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Community Participation in Natural Resource Management Projects in Asia Pacific

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Abstract

The concept of community development has existed since the 1950s and has become increasingly popular since then. Today, many development projects carry the label of participatory or community-based activities. But to what extent is this enthusiasm for community involvement expressed in the way projects are implemented in the field? What strategies and methods are used to involve communities and make a project truly participatory? This paper describes some of the strategies used to involve communities in six projects in the natural resource management sector in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Samoa, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the Laos PDR. The paper briefly discusses the concept of community participation and identifies methods of community involvement in the six projects. It highlights common themes that emerged from the projects. The consistent themes include, the importance of having information about the socioeconomic and cultural context before the project is designed; of building consensus and commitment amongst stakeholders; of institutionalising flexibility and spontaneity; of ensuring smooth flow of funds; and of a holistic approach to institutional strengthening. The article also highlights issues, such as the compatibility of the organisational framework with achieving community involvement and the gaps in the documentation, that are apparent from these projects. Finally the article raises questions for further investigation.

Introduction

International Development Support Services Pty Ltd (IDSS) is a consulting and project management firm that was established in 1986 by Community Aid Abroad / Oxfam Australia. A key rationale in founding the company was to influence the design and management of bilateral and multilateral projects, then implemented almost exclusively through private sector consulting firms, in favour of participatory, 'people-centred' approaches that had been largely developed and promoted by research and non-government organisations.

During 1999-2000, IDSS attempted to document the lessons learned from fourteen years of promoting community participation in large scale (AUD 3-40 million) projects that it had managed or participated in as a joint-venture. This paper summarises the research done for DSS by Premilla Canagaratna on critical factors for participation, adds further insights gained from personal experience and that of IDSS colleagues and focuses discussion on the influence that donor's institutional processes and frameworks for design and implementation have on community participation in development projects.

Why Participation?

The last two decades have seen an increasing acknowledgement by donors of the importance of people's participation as a significant factor in the success of development projects. This is evidenced by major donors such as the World Bank, which had previously championed solely technocratic solutions to the problems of poverty increasingly adopting the rhetoric of community participation. It is perhaps the failure of those

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development paradigms, prevalent throughout the 1960s and 1970s that emphasised technical solutions to development problems, delivered top-down through centralised national and international bureaucracies to largely passive beneficiaries and the increased recognition, thanks largely to grassroots movements, that those beneficiaries are not ignorant but often highly knowledgeable about their environments, that has given space for their voices to be heard by Western policy-makers. Currently the Bank is promoting the notion of social capital, originally articulated by Robert Putnam, as an essential component of social development, particularly in the reconstruction of post-conflict societies. The creation of 'networks of trust' through voluntary 'civil society' organisations such as the Italian community choirs examined by Putnam are increasingly viewed as foundational. Much debate now centres on how social capital is created. Indeed, even the corporate sector, particularly in Europe, appears to be acknowledging the importance of people as participants and legitimators of 'progress'. Corporations such as the Body Shop, IKEA, British Telecom, BP and most recently and notably, Shell espouse John Elkington's notion of the 'triple bottom line' - 'the idea that to judge a business by its financial performance is not enough, and that it should be judged by its financial performance, environmental performance and social performance'¹. Many view such developments with skepticism, as no more than elaborate and clever PR strategies. However, the need to measure such social performance is creating a new profession of social auditors and global consulting firms such as KPMG have responded to their corporate clients by establishing social auditing practices.

The support for people's participation as described above would seem to be largely driven by pragmatic considerations - either because of the failure of other forms of development or in response to grassroots inspired advocacy emphasising equity. Given its grassroots heritage, equity continues to be the foundation for IDSS' support for participation in development projects, as well as a belief reinforced through experience implementing projects that sustainability requires that 'project beneficiaries' 'own' development processes in which they play a part and ownership will not occur unless they play an active role in determining their needs, planning for those needs to be met and participate in the strategies to meet those needs.

