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Participation and Development Assistance in Africa

by Allan Hoben, Pauline Peters, and Dianne Rocheleau

There is now a broad consensus in the development community that rural development and natural resource management projects in Africa can't succeed without local participation. Yet, donors' and governments' efforts to promote greater local participation in rural Africa have met with only limited success. Why? Some possible causes of this dilemma and ways to encourage more effective local participation, particularly in community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) projects, are explored below. This policy brief is addressed primarily to donor and NGO policy-makers who must decide how best to foster greater stakeholder participation in Africa. It is based on a forthcoming PCG discussion paper by Allan Hoben, Pauline Peters and Dianne Rocheleau, "Participation, Civil Society and Development Assistance in Africa."

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APPROACHES TO PARTICIPATION

Different approaches to participation are based on different theories of community, society, and

development. They have different implications for action, and they are pursued by different actors in the development arena. For this reason, participation is in danger of becoming just another development clich,. The top-down mobilization approach, adopted by many authoritarian regimes, rests on the assumption that people need to be told how to "participate" in centrally planned development activities. At the other extreme, the bottom-up empowerment approach advocated by some activists rests on the premise that "the biggest obstacle to participation is that current decision-making structures and processes have evolved to accommodate the interests and objectives of powerful sectors within society and to maintain the status quo" (Zazueta 1995).

The "stakeholder involvement in decision-making approach" (hereafter, the stakeholder approach), the main focus of this report, has been adopted by most development agencies. It rests on the idea that all stakeholders--including politicians, government organizations, the private sector, voluntary organizations, and, especially, ordinary citizens groups--should actively take part in decisions that affect their interests. The participatory approach rests on the assumption that participation will enable stakeholders to identify their diverse objectives, to flag conflicts, and to resolve them. Such broad stakeholder involvement has four kinds of potential benefits:

- It can bring more information and broader experience to bear on decision-making, making it easier to elaborate more realistic and effective projects, policies, laws and regulations;
- It can help to ground new initiatives in existing and legitimate local institutions and in cultural values;
- It can help build political support for and reduce opposition to policy proposals, projects, and other decisions by building in stakeholder concerns and taking account of their interests; and
- It can help to build local capacity to plan and implement development activities.

Donors pursue the stakeholder approach through a wide spectrum of activities. At one end of the spectrum are project-specific technical interventions intended to promote local community participation. A strategy relying on these localized technical activities implicitly rests on the assumption that people are not already participating in development decisions because they lack the will, the knowledge, the resources, and the organizational skills to do so.

At the other end of the spectrum are activities intended to create more space for individual and organizational participation in decision-making of all kinds and at all levels. These focus on such institutional factors as the distribution of political power, the right to voice dissent, the openness of governmental decision-making, secure access to resources, and the state of legal institutions. An institution-building or enabling strategy of this type rests on the assumption that stakeholders will normally try to influence decisions that affect their interests except where institutional barriers prevent them from doing so.

Although the localized and institution-building strategies are both useful and complement one another, disproportionate amounts of development resources are currently invested in localized activities, perhaps because they are easier to administer project by project, easier to explain to donors' domestic

constituencies, and less contentious. Unfortunately, this pattern of resource allocation does not reflect the institutional and political barriers to local participation discussed below.

Participation in Africa

Stakeholder participation in rural Africa has many precedents. The current tendency to view participation in decision-making as absent or new in rural communities obscures both the vigor of participatory rural institutions and the critical linkages among these small-scale institutions and wider regional, national, and international institutions and political processes.

In pre-colonial Africa, participation by adult males was a common feature of decision-making in many types of political and social organizations. Long and open discussions were a common way to reach decisions in many communities. Clans, lineages, age grades, and other "participatory" groupings constituted a kind of civil society and played a vital role in economic and community organization, limiting the abuse of political power.

Colonial rule had a mixed but generally negative impact on participatory institutions and practices for it represented the imposition by force of alien rule, institutions, and values for the benefit of the colonial power. But, in rural areas many kinds of indigenous organizations survived and provided their members with economic and social security. At the same time, new ethnic welfare organizations, professional associations, and separatist churches were formed by educated urban Africans.

Since independence, many African regimes have eroded the institutions of civil society and discouraged rural stakeholder participation. In large part, this happened because ruling elites adopted colonial top-down administrative structures and attitudes towards rural people. Other causes were the urge to catch up with the developed nations by forcefully transforming traditional institutions and the fear that independent organizations would be spawning grounds for rival leaders.

In many countries, rural Africans are not allowed to form autonomous organizations, and few regimes are entirely at ease with the great increase in the 1980s and 1990s in the activities of international NGOs and the local NGOs they support. Yet, if rural stakeholders don't feel safe from arbitrary reprisals by government and powerful interest groups, how likely are they to participate and to contest decisions by government officials, landlords, or employers?

Similarly, unless rural people believe that they have secure rights of access to natural resources, they have no long-term interest in managing those resources or participating in community-based conservation. Yet, both colonial and independent governments have asserted state rights over land, pasture, and forests thus weakening or eliminating local property rights. Moreover, both private investment and donor-funded development projects have often heightened conflicts over access to natural resources and decreased the security of individuals, user groups, and communities by providing the impetus for governments to override long-standing local property rights in the national and elite interest.

Adding to this problem, Africa has few strong democratic pluralist national institutions. Sustained support for democratic reforms (as USAID and other donors are already attempting to give in several countries) is especially critical for minority rights, the right to dissent, the right to criticize government programs and policies, and freedom of the press. Without these and greater stakeholder involvement -- through a wide range of legal and administrative institutions -- in the formulation of laws, regulations, policies, and programs at an early stage, democracy is unlikely to root firmly in African nations.

Unfortunately, the actions of donor agencies have often reduced the scope for rural participation in decision-making. During the Cold War, major Western development assistance agencies too often uncritically supported authoritarian regimes to contain communist influence and maintain access to strategic minerals and base sites. The recipient regime's record on human rights, freedom of speech, democratic elections, and cooperation with civil society scarcely figured in the setting of development aid priorities. This policy strengthened authoritarian regimes and signaled other rulers that democracy, anti-corruption measures, and efficiency were to be given more lip service than serious financial and other support.

High but unstable levels of per capita foreign assistance and major periodic shifts in aid policies kept African officials off balance and placed them in the role of "policy-takers" more than policy-makers (Johnston, Hoben, and Jaeger 1992). Their latitude for choice diminished as debt mounted, fiscal crises loomed, and donors became more prescriptive.

Under these circumstances, African officials were rewarded for understanding what aid agencies wanted them to do and for attracting aid to their nation, their ministry, and their unit. Few opportunities or incentives for stakeholder participation were built into crucial decisions. Indeed, governments increasingly looked outward to aid agencies instead of downward to their constituents for revenue, and, instead of establishing local systems of taxation and user fees, which can give authority to decentralized government and give local people greater voice in how their money is spent, governments found it easier to accept aid.

Delivering aid through complex project design and implementation procedures also reduces the scope for stakeholder participation. Project ideas too often come from donor staff, rather than from local people. Project selection is too often influenced by political and bureaucratic pressures that arise at the national and international level rather than by local needs. Design requirements have been so complex that many projects are modeled closely on previous efforts to save time, regardless of their success. To keep projects on schedule, design, implementation, and evaluation must be carried out by staff or consultants familiar with the agency's procurement and accounting procedures -- another way in which local people are bypassed.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Development planners increasingly understand the need to engage stakeholders in decision-making. Two ideas in particular are receiving much attention: 1) funding community based natural resource

management (CBNRM) projects, and 2) giving a higher portion of aid to and through international, national, and local NGOs.

Community-Based Projects

Most community-based projects are organized around a convenient local administrative unit. Defining "community" this way raises several questions. Does the unit represent a community? Do all the stakeholders, including women, the young, and minorities, have common interests and objectives? Can they reconcile their differences? How is political power shared within the community? Can the community be treated in isolation from its wider institutional setting?

Some parts of sub-Saharan Africa lack clearly bounded social and residential units. In many areas, imposed administrative boundaries do not correspond to meaningful social groups. Even where bounded communities exist, as in much of West Africa, their members don't necessarily have common needs and interests in natural resource management. Members of what may appear to the outsider to be homogeneous low-income communities are always differentiated from one another by gender, class, ethnicity, race, age, religious affiliation, or caste. Nor is identifying stakeholders a once-and-for-all action. Shared interests on a specific issue may create temporary coalitions of distinct social groups, which may break apart as other issues become relatively more important.

Since stakeholder objectives are diverse, identifying them and ensuring that conflicting objectives can be politically and legally reconciled is difficult. Moreover, some stakeholders may publicly agree on a course of action but harbor very different unstated objectives. If all groups are getting what they want, hidden agendas don't necessarily cause problems, but both participatory decision-making and the new practices induced by the project will cease once project funds are exhausted.

Another challenge to CBNRM practitioners determined to increase participation is understanding the political context of their work. Too often, they see local, regional, and national politics as illegitimate interference from the outside, as an unfortunate outcome of action rather than as an inherent part of it. Recognizing that participation is intrinsically political draws attention to four related issues that frequently remain dark areas in planning and implementation. (See Box 1.)

Because local conservation and resource management activities are part of longer-term processes, a final consideration is the design of CBNRM projects to take careful account of the planning time horizon. For example, rapid assessment methodologies, such as Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA), are commonly used to initiate participatory projects by engaging community members in planning discussions about local problems and proposed development solutions. However, some PRA results have been extrapolated inappropriately. Ambitious objectives for broad, sweeping, or long-term changes may be unduly influenced by one-time PRAs originally conducted to inform short-term planning. Experience to date suggests that, even more than for some other development projects, natural resource management activities require ongoing monitoring and reassessment.

Strengthening Participation through NGOs

Aid agencies justify their massive increase in official support for NGOs over the past 15 years as an investment in stakeholder participation in rural development, environmental management, and civil society. These agencies consider NGOs to be more adept than the agencies themselves are at mobilizing local resources, consciousness-raising, sparking volunteerism, collective action, grassroots representation, innovation, creating replicable projects, and reaching often-disenfranchised groups (such as the poor and women).

The evidence, though incomplete, shows that official support for NGOs does not necessarily help increase or institutionalize stakeholder participation. Two problems stand in the way. First, many of the NGOs that have received the most support have had little capacity and incentive to adopt a truly participatory approach. Few African NGOs are legitimate representatives of rural people's organizations, partly because few governments have encouraged or permitted from-the-ground-up organizations to flourish. Second, receiving large amounts of official development assistance tends to make local NGOs of any type less participatory since it frees them from the need to seek and use the energy of voluntary action.

The difference between African NGOs that are legitimate voluntary organizations and those set up by entrepreneurial individuals or groups to serve as convenient "intermediaries" and surrogates for national, bilateral, and international agencies and organizations is huge and important. The former, representative membership organizations, are organized around shared values, they rely heavily on voluntary energy, and they aim to alleviate poverty or promote development among disadvantaged, low-income, or marginal groups. Their support comes from constituencies that are sympathetic to their values and objectives. The latter represent an opportunistic response to the availability of funding. Some are little more than "brief-case NGOs." Although technically nonprofit, they are basically businesses selling services to governments and private donors. They may have considerable technical and managerial capacity and operate on a large scale, and many are what big aid agencies really want when they contract with NGOs for project implementation.

In practice, external support often becomes top-down support, replacing the upward flow of voluntary energy with a downward flow of goods and services. Authority and legitimacy come to depend on how well leaders maintain and increase this stream of benefits, not on how well they help their constituents articulate their objectives, reach a working compromise, and cooperate to meet shared goals. In short, they become at least as accountable to the funders as to their constituents.

When externally funded NGOs make goods and services available unpredictably or capriciously, local-level organizations can be further thwarted. This undisciplined approach can reduce their incentives to make and maintain capital investments. This happened in the Bakel region in Senegal, where villagers decided not to save for a replacement irrigation pump when they heard that a neighboring community had received one free from an international NGO. Similarly, farmers in Alaba, Ethiopia, stopped tending traditional communal ponds when they observed that a well-meaning NGO was constructing new ponds

in their area.

Top-down support through NGOs does not necessarily expand their local membership base either since current members fear the dilution of their benefits. Nor does it encourage close cooperation among NGOs that are competing for funding. Indeed, such support can hurt, weaken, or undo legitimate NGOs that happen to be less visible or less convenient for donors to work with.

Implications for Development Planning

The preceding analysis has implications for three types of donor and NGO action:

- The first are actions that recognize the political character of participation and create more space for it by strengthening the institutions of civil society. These include: strengthening the rule of law, with special attention to human and civil rights; securing property rights for individuals, communities, and user groups; allowing freedom of dissent and assembly; providing freedom of the press; and assuring the rights of women and ethnic minorities. A complementary need is to curb the abuse of administrative power and increase "transparency" or openness in bureaucratic decision-making. These objectives must be pursued through both capacity building and the conditions attached to aid.
- The second are actions that increase the capacity of local people to assert their interests and cope creatively with government, NGO, and donor initiatives in environmental management and development. These include training in literacy, numeracy, accounting, leadership and organization, record-keeping, awareness of legal rights, and getting familiar with the workings of government and potentially useful programs and services.
- The third are actions by which donors and international NGOs can enhance participation when they support local NGOs. Support should be given to local NGOs that have demonstrated their commitment to their mission and values -- NGOs that depend for much of their energy on volunteerism. Donors should not expect NGOs that function as public-sector contractors to simultaneously promote participation. Funds to local NGOs should, as far as possible, be given as grants rather than contracts, though the results should be evaluated before additional grants are made. Also, too much funding too fast is likely to decrease a local NGO's capacity to promote participation in rural areas. In any case, long-term investing in the NGO's mission makes more sense and does more good than unding short-term NGO service contracts.

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