations. Despite several practical hindrances and reluctance among many women ("If we rely on our own means, women are not interested" – "We are still investing and not harvesting" – "We do not have enough money to develop the project well"), several women started to cultivate the noni plant and to explore the creation of different products and marketing. One informant said: "The Noni project benefits first the person who planted the plant, then the women's association, then the district, and the synod. Everybody benefits."

The starting point for women involved in the cultivation of noni was the training offered by regional church bodies, including the sharing of noni seedlings for initial planting. The women interviewed pointed to different obstacles, like lack of land to cultivate, lack of funds to employ guards for the plants and watering systems, lack of access to markets, lack of competences, and lack of resources to produce enough products for local demand. On the other hand, the women did manage to succeed with the development of new products and sale on local markets. We visited the market and sales store of one of the women involved in noni production and observed what seemed to be great interest in the products.

One of the women reported that the project primarily supports herself and gives her family an income, but she also shares seedlings and knowledge with other women and contributes to the building of a new church with the money she earns. One of the women interviewed underlined that developing new products, like soaps, essential oils, and creams, has become her "talent." Both women we interviewed who were involved into the noni production pointed out that the Church, nationally or locally, was not very interested in what they are doing with the noni cultivation. "Within the Church it is very difficult to do something because people will always criticize you. There is no mutual trust. – The congregation does not support me at all." One woman also mentioned that she needed funding for the extension of the production but would not take out any loans, for example, through microcredits or saving group associations, because "it is a Malagasy principle and way of thinking, we don't do this."

### **Training of Hairdressers**

A woman we interviewed was a member of the urban congregation. She was involved in various Church activities, underlining that her involvement in the Church was based on experience of a personal call: "What can I do in response to God to what he is doing for me?" She emphasized that being a deacon<sup>33</sup> is

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33 The title of "deacon" indicates within FLM the person who assists the pastor or the catechist with the church services. They ensure that everything the pastor uses in the service is ready. During the service they ensure that attendees find their places and do not disturb the smooth

the most important part of her life: “Being a deacon – that is my pleasure. That is me. That is what I like to do.”

In addition to her engagement within the Church’s regular activities, on a voluntary basis, as her contribution to poverty elimination, she started to train young people to become hairdressers. “What I know is that they are all really having a good life, they are working.” She had already trained more than 20 young people who now mostly have their own hairdressing saloons and are thus sustaining their own lives. Some of them are continuing to follow the model by training other young people and thus “multiplying the talents.” When asked about the connection of her personal dedication to “use her talents” and the Church activities, she said: “The Church does not do anything. It is a voluntary work. I am doing it by myself. It is not part of the organization of the Church to do things like that. What I am doing is between God and myself.”

In her work as a voluntary deacon in the congregation, the main duties are the organization of the Sunday service, and her practical duties relate to the maintenance of the church building, cleaning, etc. Although, in her opinion, “being a volunteer is inside being a deacon,” she pointed to the disconnection between her own engagement for young people and the congregation’s interest in her involvement in the support of young people’s professional training.

Nevertheless, the informant related her training of hairdressers to the UYT approach: “There is a link between the UYT and my work because I have to use my talent. It is my talent that I use to help others. I multiply my talents by teaching others so that they become like me also.”

When asked about her ideas on spreading the UYT concept, she underlined the core role of pastors to teach the members “that they should not keep their talents for themselves, that they should share them.” According to the informant, a number of cultural restrictions hinder the sharing of ideas and success stories: “They don’t want it to be known. It may become like boasting. I really believe that what I am doing is between me and God.”

### **Distributing School Kits**

In the urban congregation, the pastor responsible for diaconal activities tries to develop a range of diaconal activities. He arranges specific training sessions, so-called “Monday schools,” where the aim is to sensitize members of the congregations to “be their talents”: “If you want to use your talent, be the talent. That is what we should do. Be the talent, as you are the talent of God. That is the first prime. – They are the first tool that God uses to improve everything, to increase everything and to develop everything.”

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running of the service. They also help with some administration duties, like counting the number of attendees, counting the offering, etc.

