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What happened to participatory planning in Kenya's arid and semi-arid land?

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• Introduction

In Kenya, the idea of participatory planning is certainly not new. References to the concept have recurred repeatedly in planning documents since the early 1960s. It is necessary to ask why a practice which is so widely recommended is so rarely applied. One must conclude, at least in the context of Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands' development programme, that both donors and government find participatory planning and implementation administratively inconvenient, even impracticable. In order to explain why, it is necessary to consider the framework for implementation in some detail.

The government of Kenya has pursued an active strategy for the development of Kenya's Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL)¹ for more than a decade. ASAL areas account for more than 80% of Kenya's land area yet hold only 20% of the population. Because of their low economic potential, these areas tended to be neglected in development strategy until, in the mid-1970s, it was recognised that they merited special attention since (a) their inhabitants were often amongst Kenya's poorest, (b) they needed to support and feed a growing population if they were not to become an increasing burden on the rest of the economy,

¹ ASAL is the common abbreviation for Arid and Semi-arid Lands. The definition of ASAL is derived from the Farm Management Handbook of Kenya (GOK, 1982) which identifies seven agro-ecological zones (AEZs). ASAL comprise AEZ IV-VII. Twenty-two districts, the so-called ASAL districts, have more than 30 per cent of their area with an evapo-transpiration of more than twice the annual rainfall, that is within AEZ IV-VII.

and (c) the intensified pressure on the ASAL carried dangers of environmental degradation.

The 1979 government policy document (GOK, 1979) on SAL was followed by the establishment of 12 donor-funded integrated rural development programmes (IRDPs) in 14 of Kenya's 22 ASAL districts. To coordinate them, a special ASAL Section was created in 1980 in the Rural Planning Department of the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development (MEPD), subsequently the Ministry of Planning and National Development (MOPND). Through the 1980s, the ASAL continued to have an important place in national policy. However, by 1988 it had become apparent that the manifold problems of ASAL required more resources and better coordination. As in the rest of Kenya, problems of the ASAL districts had continued to grow as the population increased. Despite the fact that the provision of basic services had improved in ASAL, they remained poor in relation to the rest of the country. In May 1989 a separate ministry, the Ministry of Reclamation and Development of Arid, Semi-Arid Areas and Wastelands (MRDASW), was created, primarily as a coordinating body. This took over from MOPND the responsibility for overseeing the ASAL IRDPs.

• Decentralised integrated planning

Decentralised integrated planning was initiated in Kenya in 1971 under the Special Rural Development Programme (SRDP) in areas chosen to cover a cross section of the nation, including ASAL. The primary objective of SRDP, which was focused at the sub-district

level (i.e. the division), was to increase rural incomes, employment and welfare. Attempts were made to identify critical gaps and bottlenecks and to test new ideas and projects. Organisational and sectoral coordination were given attention in both planning and implementation. As with many pilot programmes, a major problem proved to be the conflict between the desire for establishing viable programmes, which could be replicated through the country, and the pressure to create individually successful programmes which were not transferable because of high costs (IDS, 1973). As an outgrowth of the SRDP experiment, the government attempted to extend decentralized planning to all districts in Kenya. The post of District Development Officer (DDO) was created and District Planning units (DPU) were established (Lele, 1975).

The first of the ASAL district programmes was the Machakos Integrated Development Programme (MIDP). This began in 1978 in Machakos District which had long been recognised as a critical area by those concerned with the development of sustainable dryland agriculture on erodible soils. The MIDP has been funded by the European Development Fund to a current total of K Sh.17.25 million. The Phase I objectives were simply to increase productivity and raise rural living standards. Its major justification was poverty alleviation. MIDP strategy emphasised planning at the local level, building local implementation capacity and investing in a range of complementary activities to overcome joint constraints. To achieve the above objectives, planning and implementation were meant to be decentralised to the district level and efforts were made to seek complementarities between sectors. A flexible approach was adopted to the annual programming and budgeting of a series of sectoral activities: soil and water conservation, crop and livestock production, cooperatives, rural afforestation, water supply, rural industries, social services and adult education and institutional support (ie. the funding of a programme Management Unit, training and the provision of Technical Assistance).

