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The rush to scale: lessons being learned in Indonesia

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• Introduction

UNICEF became involved in integrating participatory approaches into the nation-wide system for village development planning in Indonesia about 18 months ago. This paper is a chronology of the events to date. Readers may draw their own conclusions from the story. This is, perhaps, a good example of what can happen when participatory approaches are institutionalised, what it takes to make a difference, how far one can expect to go and things that can and cannot be controlled and why.

Formulation of annual plans for village development has been a feature of rural life in Indonesia for more than a decade. Every January the Department of Home Affairs sets the process in motion. Sub-district administrative chiefs notify village heads that they should schedule community consultation meetings to come up with proposals for village improvement. The proposals usually include resource sharing commitments between the villagers and different government departments. These are examined and progressively consolidated at sub-district, district, provincial and national levels. Information about approved proposals passes down the same levels in reverse order and funds follow. What is requested is not necessarily the same as what is received. The process takes 12-14 months.

During the planning of the 1995-2000 country programme of collaboration with the Government of Indonesia, UNICEF was requested to help improve the quality of this bottom-up planning process. Joint reviews of the existing process were undertaken in six provinces in early 1995. They revealed that the process needed to focus more on human development, involve larger community groups

(particularly more women) in decision making and be based on better analysis of the causes of local problems. A training programme for village level 'facilitators' of the improved planning process had already been prepared by a foreign consultant using ZOPP methodology. However, its field testing during March-April 1995 did not satisfy all the requirements.

The Department of Home Affairs has a group of national trainers. They wished to gain wider exposure to the participatory planning methods being used in other developing countries and adapt what was relevant to the conditions in Indonesia. In response, UNICEF arranged a one-day exposure seminar in April 1995 for national government personnel, including presentations from a range of international PRA practitioners and Indonesian NGOs. As a result of the seminar, the Government Departments and PKK (Women's Family Welfare Movement: a nation-wide women's NGO that includes the wives of all government personnel) requested longer and more in-depth learning about PRA.

UNICEF supported a two-week study visit to India for key government officials and trainers from the Departments of Home Affairs, PKK, Adult Education, Social Affairs and Health. The 12-day study programme on 'PRA applications for rural development' was organised by OUTREACH at Bangalore, India during August-September 1995.

• Training targets

The national trainers had been instructed to re-write the training module developed and tested in April 1995. They did this by referring to available manuals and books documenting PRA and RRA experiences. The training manual was completed before the study visit.

A central government directive was sent out to all 27 provinces of the country in early June. This instructed local government that, starting in the 1995-96 cycle, bottom-up planning in villages of Indonesia would follow a participatory process called the 'P3MD' *Perencanaan Partisipatif Pembangunan Masyarakat Desa*, which means Participatory Village Development Planning.

Training modules were scheduled to be produced centrally by October 1995 and despatched to provinces, districts and sub-districts. Provincial trainers and village council heads would be trained in December 1995. Following this training, village council heads were to facilitate participatory planning in their villages during February-March 1996. Government funds had been officially allocated for this 4-day training in over 60,000 villages within the 1995-96 budget year ending in March 1996.

From the outset, the planned schedule, target group for training, budget and the 4-day training plan appeared to be beyond discussion and possibility of modification. The funds had to be utilised before March 1996. Furthermore, the provincial government had been given explicit instructions along with the June directive on how to use the funds based on the 4-day training plan. However, upon return from Bangalore the national trainers' team decided to re-write their earlier training manual. This was achieved under close supervision of the Director and real pressure of meeting the printer's deadline.

The 11-volume training package was in press by November. This allowed very little opportunity for consultation with anyone outside the four members of the writing team. Field testing was not feasible, given the time frame.

Compromises had to be made to fit all the officially specified contents into the 4-day training module for trainers and the 3-day module for village heads. Field-based methods inevitably became classroom-based and the time constraints allowed only "teaching" rather than learning. Attitudes and behaviours received little attention in the module because departmental trainers at provincial and district levels had had prior training in communication skills.

The new elements in the module were the incorporation of three techniques from the PRA repertoire: resource mapping, seasonal calendars, Venn diagramming. Information from these methods was to be transferred into a series of 11 tables for processing into a Village Development Plan.

Everybody agreed that the product and the planned process left much to be desired. However, it was felt to be sufficient for the current year in fulfilling the government's commitment announced in June 1995. It was also felt best to learn through experimentation and that improvements could be made the following year, based on the experiences in the current year.

There was no way to stem the tide of instant replication and mass scale training. The planned schedule was implemented relentlessly in 27 provinces and the budgets duly spent within the financial year. We were invited to observe the process and provide feedback to central decisionmakers.

The trainers observed were generally unprepared for their role. They agreed with the objective of empowering the community but were unaware of how to foster the process of empowerment. During the training of village heads, the trainers: tended to rely on overhead transparencies reproducing text directly from the training manual, provided too much direction for exercises to be completed by community groups, asked leading questions and provided lengthy 'correct' answers themselves. The fundamental principles of learning and discovering together with their trainees seemed incompatible with their own perception of their role as trainers.

Trainings were conducted for 60 to 70 people at a time in order to meet the deadlines. Reports from observers of the village level planning that followed show that little has changed in terms of process and outputs this year as compared to previous years.