One of the projects driven by the local pastor included the collection and redistribution of used clothes as well as the collection of school kits for children. Asked about the other pastors' role and attitude toward what he is doing, the pastor said that he did not receive any support or involvement from other pastors: "Only God supports me." The pastor also mentioned that the Church leadership does not actively support him but nevertheless allow him to pursue his ideas as long he is in the position as leader of the diaconal activities of the synod.

### **Clothes Collection**

In 2017, to celebrate 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the urban parish in Toliare arranged a collection of used clothes. The aim was to collect 500 pieces of clothes to be distributed to prisoners as well as physically and mentally ill people. The project was organized by the local pastor who has a group of volunteers meeting every Monday. The goal was exceeded when 900 pieces of clothes were collected. The volunteers washed the clothes and those who had the skills sewed damaged pieces. The pastor considered the project as a pilot that can be extended to three or four other parishes as part of a broader diakonia program. The project engaged volunteers who were able to help those in need, and perhaps it will pave way for a broader diakonia program.

The pastor emphasized that he wanted to change people's understanding of diakonia as traditional charity activities toward diakonia as a tool of mutual support, where everyone is asked to explore their inherent abilities and strengths for the sake of themselves, the family, the community, and the congregation: "The main problem is that people think diakonia is related only to helping the poor – not to develop their lives. Little by little we will end up building a serious program on development. Like offering people jobs. It is possible."

### **Fisheries Development**

On a national level, the UYT project organized a program develop fishermen's livelihood, which was extended also to Toliara region. The motivation for starting the project was that the fishery production had declined to hugely impact food security. The UYT program tries to implement different solutions that can help fishermen to use sustainable fishery resources. A first meeting was held in Antananarivo in 2016 to train UYT actors about traditional fishery, about the techniques for the sustainable use of fishery resources, and how to find new livelihoods. According to the national Church leader, the Toliara area project started by identifying fishermen who would represent their colleagues: "Everything starts with the people who are already involved and responsible for something. They are the representatives of the fishermen. Then we organize workshops to discuss the activities to be conducted in order to improve the lives of the fishermen."

In the asset mapping phase, the project looked for people with special knowledge of fishery management, marketing fishery products, and algae farming. Second, the project coordinators looked for candidates as animators, who would sensitize others in the village to improve their lives. That happened through a meeting with fisheries representatives: “After the meeting with all representatives, they went back to their villages and appointed people to be responsible for the tasks identified in the workshop. When they [the representatives] go back home, they know which types of volunteers are needed. They appoint five volunteers in every district, altogether nine times five volunteers.”

At the time of interview, the project had already identified volunteers, and their training was about to start. The project had clearly identified local assets, although expertise on the three areas (running fisheries, marketing fishery products, and algae farming) was brought in from outside the local communities. At this stage it was too early to determine the level of local ownership in the project. Unlike the projects organized locally in rural and urban parishes, the fisheries project was a more professional project with regional management and resources, which unavoidably introduces top-down elements.

### **Latrine Project**

The FLM has established a specific rural development program MIRD (Malagasy Integrated Rural Development Program). In the rural parish, the Church has a coordinator who is the interlocutor of MIRD for activities they support such as building latrines, training various farming techniques, digging boreholes, and installing water-irrigation channels. In 2015, MIRD collected a group of volunteers to build three latrines in the village. A local Church leader described that as an easy project because UYT sensitized people about hygiene: “If we are clean, then we can avoid disease. We also sensitized people to cleaning their properties, to cleaning their house and their environment. So that we can have good health and if we have good health, we can work.”

The local people were not all engaged in the construction of the latrines, but obviously their engagement was crucial to the sustainability of the project. Without villagers’ involvement, the latrines would have soon become redundant. The coordinator also expressed satisfaction with the project: “It has improved our health. Some people have copied the model, some people wanted to have their own latrines, they have dig holes for their own use and the idea was copied here and there. This is how the ideas spread.”

As a result of the latrine project, the fokontany (local village) got a certificate of cleanliness from a project working in the kaomina (district) in 2018. That happened 3 years after the construction of latrines, which proves that there is a local ownership in the project. In October 2018, the latrines were still in use and in good shape. One of the reasons for this was that the latrines were

locked. As a more than symbolic sign of local ownership, one person on whose compound the latrine was situated possessed the latrine key. The benefits of the project were shared with villagers whose health was improved as a result from better hygiene.

