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Adaptive local planning: institutional issues

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• Introduction

The question that we face is whether adaptive local planning techniques are sufficiently powerful, persuasive and, in themselves, adaptable to local situations to facilitate a breakthrough in the logjam of local institutional structures, procedures and interests that has so far set limits to the effectiveness of local planning.

• The local planning context

In many Third World countries three principal forces are at work at local levels of governance.

- Conflicting centralisation - decentralisation imperatives:

At macro level these are seen as the conflicting requirements of holding the state together versus allowing expression of local interests. Local outcomes include:

- central and local politicians struggling over control of local opportunities for patronage;
- for administrators, questions of degrees of discretion or conformity; and,
- for technical officers, conflicting loyalties to central ministries and local co-ordinating or planning bodies.
- Parallelism of line ministries:
 - separate ministries, represented at local levels by technical officers, each with their own budgets (great

or small), lacking any interest in collaboration.

- In some places, plurality of NGO initiatives:
 - each exerting demands for information or permissions etc.

• How does planning fit?

In this context planning is not just-a question of knowing what best to do in an area (itself a difficult enough matter) but of providing:

- a legitimate means of decision making at a decentralised level (i.e. a framework through which the centre/local issue can be resolved).
- a means of co-ordination: between the activities of departments, between other development agencies, and between statutory and voluntary sectors.

Insofar as local planning has been institutionalised at all, it is evidence of a desire, at some level of government, for development activities to be adapted to local needs. This desire can be backed up by an element of conditionality in budget allocations and other persuasive measures. However we can still look critically at the institutionalisation of local planning directives to see to what extent they represent battles won or lost (e.g. at the political level, local planning committees chaired by central MPs rather than local councillors) or varying degrees of token conformity (e.g. the stapling together of departmental budgets to form a plan).

• **Types of plan**

Different actors on the local planning stages are likely to perceive strategic advantage in different forms of plan.

- End state plans are likely to be favoured:
 - by administrators and technical officers who are seeking to limit political discretion or 'interference' (i.e. political involvement in particular allocations); and,
 - by donors seeking evidence of commitment to the aims of 'integrated' area development packages.
- Rolling plans will be the outcome of accommodating processes, in which different stake holders (politicians, elites, technical officers) are represented on local planning bodies, to bring together shopping lists from the grassroots, technical department budget proposals etc.
- Advocacy plans will be favoured by voluntary bodies that seek to influence local allocations (usually seeking maximum discretion for their own activities nevertheless).

To a certain extent the dominance of different parties in different places or in different stages of rural development history, can be seen in the prevalence of one or other of these planning devices.

• **How effective is adaptive local planning?**

I take adaptive planning to be a number of techniques or procedures (including RRA) for bringing local peoples' perspectives to bear upon resource allocating and controlling processes. In many cases the fact-finding activities required will be prior to the 'on paper' or 'in committee' phases of the above kinds of plan. They can be used to sensitise the proposals of technical departments to local perceptions of need, or to prioritise politically

mediated demands from grassroots organisations, or to enable NGOs to be responsive rather than prescriptive. As such, adaptive planning can be seen as a useful addition to any planning process at the local level. However, is it in the interests of any powerful people within the planning process to do it? The institutionalisation of adaptive planning hangs on this question.

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