Thus MIDP and its imitators were meant to break away from the archetypal donor project. From the outset, the locus of decision-making

and control of the ASAL district programmes committees, from the locational, through divisional, up to the district level. Detailed programmes were expected to evolve as a result of a process of annual planning and budgeting. Despite early progress on MIDP with district-level planning, which led to the formulation of the District Focus for Rural Development policy (GoK, 1984), subsequently little has been achieved in the way of institutional development at district level or below, either in Machakos or in other ASAL districts. Why?

• Programme planning and management

Political control

With the introduction of the District Focus, district development was to have been brought under the supervision of the District Development Committees (DDC) and sub-committees at divisional and locational level. Externally funded programmes like MIDP, were expected to provide a source of funds to allow districts to plan and implement their own programmes. The extent to which this happened has depended on the degree of involvement of the community. For example, there were marked differences between the densely settled farming areas, such as Machakos, where the local committees were active and the remote pastoral areas, such as Turkana, where the committees rarely met and were dominated by a handful of officials and politicians. The 1980s have not witnessed the flowering of participatory planning in Kenya. Indeed, since the 1982 constitutional amendment that made Kenya a one-party state, democratic institutions have been steadily eroded. This has blighted genuine participation in local government and has strengthened the hold of KANU's gatekeepers.

Bureaucratic control

Implementation of the District Focus policy has also depended on the degree to which line ministries were prepared to devolve decision-making to district level and below. In spite of the lip service paid to District Focus, Kenya's administrative structure has remained very hierarchical, centralised and vertically

fragmented. Junior officers at field level are at the bottom of a career ladder which leads progressively to less direct involvement with the poorer sections of the rural community and to less need to undertake tiresome duties in remote areas. The DC, assisted by the DDO, is nominally in charge of all administrative work in the District, but in practice field staff of line ministries continue executing their work with little regard to the need for mutual coordination of either day-to-day administration or long-term planning and budgeting. Public servants are over-represented on development committees at both the district and divisional level (Rono et al, 1990) and have found little difficulty in resisting local wishes if they were so disposed.

Budgetary process

Originally, with MIDP Phase I for example, the ASAL funds allocated to the districts were seen as incremental. They represented funding over and above that which the line ministries in the district would otherwise be receiving from the Treasury. The funds were meant to be used for investments which addressed the special problems of ASAL, namely human resource development, exploitation of productive potential, conservation and integration within the national economy. Yet, even in the case of MIDP, there was a tendency to load the programme with the costs of ongoing national programmes (ODI, 1982). Over the last ten years, ASAL funds have become a substitute for recurrent funding from the Treasury. In some districts, the situation has now been reached in which the major portion of external funds has gone to meet operating costs. Donors have persuaded themselves that it made little sense to finance separate programmes when many of the developmental services were functioning at low levels of effectiveness on account of the scarcity of government funds². They reasoned that comparatively modest incremental resources could be used to make the existing services more effective.

This tendency of IRDPs to absorb recurrent costs has been reinforced by the fact that they

² In Kitui District in 1988/9, for example, only KSh.200 was available per professional officer to meet non-wage operating and maintenance costs.

proceed by annual programming and budgeting. Annual work plans and budgets are submitted to the Programme Officer by the district heads of line ministries for approval in March/April for inclusion in the budget for the financial year following the one after next, ie. the FY starting in 16 months' time. Because they fear they will not receive funds from the central Treasury to cover routine operating costs, they load them onto the ASAL programme. Thus much of the ASAL budget goes to cover transport, travel allowances, stationery, etc. for routine work with very little innovative content. Even if he/she were so inclined, the scope for the beleaguered Programme Officer³ from the ASAL Ministry to change submissions, by for example the Ministry of Water Development or the Ministry of Agriculture, is very limited. Thus a prime purpose of the ASAL funds - to provide the opportunity for innovative participatory planning at the district level - has been frustrated.

Donor influence and involvement

In an attempt to resolve these and related problems, the donors' staff tend to become involved in day-to-day management. In order to limit donor influence, it has been proposed that district programmes should be financed by more than one external agency. However, this would not solve the underlying problem, namely the weak representation of the MRDASW, the ASAL Ministry, at district level. The presence of several donors could make matters more complicated at district level. In any case, half the ASAL districts are currently without an ASAL programme and they would prefer to have one donor rather than none at all.

