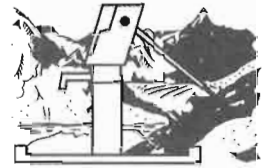




WATER, ENVIRONMENT AND MANAGEMENT

Participatory approach to community management

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The developing world in last five decades has witnessed two major shifts in international thinking on the issue of 'Development'. Both these shifts have potentially important consequences for the developing world. The concept of participation, the subject of this paper, represents one such shift and cannot be understood without making reference to earlier approaches to Third World development.

Background

Development thinking, immediately after the Second World War, was characterized by what has come to be termed the "modernization" approach. This view stressed the injection of capital from outside which would result in economic "take off" and the eventual spread of benefits throughout the system. Newly emergent independent (mostly ex-colonial) nations would be given a helping hand up the economic ladder that had already been climbed by industrialized nations. Emphases were laid on providing the infrastructural and institutional support to facilitate this climb and on tackling the obstacles that were to be found on the way.

In this context the (mainly rural) poor populations of developing countries were not seen as resources for furthering the process of development but rather as obstacles. Attention was given to mobilizing them through mass education and community development programs to reach the critical "take off" point into self-sustained growth. Rural areas were perceived as "backward," agriculture had to be improved by technological means to support the industrialization process. The rural peasantry was regarded as primitive and in a paternalistic way, in need of education to eliminate ignorance. Traditional rural habits of thinking and behaving needed to be changed and this could be achieved most quickly and efficiently through modern means of science and technology.

These concepts of 'modernization' and 'development' emanating from the industrialized countries received wide acceptance in the Third World during the fifties and sixties. Developing countries in docile fashion accepted the view that they would have to follow a development path of economic growth through a combination of modernization, industrialization and (implied) cultural change.

The origin of participatory approaches

During the late sixties and seventies (for many social and political reasons on which we will not dwell here), the above approach came under heavy criticism. Many developing countries expressed their concerns in such international forums as UNESCO and through demands for a new international economic and information order. The "North-South Dialogue" was one well known example of the expression of such demands and concerns. Their concerns ranged from the western-centered nature of prevailing development theories and their neglect of the international dimension, to the emphasis on proposed attitudinal changes in individuals rather than on structural changes in developing societies. What was questioned most was the assumption that the concepts and criteria developed in one particular cultural context could be transplanted and applied in immensely diverse socio-political settings. Existing approaches to development were not yielding the desired results and the development process itself was, in the opinion of many, contributing to the further impoverishment of the rural poor.

The search for a more appropriate approach to development, therefore, reflected a shifting paradigm in which explanations of poverty were seen in a new light. This shift, represented by participatory approaches to development argued that development should not be imposed from outside but should be based on indigenous knowledge and resources. Participation is essential not only for preserving human dignity and local culture but also for

empowerment and change in the balance of power and, therefore, seen as critical in the process of poverty reduction. 'Development' thus began to be defined as the "unlocking and enhancing of human potential rather than the wholesale replacement of existing systems."

It is in this (fairly) new context that we have to analyze the practical applications of a participatory approach. The need for such analysis is more profound today than ever before. The reason lies in the fact that even after more than a decade of participatory development, there are still more uncertainties and questions than workable models and solutions.

The need for the learning process

Although many doubts and apprehensions are expressed informally in many quarters of our sector about practical difficulties in applying participatory approaches, they are not shared on a formal platform presumably because of lack of systematic effort to analyze the whole concept. This leads to two important issues:

i. There is an urgent need to open the whole field of community participation to most active and far ranging reflections on its meaning and application and initiate a constructive debate.

ii. While most of us are busy finding procedures for applying participatory approaches to our projects, some of us need to pause and give a retrospective look on what has worked and what has not worked in reality. In actual terms it means undertaking conceptually sound research to draw useful lessons. The results of such research can be very useful for planners in understanding the reality of a given situation.

Frame work for analysis

This paper presents a schematic framework that we have developed for analyzing peoples participation experience in eight selected projects in the rural water supply and sanitation sector in India. This framework also includes some hypotheses which are based on preliminary findings and are being further tested in this study that RWSG-SA, in collaboration with DANIDA, has undertaken.

The vision - Project Appraisal Planning and Design

The vision of proponents of the participatory approach is that there will be direct benefits of participation to project design and therefore greater project success. Participation (according to the vision) will ensure that felt needs are better served than previously because beneficiaries themselves can shape the project in ways that outside planners cannot. The following components of project design, therefore, need to be analyzed to determine (i) whether the beneficiaries get the opportunities to shape their projects to their specific needs, (ii) if not, what are the practical problems or obstacles in involving people during this process. The central question, therefore, is:

Do people have a voice in determining-

i) Financial Mechanisms

The size and total cost of the project is based on certain estimates and assessments which is completed and finalized at the project appraisal stage and stated in the project document. What will be the budget for hardware and software components, level of service, cost sharing by different agencies and how much will be the contributions by the beneficiaries are all decided at this point.

ii) Institutional Arrangements

The project document will spell out the institutional arrangements, whether it will be PHED or Panchayat, state extension agencies or NGOs, independent project units or coordinating committees representing various groups. The delivery mechanism is decided at this stage, including whether there will be a village water committee responsible for operation and maintenance of the resources and, maybe, collecting financial contributions.

iii) Technology Decisions

These include whether it will be piped water supply or tube wells, how many sources per village, whether the existing sources will be considered, will they be rejuvenated or not. (Some project documents do give the beneficiaries the choice for site selection of stand posts etc.)

iv) Policy Framework

Any new policies which will directly affect the beneficiaries are also set out in the project document. These usually relate to operation and maintenance by beneficiaries and the procedures or mechanisms by which cost will be recovered.