### **Goat Farming**

The livelihood of the local population in the village comes mainly from farming. However, the area is dry, and sometimes people have no rain for the crops. People cultivate sweet potatoes, cassava, and maize as well as breed goats. Some men produce charcoal, and some girls and women sell their crops and products in Toliara's street markets. Because of draughts, the lack of fertile land, and outdated farming techniques, people live in constant struggle for survival. That is also reflected in the parish, which does not generate enough collection money to pay a full salary for the single pastor.

According to the UYT academic trainer, the people in the village cannot survive using their private gardens to produce and then to sell vegetables, for example, beets or tomatoes: "They need rice, manioc, maize, cassava. They need everyday food. Their knowledge is very limited. If they would dig a well, they can get water at low depth, at five or six meters. They could dig a very big hole. They could water their crops. But they do not do that. Some do, but not everybody. If everybody did that, they would not have that issue. You still have a water problem."

To improve the situation, the FLM with the help of MIRD<sup>34</sup> has sensitized and trained voluntary leaders and brought expertise to improve farming techniques and to drill wells. The project uses available local human resources and contributes to sustainable local production. According to informants, there is obviously a great demand for agricultural products in the vicinity of a big city, Toliara. More developed farming techniques can improve food security in the area. Raising goats has been chosen as a project since the goats grow fast and they are easy to farm.

The FLM has divided tasks and responsibilities for parish members through associations. This ensures the engagement of all motivated villagers. The FANILO coordinator confirms that they have the motivation to learn and to implement the new techniques. However, local ownership is partly questionable. According to the FLM coordinator, receipts from selling the goats go

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34 Malagasy Integrated Rural Development Program (MIRD) is a development program financed by NORAD (The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation) and organised through NMS/Norwegian Mission Society within the FLM/Malagasy Lutheran Church. For more information, see NORAD's evaluation report, available online at <https://norad.no/en/toolspublications/publications/ngo-evaluations/2017/final-evaluation-for-mird-i-midterm-review-for-mird-ii/> (retrieved on 15 October 2019).

partly for the Church: “When they make profit, they will be able to pay their contributions to the Church, that is used for the salary of the pastor, money to buy furniture, etc. – With the money they make through these activities they contribute to the building of the Church.”

Interview with the local pastor confirmed this finding:

Q: Practically, is there any UYT approach in your congregation here?

A: Until now, I did not see the UYT in the Church. What I saw is the developmental work of the FANILO.

Q: What are they doing?

A: They are raising goats.

Q: Is it for the community?

A: It is for the Church. It is something that will help the Church financially, it is not for the community.

Q: What do you do with the money? Is it for buildings or salary or what?

A: So, for example, they sell a goat. If there is a financial need in the Church, it goes for that. Like for example for the repairing of the Church.

## Savings Clubs

The Church youth group is an association that includes people who are between 7 and 17 years. The leaders of the Lutheran Church youth group in the rural congregation decided to copy regulations for a saving club of a local NGO in 2017. The youth saving club was considered a success, which prompted other associations to copy the model to their own saving clubs. Banks and microcredits lie far away from the rural areas in Toliara.

The saving club has rules and regulations that structure membership, savings, loans, and interests. Registration requires payment of a small fee to covers the cost of the safe, keys, and books. Each member can save each week according to their capacity, but within the range the group has agreed on. A member can loan up to three times the amount of their deposit. The saving club charges lower interest than banks or relatives, who may charge 100% interest per month (the saving club interest is 10%). Once a year each member gets back their savings. Weekly presence is encouraged, as well as punctuality. The members must pay penalty fees for absence and lateness.

Saving money has two components: One is personal saving and the second serves as social saving used for family events such as funerals. The aim of the saving club is also to help the group to fulfil its financial duties within the Church. The president of the youth saving club said that “the profit stays in the association and helps the youth to contribute to the fulfilment of their (financial) duties in the Church.” Financial needs in the

Church includes the salary of the workers, usually the pastors and/or the catechists.

