



Community participation/community-driven

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COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT in South Africa has taken a radical step away from accepted international development practices. Although most NGOs and donors purport to support processes of participatory development, real power and control of resources is retained. Increasingly the paradigm in South Africa is to give resources directly to communities for them to manage, rather than to work through an intermediary.

The political context and history of South Africa have led to a level of awareness and sensitivity, which makes it untenable for 'outsiders' to control resources on behalf of disadvantaged communities. However, the process of community-driven development and community control of resources, assumes a level of skills and experience in the use of these resources which is often lacking. Facilitation of the process therefore becomes a priority, and the relationship among facilitator, community and donor critical and problematic. This process brings the power relationships between the various actors, as well as within communities into question. This is particularly true with respect to decisions regarding the project process and control of resources.

The development of small-scale rural water systems provides a useful example of the processes involved and problems encountered in community management of development. Water systems development raises a number of issues and areas of potential conflict both internal to the community and in relation to external agents. Inherent contradictions are apparent in the need for community control of both process and physical products of the project, and the inexperience and lack of capacity, which result in a need for skilled technical input, and limit the capacity for community members to make informed and real choices, leading to tensions and problems in project implementation. These are exacerbated by conflicts and power relations between the different components of heterogeneous communities. The role of external facilitation is poorly defined and constrained by resource and time limitations. The role of Government in initiating, controlling or supporting development is also problematic.

This paper draws on the experience of the Leon Foundation Water Programme (LFWP) in funding the implementation and facilitation of a number of water projects in the Northern Province and Mpumalanga, South Africa. Specifically, much of the information and experience are drawn from participatory evaluations conducted with the communities involved in the projects by the author.

Participation and community managed development

Much debate has centred on the notion of community participation in development. Participation must be in relation to something - an external agent or other sections of a community. Thus community participate in an NGO's project, or community members participate in an event or process organised by a village committee. In practice the concept of 'community participation' relates mostly to the involvement of people in externally initiated development interventions. Underlying the debates around participation lie issues of power and control (Nelson and Wright). It has generally been the practice that external agencies control the resources which are used for the communities' benefit. The motivation for this arises from the need for donor accountability, lack of project management and financial skills in the communities, or risk of patronage by powerful interest groups, but essentially it is based on the premise that communities are not capable of managing their own development process.

Negative project experiences have led to the realisation that project sustainability and viability is dependent on community involvement. The 'outsider knows best' approach where the external agent 'does the development' for the recipients, created problems of factors unknown to the implementor disrupting the project objectives, and undermining sustainability. Community Participation became an essential component of community water supply, ensuring sustainability through development of a sense of ownership and community capacity and commitment for ongoing repairs and maintenance, as well as reducing project costs.

The move towards participatory development, in the late eighties and nineties, challenged the concept of participation as active involvement of beneficiaries in an externally driven process. The need for a participatory approach which gives communities input into, and control of the full project process is stressed. Participation is also seen as important to ensure that a development project meets the needs of the whole community - including those of marginalised groups. Real participation, argue Oakley et al., involves equality in decision-making throughout the Project Cycle - i.e. assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation. A useful distinction in this debate is to examine the goal to which participation is targeted i.e. whether it is a means (to improve project efficiency, cost effectiveness or sustainability), or an end in itself (to develop a process

where the community controls its own development) (Nelson and Wright). There remains, however, a problem of power since the presence of an external body in any form results in power dynamics between this body and the community.

Community-driven development in South Africa

The South African approach, in theory, takes a new perspective which abandons the need for an external initiator, and attempts to give 'communities' the resources and control of institutions necessary for development. Practice, however, leads back to the same questions, as the mechanism for funding development begs the question - is the process product orientated or aimed at building the capacity of communities to manage their own development?

A history of political activism and determination not to accept paternalistic development has led to direct funding of communities as the dominant development model in South Africa. Communities are then, in principle, in a position to determine and manage their own development, since they control the financial resources by which development services can be purchased. This model has now become the norm for funding small-scale rural development for both donors and Government. In fact, the increasing frequency of direct funding combined with political consciousness has resulted in a situation where 'People will no longer settle for any other rural development strategies than to be given money to run their own things.' (L.Musandiwa, quoted in Vergnani: 7).