A summary of observations and lessons learned has been compiled at the Department of Home Affairs, using all the feedback received from departmental as well as external observers. To date there has been no review dialogue on the subject. However some basic premises have

been revised. For example, the village teams of analysts are to be trained in the next phase rather than just the village heads. The five-person team will also have to have at least 2 women, including the village PKK (women's NGO) leader. The core national trainers' group is working on revising the training modules again, within their small, select group.

• **What can we learn from our experience?**

We began with a situation where there was, allegedly, institutional support and interest in participatory approaches. The political climate was turning more favourable. Terms like 'participation' and 'empowerment' of the community were becoming popular in national policies and plan documents. There was a sense of urgency in the highest levels of government to bring about visible and rapid change towards more equitable development. An overall institutional thrust towards decentralising the responsibility for development was (and still is) gathering more momentum as the country approaches the next general elections in 1997.

Here was a nation-wide system to promote participatory approaches to improve the quality of life of the rural poor. The planning process was designed to learn more about how to achieve this objective. We felt that our appropriate response should be to assist this quest and shift the focus of village development towards the situation of women and children in the village.

We were aware that the 'institutional support' had to be taken at its face value. If we wished to influence the system, we had to enter when and where we were invited and try to make a difference from that point onwards. With hindsight, perhaps, it may have been useful to emphasise the implications of adopting participatory approaches more explicitly with top-level decision makers. This could have helped avoid unrealistic time-schedules and mismatches between processes and structures. However, by doing this we could have alienated top level decision makers who are keen to bring about rapid innovations. The government could also have approached other consultants that would provide the required deliverables: manuals, materials and training. We hoped to make a difference by increasing the number of

people who supported our approach and building up a critical mass of opinion. We will continue to support dialogues, promote alliances and reflection, bringing more and varied people into the picture

An interactive learning environment is alien to most bureaucracies, especially large government systems. Training programmes are easy to design. Fostering an interactive learning environment is infinitely more difficult, particularly in top-down, hierarchical organisations where unquestioning respect for authority is integral to social and cultural life. To achieve an interactive learning environment, the change must come from within and it is important to respect and go along with the institutional culture. We frequently found ourselves limited by the institutional norms of our counterparts. For example, we tried to promote reflective dialogues but were asked to send our inputs in writing for consideration by the Ministry. Clearly written memos are a one-way flow of information and do not lead to genuine interaction.

Cultural codes of conduct may inhibit open discussion of what did not work. Attempts to do so may ostracise the 'insensitive foreigner' and fail to lead to collective learning. Discussing sensitive issues with key persons prior to official meetings can help, but sometimes leads to dilution or distortion of the main point. Significant contradictions and questions involving conflicting opinions may never be opened for discussions. Under such circumstances it can get extremely problematic to define what is and what is not 'uncompromisable' according to one's personal code of ethics. It seems to help to keep the longer-term potential in mind, even if the immediate present seems too "compromised".

Institutional capacity building in participatory approaches is beset with the chronic problem of staff transfers. Adoption of participatory methodologies needs a critical mass of people. However, we found that just as the group is beginning to develop the required work culture, it may be broken up by staff moving to different sectors which are too far apart to support each other. Within strongly hierarchical systems, such disruptions may never allow participatory learning to establish.

How does one address the problem? We have yet to find an effective solution. It seems better to run field based training for people from several ministries/disciplines together. Sensitising people in a multi-disciplinary environment provides more contacts to follow up later. We have proposed, but have not yet succeeded in establishing, a communication and interaction forum/network covering both government and NGO practitioners. The two still tend to work in isolation. Strengthening institutional training centres that handle mainstream staff training for government personnel is another potentially promising strategy. We have made a step in this direction with the staff trainers of the two national training centres of the Directorate of Community Development in Indonesia.

Learning continues.

Progress with PKK womens' groups is very encouraging. Within three months of PKK's national consultative meeting in February 1996, two major provinces have organised learning workshops for PKK's district and sub-district level trainers. Their plan is to work out ways of using the PRA methodology for improving rural womens' health. Despite commendable economic progress over the past decade in Indonesia, maternal mortality remains unacceptably high. The President has recently called for urgent action to accelerate a reduction in maternal mortality.

PKK has joined with local NGOs in the provinces, to work out appropriate PRA applications for village level assessment of womens' health and participatory analysis of direct and underlying causes of maternal deaths. This is to be followed by action planning for prevention as well as proper management of obstetric emergencies at family and community level. UNICEF's support to these initiatives is limited to technical assistance for training, participatory research and alliance building among community organisations, specialised NGOs and the providers of health services. In both provinces, local government personnel have attended the field based learning workshops and recognised that PRA goes far beyond the '*playing with sticks and stones*', as commented by a Jakarta based public health specialist earlier this year.

Conclusion

Experiences with the institutionalisation of PRA seem to turn into an exercise in compromise. It is critical to recognise where to draw the line and prevent a slide into manipulation. On the other hand, the institutionalisation of PRA can reach many more people who can make a difference than a perfectly conducted two-village PRA exercise conducted by good field activists. The benefits may not be immediately discernible. But over the long term the sheer volume of new thinking sparked off by good institutional exposure to PRA, tends to yield unexpected bonuses from many quarters.

There is a very real risk associated with working on an institutionalised scale such as a government system. This is the risk of generating community initiatives and empowerment before the institution is ready or willing to respond. Those of us engaged at this level cannot disown the responsibility of continually seeking the most operationally (as well as ethically) acceptable compromise, keeping both the short and long term consequences clearly in mind.

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NOTE

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of her organisation.