11

Challenges in influencing public policy: an NGO perspective

Anil Shah

• The need

Participatory development aims to enable individuals, groups and communities to plan execute and manage development that improves their living conditions. They often need technical, administrative, organisational, financial and legal support in their endeavour. Some of these support services lie in the public domain and may be cumbersome or obstruct the development processes. They therefore need to change. The need for the public to inform and influence policy changes arises mainly from grassroots experiences: PRA often raises important issues that can be resolved only through policy changes.

For example, in June 1990 an order of the Government of India on Joint Forest Management was secured. This occurred only because an NGO spent three years lobbying the government to remove policy bottlenecks from its fieldwork. Senior administrators in charge of policy formulation are removed from the field realities and may not have first-hand knowledge of participatory processes. NGOs have such experience. They need to, and can, influence policy to further participatory development.

Apart from the constraints arising in the field due to inappropriate or inefficient policies, NGOs may like to engage in policy influencing for other reasons:

• To encourage better implementation of a government programme that has the essential components of a participatory approach. NGOs may work to promote more appropriate mechanisms and procedures within public agencies. For example, the Watershed Development Programme of Ministry of Rural Development in India has all the features of a participatory programme and NGOs can contribute to more satisfactory implementation activities.
• To ensure that participatory features are integrated into policy formulation, an NGO may try to associate itself to a programme to influence policy changes.
• To persuade public agencies to put issues that are important for a participatory approach onto their agenda. For example, by promoting gender awareness in development programmes.

The action required to influence public agencies is arduous and daunting. NGOs need to commit considerable time to take up the challenge. Instead, many NGOs prefer to continue their work, hoping that the quality of their project will attract the attention of public agencies, who will eventually appreciate the need for providing supportive policy changes.

• What needs to change

Public policy is embodied in a country's constitution, legislative acts, rules and administrative instructions. These are prescribed in manuals, guidelines and orders issued at government level, or by government bodies/officers at different levels. But pragmatic policy decisions are also made at a more local level when the policy is actually implemented. Policy-change advocates should know precisely which of these need to change to facilitate development.

• The bus is crowded

Those who decide policy changes, are usually preoccupied in implementing existing policies and considering a plethora of proposals for

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changing current policies. Proposals for change emanate from a wide range of sources: influential political parties/leaders, interest groups, committee recommendations, research findings, public spirited experts and citizens writing letters to the editors of newspapers/magazines. Policy makers are continually bombarded with proposals for change. They are not waiting for good ideas. Their basket is full, the bus is crowded.

- ### Selecting issues

Development agencies should select a few issues for advocacy out of the many that emerge in the course of their work. Such issues should have the potential to have a large impact on furthering the cause of development, particularly for the deprived areas, communities, groups and families. Even if convinced of the need for change, decision makers will take months to change administrative orders, years to modify legislating provisions and decades to amend a country's constitution. Development agencies should, therefore, give priority to ideas that require a change in practice, administrative orders, manuals, rules, acts and a country's constitution - in that order.

- ### Plan of action

After carefully selecting ideas for policy change, a development agency will need to work out a plan of action for familiarising and influencing the decision maker to accept and act upon the proposal.

- Build up a strong case for proposed change, why it is necessary, important or urgent and who will benefit and by how much.
- Explore, in detail, the present policy that requires change, who is authorised to decide on the proposal and the process that will be followed.
- Contact like-minded organisations and individuals likely to support and join in the presentation of a proposal.
- Formulate the proposal which should incorporate: information about the organisation(s) making the proposal and their motivation, identify the problem in the field that is blocking the development

and articulate precisely the policy that needs change.
- Request a personal meeting to explain the details of the written proposal.
- Send a copy of the proposal to other people interested in the issues or whose support may be required.

- ### Strategy for drawing attention

Since policymakers receive many proposals, a strategy should be devised to draw attention to it. The strategy may:

- Identify an officer whose acceptance of the proposal is crucial and those people whose opinions are valued by the policy maker.
- Identify an officer who is important and sympathetic to the development programme promoted by the development agency. Take his/her advice on the best strategy for success.
- Contact influential people and take their advice and help on how best to influence decision makers.
- Request important officers to visit the NGO to better appreciate the work being undertaken and the context for the proposal. During such visits, presentations should be made by those who undertake PRA exercises to strengthen the case for policy change.
- Use the media to create a favourable climate for the acceptance of ideas in the proposal.

