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A strategic approach to participatory development planning: the case of a rural community in Belize

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· Introduction

In July 1991, in collaboration with a local agricultural development NGO, the Environmental Research Unit of the University of Keele worked with the community of St. Margaret's village in Cayo District, Belize, Central America. The main objective, as decided by the village council, was to design a medium-term village development strategy which would have community-wide benefit.

This paper describes our experiences in incorporating participatory methods into strategic development planning at the community level.

· Components of strategic development planning

Participatory approaches to planning often tend to concentrate on analysing community problems or opportunities from within a village, cooperative or group. This stance is understandable since it is the basic principle of PRA that the starting point for sustainable local rural development should be the knowledge base, priorities and perceptions of the local community (Chambers et al. 1989). However, when community strategic development planning is the goal, the appraisal also needs to address how a community's development decisions will be affected by outside, macro-economic or political forces.

The benefits of combining an internal appraisal with one external to a community lie at the heart of approaches to strategic planning for organisations and groups, developed largely for businesses (Quinn, 1980; Schmidt-

Pauleen, 1990). Principally, this approach provides a framework for establishing achievable development objectives and practicable development strategies and can be summarised as follows (LEK, 1990):

1. set the organisation's development objectives;
2. conduct an external appraisal of, for example, market trends, competitors etc.
3. conduct an internal appraisal of, for example, financial and resource capabilities;
4. analyse the options of the plan; and,
5. prioritise development options to make a strategic plan of action.

Participatory planning often contains parts (1), (3), (4) and in a few cases (5) (Kabutha and Ford, 1988). Figures 1 and 2 below compare the components of organisation strategic planning with those of participatory community planning. To ensure that our planning approach was more strategic in St Margaret's village, we adopted three additional steps (Figure 3):

1. a formal external appraisal of NGO and government policies and services, and macro-economic forces in relation to the development aims of the village;
2. participatory analysis of the village's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats ('SWOT' analysis); and
3. formulation of a village development strategy designed to achieving a range of development objectives.

Figure 1 Process of Organisational Strategic Development Planning

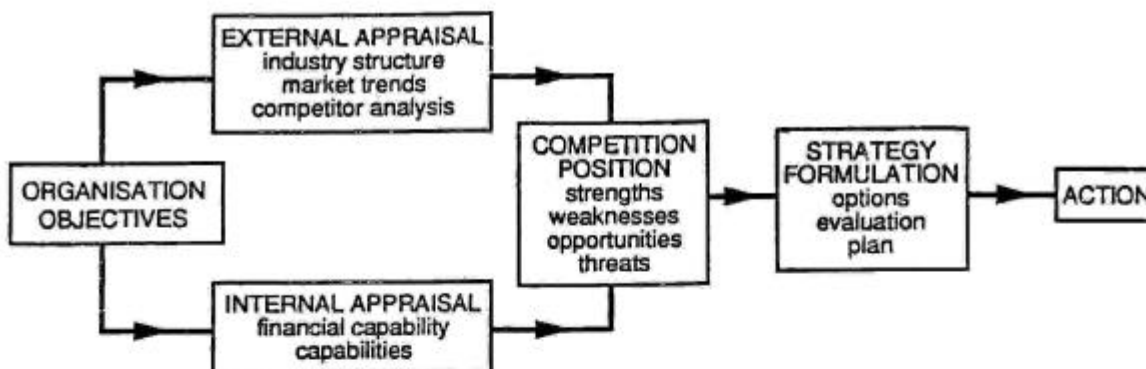


Figure 2 Process of Participatory Planning

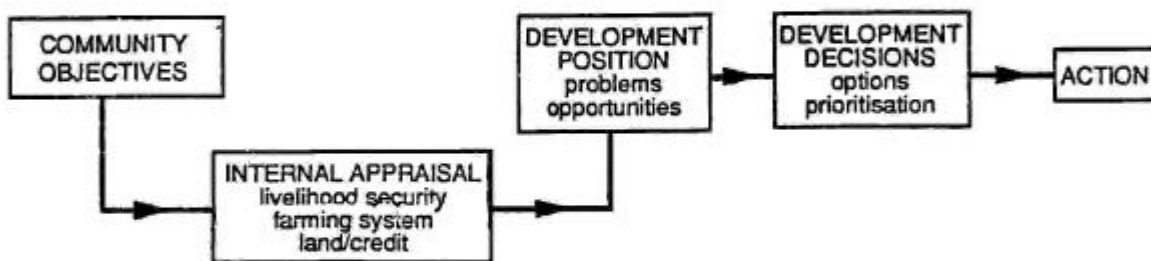
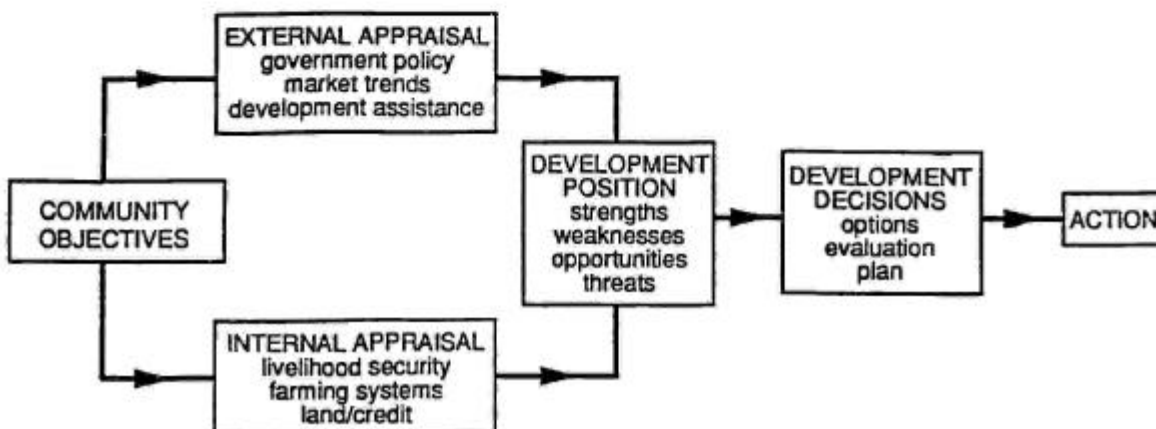