How is the Vision Implemented- Project Implementation

If the vision of participation is to be truly translated into action, then the central requirement during project implementation is the flexibility to mould the project according to peoples' needs and modify the project design accordingly. With this in mind, the following key factors arise:

i) Fund Flows

How are the funds channelled? Can they meet the growing interest and demand of beneficiaries? Is the fund flow smooth and on time to sustain the beneficiaries interest in the project.

ii) Institutional arrangements

Are the institutional arrangements made to execute the project working? During the course of implementation, are there any changes needed or made for better involvement of beneficiaries.

iii) Technological Interventions

At what stage the technologist intervene? Past experience shows that the hardware are often carried out in isolation or ahead of social development efforts. There seems to have been insistence on meeting physical targets rather than accepting beneficiary opinions on appropriate technological choices based on their local needs. Does it still hold true?

iv) Capacity building versus Service delivery

How is capacity building defined and operationalized? Does it only mean providing training and upgrading certain skills or does it really lead to "giving capacity to people to solve their own problems"?

Initial Observations: Emerging lessons

While following components are also part of our framework, we present them separately to share some of our findings.

v) Community motivation and mobilisation

The whole concept of participation appears in most cases to have been limited to mobilization and motivation campaigns. The term itself presumes communities to be passive receivers who somehow need to be shaken from their ignorance and "given knowledge". Participation, therefore, is seen as synonymous of IEC activities and all the attention has been focused on developing communication tools. They are either message centred or instructional in nature - instructing people what to do and what not to do. Does participation only mean giving messages or does it include hearing from people what their felt needs and getting those translated into action? Is participation a means of reaching accumulated indigenous knowledge and wisdom?

vi) Community Management

One of the logical arguments given in favour of beneficiary participation is based on economic justification. It is argued that participation will mobilize greater resources and accomplish more with the same project budget. However, the application of community management has not taken into account the existing policies and institutional structures, for example, state and central policies of free rural water supply and heavily subsidized latrines regardless of the choice of technology and costs. Initial observations point out the fact that the absence of a uniform policy on O&M can lead to a very contrasting and conflicting situation. Consider the scenario in two villages of the same area - one where project expects beneficiary contribution for operation and maintenance and the other where it is still a responsibility of the local government.

vii) Cost Recovery

The whole issue of cost recovery again points out lacunae in our approach. Although there is lot of emphasis given on cost recovery, enough attention has not been paid to existing institutional and financial mechanisms. Let us look at some

of the questions that we have overlooked while planning cost recovery:

- What are the current budgetary allocations for repair and maintenance services and by whom are they incurred? Is the money coming from state budget and allocated to PHED or is it collected by Panchayat in the form of local taxes?

- What will happen to the existing funds? Will they be withdrawn from the budget? If so, will PHED, Panchayat or who so ever is the responsible agency allow for such cuts in the budget?

- The responsibility of repairs and maintenance of WS falls currently within the jurisdiction of PHED, and PHED has maintenance staff exclusively for this purpose at district and block level. What will happen to this staff when the responsibility of cost as well as management is shifted to communities?

- When we talk of 100% cost recovery, are we only talking of labour expenses or does it also include cost of spare parts? If so, have the institutional arrangements been made to provide back up support to communities to procure spare parts?

- Who will recover the cost? Because of its informal and voluntary character, village water committees do not wield enough authority to collect funds.

Participation in Retrospect - Some Issues and Concerns

In the light of the above analysis, the key words that are used in describing peoples' participation will be scrutinized. For example :

- The issue of replicability will be assessed on the basis of resources both institutional and financial that are invested in the project.

- The issue of sustainability will be analyzed on the basis of the hypotheses that projects are sustainable when the priority or demand for improved drinking water supply is voiced by people.

- Empowerment will be examined against the definition that people have the power to define their own agenda of development and set their own priorities.

- Enabling Environment will be determined by looking at existing policies and institutional framework.

Based on these analysis, lessons will be drawn for:

- Project Planners
- Project Implementers
- Policy Makers
- Donors

Conclusion:

The framework that we have presented in this paper is a conceptual framework and aims at providing data which can help us draw useful generalizations which will have important policy implications. At this stage this framework may appear to throw only a list of questions. However, we believe that we first need to focus our attention on careful formulation of questions and then on the procedures for answering them. We do not want to look at these issues in bits and pieces, here and there in fragmented way. Rather we want to evaluate the new approaches in its totality and in a holistic way. This framework therefore is a beginning of the learning process.

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