The Projects examined

Canagartna examined project documentation and interviewed project staff where available for the following projects:²

1. *Community Water Supply and Sanitation Project in Sri Lanka* (CWSSP - World Bank and the Government of Sri Lanka) - This project was "based upon the fundamental concept that the planning, design, installation and operation of water supply and sanitation systems will be carried out by community based organisations (CBOs)" with the assistance of non-government organisations (NGOs) and Government institutions (IDSS & TEAMS 1992, 5). The project aimed to implement community-based schemes in rural areas and towns in three districts and to then prepare a follow-up project that would use the same strategy (O'Sullivan 1995, 12).
2. *Nusa Tenggara Barat Environmental Sanitation and Water Supply Project in Indonesia* (NTB ES&WS - Australian Agency for International Development, 'AusAID' and the Government of Indonesia) The objective of the project was to help communities and their governments to embark on self-initiated processes to improve socio-economic conditions and institutional capacities, particularly with respect to water supply, sanitation and health management (Kinhill, ACIL & IDSS 1991a, 5). The project involved communities in planning, implementing and maintaining water supply and sanitation systems and simultaneously conducting a health education program.
3. *Western Samoa Farming Systems Project* (WSFSP - AusAID and the Government of Samoa) - The goal

¹ 'BPAmocoAiiive Social Performance 1999, 1.

² All but two projects were managed by IDSS, the Indonesian project managed by Kinhill Engineers Pty Ltd and the Lao project managed by ACIL Pty Ltd.

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of the project was to create rural opportunity and income in Western Samoa by "improving and sustaining farm productivity of rural households, and developing economically viable crops in ecologically suitable and sustainable farming systems" (IDSS 1993a, B.20). The project involved communication between extension staff of the Department of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries (DAFF) and farming communities so that the technologies and systems provided by DAFF would be acceptable to and adopted by farmers. In order to achieve this, communities had to be organised to analyse their situations and identify their needs and then communicate with DAFF.

4. *Western Samoa Fisheries Extension and Training Project* (WSFETP - AusAID and the Government of Samoa) - The project goal was to "enable the Fisheries Division... to provide demand driven extension services and community out-reach activities aimed at conserving and co-managing the marine resources..." (IDSS 1994a, 3). The communities needed to be mobilised to identify the issues they faced and ways of addressing them.

5. *North Simbu Rural Development Project Papua New Guinea* (NSRDP - AusAID), International Fund for Agricultural Development and Government of Papua New Guinea)

- The project aimed to increase economic activity, household income and welfare through self-sustaining local initiatives and decentralised district level planning and decision-making- (11)SS 1993b, 1). The project contained a number of components such as small enterprise development, rural roads, community organising and mobilisation and institutional strengthening.

6. *Laos Upland Agriculture Development Project (LUADP)* - The project emphasised a community organising strategy which would develop community capability to identify, plan and manage development initiatives according to community priorities and to articulate demands for services available under the project (ACIL, CMPS&F & IDSS 1991a, 10).

The Lessons Learned

Common themes across all projects were:

1. Consult communities from the outset

The pre-feasibility, feasibility and design stages of the project should involve thorough quantitative and qualitative research and analysis into the range of socioeconomic and cultural variables in which communities exist if project activities are to contribute to community development. All too often, however, the emphasis is placed on the examination of secondary sources and data with fleeting community visits conducted that merely reinforce impressions gained from the secondary material. The design for the Samoa fisheries project emphasised an awareness raising strategy in order to halt destructive fishing practices - it was assumed communities needed to be better educated. However, "further study showed that these practices were caused primarily by economic incentives and imbalances in technological innovation (O'Meara 1995,5). As a result it was likely that communities would be resistant to a stand-alone awareness campaign. It was recommended that the awareness campaign be accompanied by the provision of new technologies and techniques and access to new sources of fish (O'Meara 1995, 12). The project was modified accordingly." In the Samoa farming project, village agricultural councils were established and charged with developing community plans. These were not successful because people preferred to work on individual, rather than communal plans. Extension officers had been reticent about these but had not been consulted. More time and money invested earlier on would have saved much more later. The more recent adoption in some project strategies of long start-up phases in order that more detailed information can be gathered and the design altered if necessary is to be commended for this reason.

Although not specifically articulated in the project documentation examined, the experience of the author and other project designers in IDSS has been that the ability of teams of outside experts, no matter how skilled they may be in facilitating participatory information gathering and analysis (and there are relatively few), to engage communities in an effective way will always be limited. Outsiders will bring their own set of world-views that will naturally restrict or reshape community realities - this tendency can be overcome, but it takes more time than design teams usually have. An example of this incongruity of world-views is the reticence of the secular, materialist oriented Westerner development worker to pay due acknowledgement to the role that the spiritual often plays in notions of development held by the communities which they encounter. How often does one find a

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project design document that examines these issues? Insiders, fluent in the language and sensitive to the social, cultural and spiritual milieu should as far as possible, play a key role in the conduct of community research.

