

6

Delta and village level planning in Sierra Leone: Possibilities and pitfalls

Melissa Leach

In Sierra Leone, local level adaptive planning approaches are under current debate and early application amongst both small NGOs and church organisations, and large-scale integrated rural development projects. Attention is focused on the DELTA/’Training for Transformation’ approaches first developed in Kenya. These have much in common with other RRA/PRA approaches, but place particular emphasis on confronting and working through local conflicts of interest. They offer exciting possibilities but also pose challenges to institutional and socio-political sustainability.

Conventional planning approaches to integrated rural development in Sierra Leone have suffered from a lack of Sectoral co-ordination and a failure to ensure that the priority needs of different social groups (e.g. men and women in different types of households) are being met. The one-off small projects (infrastructure, agricultural projects, community stores, etc) undertaken by NGOs and larger agencies’ ‘small projects’ funds frequently do not respond to community needs, rather becoming vehicles for local politicians’ rivalries or chiefs’ attempts to rally electoral support within the peculiarly resilient Sierra Leonean brand of patron-client politics. The call for ‘participatory’ planning is emerging as a response to such ‘failures’, as attributed to top-down, out-of-touch extension methods. Current appraisal methods such as baseline surveys are also out of touch in their identification of static ‘needs’ of (sectors of) the community, rather than focusing on the social, economic and political processes through which different villagers’ priorities arise, come into conflict, and are negotiated and bargained over.

DELTA (Development Education and Leadership Training for Action) was introduced to Sierra Leone in 1983 from Nigeria. The approach combines ‘conscientisation’ ideas derived from Paulo Freire with US-derived management training principles and originally - biblical messages. Teams of 5-8 people from NGOs, church organisations and local communities undergo training through a series of four workshops, spaced at six-month intervals, through which they are intended to develop communication skills and radical critical awareness of local and national conditions. They are expected, in turn, to train further groups. DELTA trainees then undertake ‘listening surveys’ to determine needs within their own communities. On the basis of the problems voiced most often and most intensely they prepare ‘codes’ - sketches, pictures or songs - which illustrate the problems to community, and which are presented in a meeting. Each code is ‘processed’ through discussion of the causes and conflicting interests, which affect the problem. Villagers are expected to reach a consensus about which problem requires most immediate action, and then to undertake a process of ‘action planning’ to tackle its causes. Action planning involves the clarification of objectives and time scales, and the management of labour and resources - including applying for funding. Typical projects initiated in this way include child delivery rooms, bridges and seed banks.

DELTA training in Sierra Leone currently centres on the Anglican Church (Bo Dioscese) and the Catholic Pastoral Centre in Kenema. There is now a network of ‘Community Animation Teams’ which have undergone the training and which make more or less operational use of the approach in their work, supporting it with various sources of funding.

A large number of NGOs have shown interest in the approach. In 1987 the large GTZ-funded Bo-Pujehun Rural Development Project adapted DELTA into an approach called 'Village Level Planning' (VLP) to ensure that project initiatives from its 'Community Action Fund' met local interests and to integrate Sectoral planning at the local level. With VLP still at a pilot stage, the project administers a truncated version of the DELTA training programme to local staff who then apply the listening survey/action planning framework in villages.

The approaches pose institutional challenges. Firstly, the Church model DELTA practised by isolated communities for themselves - offers more control to people and little to the funding agency, which is expected to react to and provide for local requests. While this often suits understaffed NGOs and churches who can use a few trained DELTA workers as 'animators', it does not fit the accountability requirements of larger funding agencies. To get round his difficulty, the Bo-Pujehun project supports VLP with an extensive set of tightly controlled monitoring procedures and feedback to a hierarchy of committees. Yet this is proving even more costly and cumbersome to administer than conventional planning and M&E procedures. Secondly, DELTA and VLP are training-intensive, and trainers, trainee-trainers and village-level workers all need to be talented communicators. Bo-Pujehun is finding that extension workers with and without good communication skills achieve markedly different results. If the approaches are to be adopted on a larger scale by other agencies, the whole recruitment profile for extension workers could change, with implications for the existing (shakily pursued) policy to work with Ministry staff wherever possible.

DELTA and VLP also raise local socio-political questions. On the positive side, the approaches do offer a more dynamic, process-oriented way of identifying and responding to local interests. The code presentations - especially the sketches - model bargaining processes effectively and help make conflicts of interest explicit by showing people a mirrored reflection of their own lives. The animator-led processing sessions provide fora for conflict arbitration and more opportunity

for the socially uninfluential to voice their concerns than they would find, say, in court or a village meeting.

On the negative side, the approach cannot ensure that conflicts are not resolved in the interests of more powerful groups. In one VLP session, for example, men and women were strongly opposed over whether a rice store (men's preference) or a delivery house (women's preference) should be built first; consensus could not be reached, and the men asserted their priority. 'Consciousness raising' and provoking open conflict at village level could rebound in unfortunate ways on people's private relations for their relations with higher authorities (in Kenya, DELTA was banned by the state which considered it to be provoking insurrection).

While well-suited to village-level projects, VLP cannot easily respond to the particular needs of small vulnerable minorities such as young wives' desires to increase their incomes to compensate for failing male support. Voiced only by a few, such issues rarely rank highly in listening surveys. Finally, the approaches offer no guaranteed safety from take over by local political processes. Sierra Leonean patrons have successfully hijacked IADP inputs, rural credit schemes and conservation programmes in the past to increase their clientele. DELTA could become a similar vehicle with a little ingenuity and perhaps some careful engineering of the 'needs' voiced in listening surveys. Like 'Action Researchers' who attempt to subvert existing power structures, therefore, practitioners of this kind of local level adaptive planning face both difficulties and dangers.

- **Melissa Leach**, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK.