



People and systems: signs of hope

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THE AIM OF this short paper is to offer some reflections from development practice in the area of community participation and empowerment. *The paper is intentionally short, as the sole purpose is to act as a marker and invitation for conference participants to contribute, via conference discussion, their own experiences in this important area.* It is intentional to challenge and ask more questions than give answers!

It is also important to look back at previous meetings and conferences, not least WEDC gatherings, to aim to distil and carry forward any insights gained. Firstly, what are the issues that we may *not* be addressing? The raconteur contributing to the 'Summary of Discussion' of the 'Community Management and Organisation' session at the 26th WEDC Conference (in Pickford, J. ed., 2001) commented:

'Possibly the most important 'missing issue' concerns the word 'community'. Communities were frequently discussed as if they are homogeneous, which is rarely if ever the case. Very few papers discussed if or how marginalized groups within communities: the poor, the landless, the lowest caste or tribal groups, were identified, their needs, willingness and ability to contribute established, their capacity built. Yet is it these groups that are often excluded from development, unable or unwilling to voice their demands. This issue deserves as much attention as the related issue of gender, but judging from the content of the papers presented in the year 2000, it is not being perceived as a priority.'

As this reflection notes it is only too easy to fail to get to the heart of some of the grass-roots problems which inhibit significant progress in the community participation area. It is a concern that such issues are not being addressed.

The main stumbling block to people's participation and empowerment is that too often the emphasis is not on the *community*, it is on the product. A change of emphasis from *product to process* is long overdue. It would be a real sign of hope if NGO's (or other appropriate agencies of change) presence in an area was initially simply one of gathering information and building up trust. The objective would be to 'listen and learn', to assess the prospects for the development of a truly people's participation network/organization, e.g. village development committee, with the intended purpose of initiating a development process based on the real needs of the community. This would mean taking fully into account marginalized groups and the existing social-

political environment in the area. The emphasis would be on community development, facilitating the appropriate rural organizational infrastructure to further projects which that community decided were a priority and were moreover willing and able to implement. The point being made here is not necessarily for more and more projects to include a significant community participation and empowerment component, but for community participation and empowerment strategies to be fostered as an *a priori* condition to the whole development process - long before any concrete project is articulated.

What does this sort of strategy mean from the viewpoint of the typical local partner NGO and funding agency? Invariably it will mean a change in mindset with a need for a flexible response. Even when projects have been identified there will be a need for plans to change, develop new on-the-job training models and be able to accept changes in time schedules and actual use of budgets. From an administrative viewpoint this strategy would seem to be a very high-risk one. However, it is only in situations where a degree of risk is accepted that there can be the potential for breakthrough towards real community empowerment. The emphasis must be less on achieving results within a particular time schedule and more on allowing the people to experience and learn from their engagement in their own development process.

Can we not identify examples of such a strategy working?

One such example is outlined by Makhetha reporting on community involvement in Ga-Motlatla village in the Northwest Province in South Africa. In this drought-relief project the approach to the involvement of the community was directly responsible for the ability of the community, not only to sustain the project long beyond the drought relief period but, in addition, to initiate other development projects that have transformed the village. The Independent Development Trust (IDT) made available a budget to the community. Decisions on how much of the budget to allocate to different activities, how to implement the projects, how to ensure equitable employment opportunities, how much to pay the labour and ultimately how to run the project were all left to the community. As part and parcel of community empowerment it was necessary to implement training schemes to enhance community competence in such areas as budgeting, operation of a bank account, tender invitations, report writing, etc. The funding agency accepted that the fencing of graveyards from cattle straying

and the sudden emergency need to fence another area (even after the initial agreement of priorities was agreed) had to be supported. Indeed the fencing project was implemented before the water project was started.

Makhetha summarises the points that led to the success of the project:

‘Total commitment on the part of the IDT to community participation and control. The IDT had the advantage that it was both funder and implementer. —

Involvement of the community at all stages in a meaningful manner. The community was not just involved in ratifying decisions but in actually making them. This was all the way from deciding on projects to the budgeting for them, to implementing them.

Positive efforts to empower the community to participate meaningfully. There was no undue pressure on the community to meet deadlines planned and programmed by some outside consultants. The community was setting its own pace and adequate time was given to the training and empowerment aspects of the project. On the job training continued throughout the project period.

Respect for the dynamic nature of community participation and an accommodation of their changing needs. The ability of the programme to adapt to changing needs in the community, including accommodation of changing priorities with time —.

Recognition, encouragement and utilisation of community resources. The programme recognised that communities had resources that they had been exploiting for ages and these should be incorporated into projects. The fact that they had been organising themselves around their agricultural activities, for example, could be a good entry point for community organisation for development work.

Commitment from all involved parties in ensuring the success of both the ‘process’ and the ‘product’. A good balance was maintained at all times between the social issues and the processes for hard delivery.’

The process of community participation in this project raised the confidence of the community to an extent that they started using their skills in negotiating with other funders and government agencies. This is an excellent example of how boundless enthusiasm, creativity and an innovative spirit can be released when people feel they have seized on something that can make a difference.

Do we have other stories like this one?

It is evident that what is required is a significant level of change within development circles - a transformation just as challenging as the programmes and projects we seek to initiate. Chambers (in Blackburn, Holland, ed., 1998) focuses on three themes of effective participation:

‘Sustained participation in development demands transformation in three domains: methods and procedures; institutional culture, and personal behaviour and attitudes. All three are needed. Each reinforces the others. Each presents points of entry for change. Of these, personal behaviour and attitudes are crucial. Participation is about how people interact. Dominating behaviour inhibits participation. Democratic behaviour to enable and empower encourages it. For those with power and authority to adopt non-dominating, empowering behaviour almost always entails personal change.’

From an organizational viewpoint what is needed is the will to encourage a ‘learning organization’ approach: embracing error, encouraging reflection (including self-critical reflection) and critical awareness linked to self-improvement. Learning organizations are collectives of communities of individuals who share experiences and understanding through co-operative learning and genuine participation in those events, which affect them.

Sustainable projects which demonstrate a significant community participation and empowerment component and which go on to nurture other projects, i.e. a true development process, are few and far between. The identification of such projects might further significant insights in this area. *This is by way of an invitation for such experiences to be shared.*

We should also not forget that there are sometimes traditional practices that should not be ignored. Often this is a means of tapping into informal methods and organization and for outsiders to learn how a community functions. One such example relates to indigenous knowledge of water management of rainwater harvesting in the Banni grasslands, Kachchh district of India. Here the most important strategy by which the local people, the Maldharis, traditionally managed to safeguard their livelihood has been through rainwater harvesting. It has been a necessity for the inhabitants to collect a maximum of rainwater falling over an area, in a manner that would secure fresh water availability for the entire year. The extensive indigenous knowledge of the local ecosystem and the complex water harvesting system they subsequently developed, is based on hundreds of years of experience and is deeply embedded in their culture. It has become increasingly clear that by failing to understand the complex ecosystem of the Banni region and adequately appreciating the value of the Maldhari’s interaction with their natural environment, large scale intervention has failed to yield expected results. It has also increased the vulnerability of the people living in harmony with their environment and undermined their local survival mechanisms.

With regard to community empowerment - are we aware of the insensitivity of much of our projects? Can we listen and learn?

References

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