2. Select communities for participation on the basis of demand

Selecting communities on the basis of their expressed interest in participating in project activities helped to ensure sustained commitment to continuing those activities after project completion (Black 1998, 37). In Sri Lanka, communities who approached the implementing agency about participation were given priority (IDSS et al 1993a, 17). Communities had to conduct a self-assessment with the help of volunteers and they also had to be willing to pay at least 20% of capital costs of the project (Minnatullah, Hewawasam & Gross 1998, 13). In the Samoan projects extension services and activities were directed primarily at communities that had specifically asked for them. Where there was evidence of a lack of community interest in and commitment to the process, the extension service was discontinued (IDSS 1997a, 11). The importance of the initial research phase is again highlighted.

3. Build support amongst stakeholders for participatory approaches to implementation

Canaragtna found that a critical strategy in all projects was not to assume that the participatory approach would be familiar or acceptable but to promote and develop an understanding of the participatory methods amongst stakeholders, particularly government. In the Lao project, project staff found that there was little knowledge of community mobilisation and little policy support for it. Communities were used to being passive beneficiaries of government initiatives (ACIL et al 1991b, 4). In PNG, the project established community development funds at the outset in an effort to respond to communities immediate needs, thereby building support amongst communities known to be cynical about development projects (IDSS 1993, 7). The project also endeavoured to ensure that definitions of participation and community mobilisation were mutually acceptable to government and non-government stakeholders. This strategy was also employed in the Samoan farming and Indonesian Sanitation projects through workshops during project start-up involving consultants, government departments and NGOs (IDSS 1992, 6 & Kinhill et al 1991, 8). However, a later lack of Indonesian government support for community mobilisation was a constraint (Simpson 1995,5). This again highlights the importance of the preparatory phase in determining stakeholder attitudes to participation and appropriate strategies for developing stakeholder support in terms of timing and content.

4. Select the right vehicle for community mobilisation initiatives

'Using a community unit (such as village, household or clan) that is not acceptable to stakeholders will affect the whole community participation strategy' (Canaragtna, 6). Designers must ensure that existing structures within the community responsible for decision making or those that grant legitimacy to activities within the eyes of the community are supportive. In the PNG project the clan was used as the appropriate unit of social organisation so as to make use of the potential for cooperation within clans (IDSS 1995, 71).

5. Provide appropriate, phased training

All the projects provided training to community workers in community mobilisation. The use of participatory, learner-centred approaches in training proved to be effective, creating the enthusiasm for participatory techniques necessary to engage communities (IDSS et al 1993a, 15). The Indonesian sanitation project found that training that was conducted in phased, ongoing manner through project implementation allowed community workers to reflect on and develop their practice - it also provided a feed-back mechanism by which project strategies could be adjusted (Kinhill et al 1994a, IDSS et al 1993a, 15). It is critical that enough time be allocated in the design to training and the process of ongoing reflection and feedback - the timing of project milestones, where these are applicable should be considered carefully in order that the contractual and financial imperatives do not sabotage the process. The selection of community mobilisers and trainers was often an issue in project implementation. The Samoa fisheries project found that inexperienced school leavers were more amenable to participatory approaches in their training as Extension Officers (EOs) than older EOs who tended to be more comfortable with top-down methods. However, village elders were not always prepared to work with young EOs (IDSS 1997b, 20).

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6. Develop trust

The projects emphasised the importance of building relationships and trust with communities. In the Indonesian sanitation project community workers were chosen from local NGOs and they worked with two voluntary community organizers from the community (Kinhill et al 1991a, 8). In addition the field support and supervision office was situated in the communities so that project staff were immersed in the local setting and could build up community trust (Kinhill 1991a, 8). Similarly in the SL water project CFs had to be prepared to live in the village with which they were working (IDSS et al 1993b).