In theory, communities contact donors directly with proposals for projects to tackle their problems. Donors then disperse funds into community bank accounts, and the community, through democratically selected committee structures, manage all aspects of the project process and control the resources: 'the recipient community is the one which not only decides on its priorities and how they should be satisfied, but also decides on how that money should be apportioned out.' (IDT; in Berger: 31)

Mvula Trust, the major donor for community water development in South Africa, adopts a similar approach, stating that: "Financial support will generally be provided through community or local level organisations...Priority will be given to communities who have demonstrated a willingness to play a full part in the planning and implementation of proposed projects...[and] the long term management (operation, maintenance and repair) of water and sanitation services." (Mvula: 3)

Clearly provision of money alone will not suffice, particularly in marginalised communities with limited skills and a deficient information base. Communities may not be able to mobilise in order to successfully implement a project, and furthermore those people with education and skills tend to be the more powerful sections of the community. There is a real danger that the marginalised sections

will be further marginalised and the project will be a vehicle for a strengthening of the positions of powerful people and for patronage.

The proposed solution is facilitation. For example, community facilitators were the 'kingpin' of the IDT Relief and Development Programme (Vergnani: 6). "When it comes to driving the process of development, capacity building comes into play. There will be a period when there is going to have to be a degree of intervention by those with the skills, who are not necessarily going to be the immediate beneficiary community...The point is to make sure that skills are transferred to a community so that...they themselves can begin to reduce the need for external assistance. The driving process needs to be learned." (Berger: 32)

Lessons from the LFWP experience

Since late 1993 the LFWP has been supporting community efforts to improve their water supplies. Initially by direct funding for infrastructure, the Programme envisaged an innovative process of community management of implementation. Funding was subject to requirements relating to financial systems, accountability, and the democratic election of a constituted committee to manage the project. Funding was made available for facilitation, which served to help communities meet the requirements, and to facilitate the project process.

In principle facilitators were 'selected' by the communities and funded by the water committees through the project budget. In practice, however, most of the facilitators initiated the contact, and determined the budget from which their facilitation fees should be paid. In a few cases, where communities had not identified a facilitator prior to applying for funding, facilitators were suggested to the committees by the Programme.

The conceptualisation of a community-driven process is simplistic in that it assumes that a facilitator may impart the skills needed for the community to manage their own development process. The nature of project facilitation has the capacity to significantly alter the achievements of a project. The LFWP experience demonstrated a variety of approaches, which ranged from predominantly technical to much more process orientated. Time, financial and skill constraints led to many facilitators taking a leadership role, and in some cases the relationship was one of dependency and paternalism, and reduced the potential for empowerment, by limiting the real control the communities had in the process. Similarly, when facilitation seeks to ensure that the marginalised sections of a community benefit from a project, there is a danger that it again becomes outsider control. In other cases the communities may not want to be 'empowered'. Their priority is the product rather than the process undertaken to get it. The process facilitated may then become a series of hurdles which the community must pass through in order to obtain the product. In cases where an emphasis was placed on process, long delays often resulted in the construction of

water systems. Lack of community understanding of the process and failure to gain a consensus on the project objectives led to frustration.

The varied approach of the facilitators suggests that they interpreted the project objectives and process to attain these in different ways. The key relationship to understand is that of the facilitator with the community, since although this may, in theory, have been neutral the translation of programme objectives into programme control, served as a hidden form of control by the facilitators.

Given the historical skill shortages in rural areas the role of the facilitator is crucial. Time and financial constraints must be overcome, allowing the facilitator to adopt an approach which is conscious of allowing the community the space to develop at a personal and institutional level, which in the long term will give them the authority to control their own development – not necessarily in a physical sense, but in a political sense. This need must be balanced against the benefits which will accrue from rapid project completion and improved accessibility to water. Critical to this is adequate definition of the facilitators role and the provision of adequate training and support.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the nature and quality of facilitation, fundamental questions remain regarding the processes required for sustainable water service development. There is a tension between the immediate need for the service, and the development process which must be undergone to obtain it. In water development, it is the physical product - water - which is the motivation behind the project. Empowerment may also be a product, or perceived by an external agent as equally important, but it is never the immediate priority of the communities in need of water. Participation in water projects is relatively easy due to the desperate need in many villages for the improvement of supplies. However, the process of 'community-managed' development is long and slow, and there is often conflict created between the pressing need for water and the slow process of empowerment.