Figure 3 Process of Community Strategic Development Planning



• The external appraisal

Early on in the planning process we undertook a formal external appraisal to identify the wider political and economic forces likely to affect St. Margaret's village council's development objectives. This involved two weeks of interviewing government departments, local NGOs and representatives of international assistance agencies. The interviews were semi-structured, based on a checklist of key issues derived from a secondary data review and revised by our umbrella NGO. The exercise provided us and the community with an understanding of the wider political, economic and technical arena within which potential community decisions would be implemented.

Some of the benefits of our approach were demonstrated early in the project. For example, one issue was the possibility of smallholder expansion into citrus (orange and grapefruit) production. Frosts in Florida in the late 1980s had caused a shift in citrus cultivation southwards into Central and Southern America. The resulting increase in fruit processing capacity and the relatively high price of citrus attracted many rural smallholders in Belize to expand their citrus production. The external appraisal sought to identify whether there were likely to be political or commercial forces affecting this expansion in the future. In particular, were there any pressures which would undermine the sustainability of village smallholders converting areas of their subsistence crops to citrus?

Surprisingly, the external appraisal revealed that both the Government of Belize and the country's large commercial producers were supportive of smallholders moving into citrus. Not only did the Government view citrus as encouraging settled agriculture, but since Belize is a small producer on the world stage, the Government and commercial producers were keen to develop the country's citrus production capacity wherever possible.

The appraisal concluded that there were no political barriers to the villagers expanding their citrus growing. These findings then fed into the subsequent participatory analysis in

the village about the overall plan to diversify smallholder crops.

In another case the external appraisal discovered important information for the fertiliser producing cooperative in the village. The cooperative learnt that its ideas for a fuelwood plantation (required to ensure the long term viability of production) had potential funding support from a local NGO, and resource support from two Government Ministries. Furthermore, potential sites for fuelwood plantations had already been proposed by the Government, one of which would be accessible from the village. These were factors of which the cooperative was previously unaware.

In a third case, the results of interviews with the High Commission for Refugees revealed that the refugee population of St. Margaret's had reached a critical size. This suggested that the village council was eligible to apply for educational funding assistance from the Commission. Such funding would help the council pursue its objective of community-wide primary education.

• Internal strengths and weaknesses

Our overall goal was to facilitate a medium-term village development strategy. To provide a framework for villagers to identify and assess their community's internal strengths and weaknesses, and the external political and economic opportunities and threats affecting them, we introduced a common strategic planning technique known as SWOT analysis (Bryson, 1988), where:

SWOT = Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

The village council then incorporated the results of this assessment into the community's preferred development strategy.

For example, a substantial portion of the smallholders in the village were unaware of either the Government's policy towards smallholder citrus production, or of the trends in world commodity prices for citrus. If this had been a conventional PRA, it is possible that development decisions concerning citrus

expansion would have been made in an environment of uncertainty. Decisions may have been taken without knowing about the availability of Government extension services for citrus, venture capital, and preferential land allocations for citrus production and without knowledge of a trend of declining market prices.

We encouraged the village participants to assess these findings by identifying threats and opportunities relevant to an expansion of citrus production. These threats and opportunities then fed through to the village council to be translated into a village development strategy for crop diversification. The strategy finally selected was to promote expansion of citrus cultivation within the village; but, in response to the knowledge that future citrus prices were expected to fall, the community also decided to take up the available Government extension services and venture capital provisions. It was concluded that this would improve yields and maintain competitiveness.

• **Limitations**

We hope that this approach is a first step towards highlighting the importance of a strategic approach to development planning at the community level. However, we recognise that our approach has some limitations. First, the structure of an organisational strategic planning methodology devised in a North American business environment (Figure 1) clearly cannot be transplanted unchanged to a village in rural Central America. Not only are there obvious wealth and socio-cultural differences between the two environments, but the development goals of a community tend to be heterogeneous whereas those of an organisation are more homogeneous. However, we would argue that the village council of St. Margaret's did demonstrate some similarities with a homogeneous organisation. In particular, the council shared the common goal of community-wide benefits.

Another problem is that the external appraisal was conducted by the PRA team alone. Although we had the development objectives of the village council to guide us, we decided which information was relevant to the community decision-making process without the participation of community members. The

external appraisal could therefore be criticised as being biased towards our academic disciplines and value systems. One counter argument might be that the use of outsiders brings the benefit of easier information access (Messerschmidt, 1991). However, in future we would recommend that the external appraisal include representatives of the village. This is likely to improve the benefits arising from the process greatly.

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