7. Provide mechanisms for community control

It is critical that communities are provided with the opportunity to analyse options available to them and make informed decisions about strategies to be pursued wherever possible. In the Sri Lanka project, community workers explained the range of technical options available for water supply mechanisms and the costs and levels of service for these. Communities selected one option and community workers prepared proposals on the communities' behalf for approval by the Community Water Supply Programme Unit.

8. Equip community groups to carry on the work

A clear trend in all the projects was the importance given to strengthening community groups in order to ensure sustainability of project facilities and outputs. In the Indonesian sanitation project the CF conducted a training course for leaders of community groups, focusing on issues such as group strengthening, before s/he left the community. Manuals were used in this training to reinforce what was said and to reduce the time spent giving information verbally (Kinhill et al 1995b).

Another strategy for group strengthening was to join a number of small CBOs together so as to ensure sustainability. In the SL water project CBOs were registered legally so that they would be able to take ownership of project facilities (IDSS et al 1993a, 24). This also helped ensure their long-term sustainability. In the Indonesian sanitation project the CBO was assigned the task of collecting user fees for operation and maintenance of the water system. This task was mainly a way of keeping the group together - meeting regularly to collect fees allowed the group to discuss other issues and remain active (Kinhill et al 1996c, 2). In the Samoa fisheries project workshops were organised for members of CBOs from different villages. This gave these people the opportunity of meeting and exchanging skills and ideas. Such an approach provides opportunities for networking and therefore is a way of group strengthening.

Donor Systemic Issues

This section of the paper will examine the influence of donor systems and requirements on the ability to design and implement projects that utilise and take advantage of the benefits that participatory approaches can bring.

Competitive Tendering and Contracting Out

All the projects covered by this paper, indeed all the projects IDSS works on, are contracted out through a competitively tendered process. Contracting out now encompasses the design phase of projects. The success of a tenderer is largely dependent on the CVs of the personnel that it puts up for consideration as well as methodological and cost considerations. Personnel are selected by the tenderer on the basis of the Terms of Reference specified by the donor. If these TOR do not structure project design or implementation teams in a way that encourages the application of participatory approaches by skilled personnel then there is little scope for the contractor to use these approaches. Frequently TOR will include a community development specialist but in the manner of *an* add-on activity, not central to the design or implementation process. The influence of team leaders, who are often technical specialists, rather than design or process specialists is paramount. There are numerous instances of community development specialists being side-lined in the design and implementation process by team leaders and other technicians who view the community development (and gender) aspects as 'soft' and mainly there to meet vaguely worded policy requirements. The output oriented nature of most contracts for large development projects require the production of milestones which trigger the payment of the money required to implement the project and provide the profit to the contractor. Hence milestones are critical. Often in practice, milestone activities will be emphasised, sometimes to the detriment of non-milestone activities. Given that

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community development processes can be difficult to place within a milestone framework, these activities can be neglected.

Related to the issue of outputs and milestones is the logframe approach to project design and management. Based on the management by objectives approach prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s in the US and advocated originally by USAID, the logframe approach seeks to determine root causes of particular development problems and apply project strategies in a logical manner to address cause and effect relationships. Specific objectives and quantifiable, time bound performance indicators are set. On the basis of these objectives and performance indicators, project outputs and milestones are determined and contracts drawn up. The logframe is therefore critical if it does not include and appropriately resource activities aimed at fostering community participation and does not establish a monitoring and evaluation system that encourages reflection by communities and the ability to adjust project strategies in response. If the project is unlikely to foster community involvement in a sustainable manner. Furthermore monitoring and evaluation systems based on the logframe will not capture or explore the unplanned-for, unintended consequences and impacts of projects, good or bad. Other mechanisms for doing so, such as community theatre need to be considered further. A striking weakness in the project documentation examined by Canagaratna was the lack of information about community participation it was not collected in any systematic manner. Generally, logframe activities and performance indicators did not include specific participation or community process indicators. So the information was not collected systematically. Given the current contracting out environment, consideration needs to be given to developing strategies by which participatory approaches can be better incorporated into the logframe format and its attendant monitoring and evaluation systems.

Another concerning trend arising from the contracting out and down-sizing of donor agencies is the loss of institutional learning and the absence of organisational learning systems that encourage necessary reflection. If contractors are not required to provide information, reflect on and analyse it how will donors reflect and learn the lessons of project design and implementation teams that can be used to develop future practice?

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