According to the youth leader, the members of the saving club compete to save money. Their savings came from small businesses such as selling charcoal and various agricultural crops. The members lend money to support the same businesses. The advantage of being members of the Church group vis-à-vis local NGO club is that the regulations are more flexible in the Church. The President of the savings association said: “We have more tolerance for delayed payments since we are Christians.”

## Conclusions

Our research demonstrates clear elements of the ABCD approach in the UYT development approach. While the theoretical understanding of ABCD takes its starting point in the somehow technical term “assets,” the UYT approach relies on a Biblical terminology, namely, the New Testament story about people’s talents which God does not want to be buried but utilized (Matthew 25, 14–30). The story about the talents is easily understandable for the members of Christian congregations. The idea that the talents are both tangible (material resources) and intangible (capabilities, interests) suits well in congregational contexts, which comprise very different people in the local communities. The congregations are places of involvement and engagement, and our informants expressed their dedication to both their own faith and the Church. Nevertheless, despite the obvious advantages of taking a starting point in the existing facilities and opportunities, the application of an asset-based approach through talents sensitization and mobilization still faces several challenges in the context of our research sites.

As indicated in the cases shown above, a number of our informants mentioned the lack of official support or recognition from the Church or the pastors in the implementation of UYT projects. Local Church members’ involvement in UYT activities occurred predominantly without contact or support from the local pastors or leaders. There also seemed to be conflicting expectations of the potential beneficiaries of the projects. While pastors and people in leadership pointed to UYT primarily as an income-generating project for the Church, the Church members involved needed projects to support the livelihood of their families, communities, and the Church. The conflict was most visible in the goat-farming project and in savings clubs.

There is also an obvious lack of professional competences. Our informants pointed to problems and shortcomings in their projects resulting from lack of professional competencies, lack of access to microfinances, and cultural barriers

to the development and improvement of their local projects. Although the projects did have some positive results, several projects suffered from structural deficiencies the participants could not address or could not solve themselves without external support.

In this context, one should also address the lack of a more structural and societal dimension in the different local activities. As an example, we could mention the Fishery project, which combines a more traditional rights-based development project with a local asset-based approach. While doing our research, we were informed that the government of Madagascar was about to sell substantial fishing rights for the sea around Madagascar to Chinese investors, coming with huge trawlers.<sup>35</sup> All local attempts at improving the situation toward a more sustainable use of fishing resources is doomed to fail when the structural, national level is not addressed simultaneously.

Conversely, the central role of Church as the UYT beneficiary fends off criticism of the UYT as capitulation to neoliberal values of individualization and privatization.<sup>36</sup> Our results demonstrate that the UYT clearly supports the FLM's structures on the parish and diocese level. However, the fact that in many cases individual Church members engaged in UYT were left to their own devices to complete the projects implies privatization of local assistance. The perception is aggravated by the different evaluation criteria among Church leaders and Church members: The Church leaders measured income generation, while the members were interested in responding to local needs and in improving their livelihood. However, given the weak public structures at the regional and provincial level can be hardly associated with neoliberalism. On the contrary, the UYT leaders portray the approach as an asset-based community development alternative to international NGO's need-based projects. Based on our data, we cannot conclude whether the UYT ignores the role of societal structures and institutions outside the Church in enabling community development.

The two sites we studied do not give enough basis to make general conclusion on the UYT project. Nevertheless, our interviews and observations possibly point to important aspects in the UYT methodology, which has the potential to be improved. The projects we studied seemed to be rather coincidental and not well coordinated. Neither of the congregations had applied structured methods of asset-mapping, nor had they tried to work systematically with the application of the approach. Although the FLM has developed a widespread model of volunteer leadership to the application of the UYT approach locally,

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35 Edward Carver, "Local Fishers Oppose \$2.7 Billion Deal Opening Madagascar to Chinese Fishing (2018)," <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/11/local-fishers-oppose-2-7-billion-deal-opening-madagascar-to-chinese-fishing/> (retrieved on 15 October 2019).

36 Macleod and Emejulu, "Neoliberalism."

this structure and methodology does not really seem to have reached the local congregations.