A Programme review and evaluation process led to the employment of in-house facilitators and developed a detailed methodology for community support. This has reduced many of the problems outlined above, particularly with respect to time and skill constraints. Facilitators work with four communities and receive intensive formal and on-the-job training. The use of local matriculants as facilitators, rather than highly paid consultants results in cost-savings even allowing for the additional facilitation time. This process has also led to a high level of community understanding of the process amongst the committee, and a shift from a facilitator-driven process to one in which the committees understand and support the empowerment process.

The review also led to a much more holistic approach to supporting water development which also highlights the need for information, organisational development, education, research, and advocacy, as well as support to local government which aims to develop government capacity,

and to clarify roles and responsibilities between government and community.

Power and community-driven development

The LFWP Programme - in line with the accepted paradigm – implicitly rated the project process as highly as the water product. This, arguably, went beyond the needs for project sustainability through community maintenance and repair, and viewed the project as a vehicle for an empowering process. The fact that the Programme had an implicit objective which was not a perceived priority of the communities with which it worked challenges the concept of community driven projects and questions the power relationships between the Programme and communities. Can a community be empowered when they perceive themselves to be acting because of funder control?

There is a need to unpack the objectives of development, and separate the need for community empowerment from the desperate physical needs of underprivileged areas. In this context, it is essential to examine the role of Government, since this impacts directly on the conceptualisation of community managed or driven development, and the goals of facilitation. Water is a basic need, a right (DWA: 4). The Government ultimately has responsibility for water provision. However, there is also a need for community control over the development process. This does not necessarily imply that communities must be involved in physically running their own projects, but that there is a dialogue between community and Government which ensure implementation, operation and maintenance of the system. This should be based on a sound understanding of the community and its heterogeneity, and the willingness to listen to community priorities. To empower communities, strategies must be developed to allow people the knowledge needed to make real choices, and the skills necessary to understand the implications of these choices and to control the implementation of development. In South Africa, political changes at a national, regional and local level are resulting in the development of institutional structures which aim to give real power to the community level. Government becomes accountable to, and driven by community needs through local Government structures and corresponding civil society development structures.

Complex changes in power relationships, resource allocation and control are resulting in systemic changes, yet empowerment continues to be inhibited by inequalities in power relations with external bodies (Government, funders, consultants, NGOs), and within internal community structures and relations.

Practice in South Africa does attempt to transfer real power to communities. At village level the effects of national changes are real, and there are changes in power and ownership, as the previous passivity under Apartheid has been transformed into a sense of ownership and entitlement. However, neither the Government strategy of institution building - bringing communities into the new system, nor the LFWP strategy of strengthening communi-

ties abilities to manage their own development, address the issue of structural inequalities within communities. Lip-service is given to incorporating women, and ensuring that the water committees are democratically elected and accountable, but there seems to be no desire to catalyse a transformational process, which challenges institutional and systemic power relations.

Project experience suggests that powerful sections of the "community" dominate development. There is a tendency for better educated men to be active in water committees. Conflict is a very common phenomenon, resulting from the jostling for power in a changing society, and the political and economic opportunities available. The involvement of those with a 'political' interest in the project (as well as those with a social motivation) leads to lack of commitment. This is exacerbated by the voluntary nature of committee membership, and high levels of other commitments, manifested by absenteeism and membership turnover.

There is a lack of conceptualisation of the term 'community'. Empowerment in South Africa is seen largely in terms of historically disadvantaged communities. There is little discussion of the inequalities - particularly class, gender and ethnicity - which exist within communities, and this ensures that the marginalised remain marginalised.

There is therefore a paradox. Traditional interventionist development often challenges the status quo at a village level, and seeks to empower marginalised sections of the community, through developing a sense of power to take action and make decisions, but is inherently unable to challenge the institutions or systems which hold real power over the communities.

The South African model successfully challenges the power at an institutional and perhaps even systemic level,

yet leaves unchallenged exploitative relationships at the community level.

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