Expatriate Technical Assistance (TA) has been a major issue from the early days of MIDP. Heads of department often saw TA as an imposition; a price that had to be paid for donor funding. TA domination has clearly had a negative impact on past ASAL programmes and has greatly reduced the net flow of

³ Very often junior economists several job groups lower than the heads of department with whom they are dealing.

external resources⁴. Donors, on the other hand, have insisted that TA is essential if funds are to be effectively applied and monitored. The heat has gradually gone out of the debate as donors have found it increasingly difficult to recruit staff and as the technical calibre of the departmental heads has improved. Unfortunately this improvement has not been exhibited by staff assigned to the district level by the ASAL Ministry.

Donors continue to be concerned about the improper application of funds⁵. Financial control over ASAL programmes has been and continues to be extremely weak. The volume of funds flowing through a PMU can exceed the allocation to the district treasury. Very often, the PMU accounts' clerks are unable to verify the expenditures incurred or to provide the Programme Officer with financial management information. Initially, ASAL programmes were funded through a system of reimbursement to the Treasury, but, because of growing liquidity problems which delayed project implementation, bilateral donors replaced it by one of direct payment. Most bilateral-funded projects operate through a special account in a local bank, a pre-financing tool which is useful when there are many small expenditures. The obvious benefit for the aid agency of special accounts is that they eliminate the need for it to act as project cashier. Suppliers and contractors benefit as funds are paid immediately. However, special accounts can be held in local currency only and they do not allow scope for foreign expenditures. Thus overseas procurement (eg. cars, equipment, consultants) is normally handled by the donor agency and the PMU may not be kept up-to-date on the financial situation. The locus of financial decision-making and control of donor-funded ASAL programmes has tended to be the donor country office in Nairobi rather than the district treasury.

⁴ For example, in the Kitui District ASAL Programme, 59% of the budget went to Technical Assistance (IFAD/UNDP, 1988).

⁵ The adverse consequences of corrupt practices in public office were reviewed in 1987 in the "Kenya Country Study and Norwegian Aid Review" (Chr Michelsen Institute). Since then, the situation has not improved.

District planning

The unclear relationship of the ASAL Project Management Unit (PMU) to the District Planning Unit (DPU) is a further cause of difficulty. Technically, the PMU is part of the DPU. The head of the DPU, the District Development Officer (DDO) is responsible to MRDASW in Nairobi, and not the DPU which bears responsibility for programming, budgeting and the application of ASAL programme resources. In some districts, ASAL funds exceed those voted under all other programmes. Very often the two administrative units are in separate offices. When, as in the case of the ODA-funded Embu, Meru and Isiolo Programme, a single PMU is placed in the Provincial Office, the opportunities for institution-building at district level are very limited, which is one reason why the "ODA has not been particularly successful" (Howell, 1990) in this aspect.

It is apparent that district planning in ASAL remains extremely weak. It is only recently that some districts established District Planning Units (e.g. Laikipia, 1989) others are still without one. Where they exist, the DDO is beset by a massive workload which distracts the officer from strategic issues and leaves no time for travelling in the district, attending locational and divisional development committees and meeting the people he is expected to serve. Little attention has been paid to developing the process of participatory planning or to monitoring the degree to which it is being affected. There is clearly a need to develop a methodology which can be widely applied and which will encourage the participation of various community groups.

Conclusions

The reasons why so little progress has been achieved with participatory planning on ASAL programmes in Kenya would seem to be briefly thus:

1. The organisation of participatory planning is management intensive and the trained personnel needed to facilitate the process are generally scarce in rural areas, particularly in ASAL.

2. No widely applicable methodology has been developed by which participation may be institutionalised.
3. The ASAL programmes have operated separately from the District Planning Units and, in some instances, look towards Nairobi rather than the District for guidance.
4. In any case, the district (with a population often in excess of one million) is probably at too high an administrative level to foster participation, divisional level is probably the upper limit.
5. The local government system is very poorly developed in most ASAL districts, particularly the remote pastoral ones.
6. The government budgetary process is both complex and unduly attenuated. It does not easily accommodate the allocation of government funds to finance ad hoc local works.
7. Widespread corruption in the public service and the lack of accountability among officials handling funds makes it difficult to channel resources through the government system to community groups.
8. The weakness of the coordinating ministry results in a high degree of donor involvement in day-to-day management of programmes.

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