Our informants confirmed their dedication to the Church, to Christian faith, and to service. This demonstrates that congregations have the potential to be stable civil-society structures in rather unstable environments. The results also show that congregations might have a potential for developing local asset-based community development measures with a high degree of local involvement, participation, and ownership. The what-people-have-in-their-hands approach has validity compared with waiting for external support that might never arrive. On the other hand, the cases we studied also show the need to train local leaders, especially pastors, in diaconal leadership and transparency. This might include both theological training pointing toward the need for Christian churches to involve in their local communities and practical training. The latter could focus on both asset-mapping and mobilization, and probably also on developing further professional competencies to be applied locally.

This research was conducted within the FLM. Nevertheless, we were aware that Madagascar has one of the highest proportions of indigenous religious practitioners in Africa.<sup>37</sup> Several informants confirmed the challenges related to a merger of different religious traditions, culture, and mentality. Traditional Malagasy Beliefs is adhered to by approximately 50% of the country's population. The close relationship between the living and the ancestors is integral to the traditional religion and part of the Malagasy culture beyond the boundaries of traditional belief. Ancestors are assumed to be the link between the living and the Supreme God and to be actively looking for their descendants. This poses unique challenges also for diaconal community development.

The inculturation of Christianity into the traditional culture contrasts Christian faith with traditional beliefs. Although the Lutheran Church officially condemns practices related to traditional beliefs, members of FLM congregations, especially in rural areas, often adhere to both their Christian faith and the traditions based on the traditional religions. Some of our informants emphasized the impact the traditional beliefs have on the culture and coexistence of people living in the same community.

The cases described above show that the asset-based approach UYT, as performed within the FLM in the congregations we visited, has a high potential to contribute to the improvement of local living conditions. Moving away from mere dependency on external help and focusing on inherent possibilities locally can be an important contribution to achieving local development. Nevertheless, our findings and analysis point to the need to combine a mere

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37 Sawe, "Religious beliefs."

asset-based approach to local community development with traditional rights-based approaches, in order to secure a better training and asset management and mobilization of the locally involved people, and also to supply local actors with important knowledge and skills that can be used to improve the outcomes of the projects. Our research also revealed the need to make even clearer the goals and potential beneficiaries of the projects developed in order to avoid power abuse and exploitation of the local members in the congregations.

Our research showed that the UYT approach has the potential to improve precarious living conditions through the mobilization and empowerment of Church members. On a personal level, it contributes to strengthening the self-perception of individuals related to abilities and assets, so-called “talents,” and it supports people’s ownership in the development of life conditions. The approach supports people’s self-esteem and thus encourages them to mobilize personal efforts for the sake of their personal and the common good – and the Church. Several interviewees underlined that the project supported them in the development of their personal faith. The UYT approach can contribute to the empowerment of the participants within different fields of professional work, as the cases of the hairdresser, goat farming, and noni cultivation indicated. Thus, as an asset-based congregational community development method UYT needs to be explored and developed further in line with the critical remarks we emphasized in this article. Further research is needed on power constellations and their impact on the community development outcome as well as on questions of gender structures and their role within Church community development measures.

Our research revealed aspects of strengths and weaknesses of UYT as an asset-based congregational community development project. The weaknesses we pointed to need to be addressed systematically and explicitly in order to improve the UYT methodology on the ground. In this context, we can only mention a few areas where further work is required:

One of the areas that should be addressed is the training of participants on all levels, especially the pastors. While our research pointed out that pastors do not necessarily support the idea of congregations as agents of local development, it is important to acknowledge that pastors are gatekeepers for local engagement, and that when trained properly, preferably already as a part of their theological training, they could potentially hold a key role in better implementing the project.

Second, the project needs to address the power structures hindering or enabling its successful implementation. This also implies addressing the goals of the project and revealing hidden agendas, for instance, when it comes to the distribution of achieved goals and beneficiaries. Openness and clarity about the goal of the local UYT initiatives and the intended beneficiaries could contribute

to the improvement of the cooperation between all the different stakeholders. The task of creating communication structures allowing for transparency applies especially to the church employees and leadership.

Third, the UYT project might gain from participation in the wider international development discourse on the relationship between local, participatory asset-based community development measures, and rights- and need-based traditional development approaches. By focusing so heavily on the local level and “what we have in our hands,” the project runs the risk of underplaying both local inequalities and power imbalances as well as national and transnational economic and political forces.

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