- ### In the event of rejection

If the key officer is not impressed by the proposal, rejects it or is likely to reject it, work out a strategy to overcome the obstacle. The agency may approach higher levels in government to direct the officer to consider the proposal sympathetically and expeditiously. The agency may have to wait until the unsympathetic officer is transferred or a more favourable situation develops.

- ### In the event of a favourable response

If, and when, the response of the decision maker is favourable, the agency should work

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2

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to ensure that the formulation of the proposed policy change will meet its requirements.

- Suggest the appointment of a policy drafting committee, with NGO representation on it, for preparing the draft of the proposed change.
- Offer services of the NGO to work with the officer who is responsible for drafting the government order/instruction.
- If such offers are not welcome, retain informal communication with the implementing officers.

• Follow-up

Government decision-making on policy matters involves several levels in a department. In more important matters, several departments are involved, particularly, legal, finance and personnel. The agency should follow the progress of the proposal until the desired order is issued.

• Acknowledgement

Acknowledge and thank those who have helped, with and without enthusiasm, in the progress of the proposal.

• Processes for promoting participatory development

The effort required to initiate policy changes is enormous. For example, the NGO that moved the Government of India to adopt more participatory approaches to forest management, used 49 different contacts, including personal meetings, letters and telephone calls.

Participatory approaches are being integrated into more programmes in India. Yet government bureaucracies have little experience of participatory development systems and processes. It is essential that governments recognise that participatory development requires modification to the acts, rules, administrative and accounting procedures and roles and responsibilities of personnel. Adoption of participation will require an environment conducive to free and frequent interaction with those outside government.

Drawing from John Thompson's (1995) article, the following lists some activities that will help promote the necessary institutional change.

- Appointment of Working Group for each programme as a forum for open dialogue, critical reflection and continuous learning. The Group should consist of senior officers, NGO representatives, academics studying the programme and representatives of community based organisations.
- Policy Resolution affirming Government's commitment to participatory approach in a programme.
- Strong leadership with long term commitment and capacity to learn.
- Specific responsibility entrusted to a senior officer to develop the new programme.
- Pilot projects as 'learning laboratories'
- Action plan indicating tentative broad targets, delegated authority and training needs.
- Process Documentation Research to provide continuous feedback about development and emerging issues in the field. The system of monitoring and evaluation should include equal concern for quality as quantitative targets.
- Fostering a culture of consultation and participation at various levels within an organisation and with stakeholders outside the organisation.
- Organising National Support Group (NSG) outside Government but with active involvement of key officers of concerned Government department, donor agencies, NGOs and academics active in the programme.

There is an NSG for Joint Forest Management in India, which provides support for innovative initiatives and research. It is also a forum for exchange and dissemination of experiences and ideas. Similar NSGs for Watershed Development and Participatory Irrigation Management are under consideration.

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• **Daunting - but rewarding**

The Indian Government policy on Joint Forest Management initiated in June 1990 has led 16 states to issue detailed government orders on the procedures to be followed for implementing the policy. About 2 million hectares of forest lands are now being managed by nearly 15 000 forest protection committees.

Working closely with the government of Gujarat, India, the Development Support Centre has facilitated a policy declaration for Participatory Irrigation Management. This has triggered changes including: appointment of a Working Group, starting pilot projects, simplification of the procedures for facilitating participation by NGOs and farmers, more delegation of power to field officers and liberal incentives to farmers' organisations to take responsibility for managing government irrigation projects.

The process continues. Policy influencing by NGOs is arduous, but I consider it to be essential and rewarding.

- **Anil Shah,** Development Support Centre, 2 Prakruti Apartment Opp. Red Rose Restaurant, H. L. Commerce College Road, Navrangpura, Ahmadabad, Gujurat, PIN 380 009, INDIA

REFERENCE

Thompson, John (1995). Participatory Approaches in Government Bureaucracies: Facilitating the Process of Change. World Development 23 (9) 1521 - 1554.