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## Participatory community planning: some unresolved challenges from The Gambia

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### • Introduction

Since the early 1990s, The Gambia has been developing a decentralised community planning process. The key to this process has been the belief that rural people should be defining their own development needs, be at the centre of development planning decisions and translate development plans into action. This paper describes the approach and some of its strengths and shortcomings, with the aim of raising some debate about this type of participatory development, and the methodological issues arising from the transition to a more participatory community planning process.

The decentralised approach is being promoted by a multi-lateral government agency, henceforth referred to as the NGO, in partnership with the Community Development Department of the Gambian government. This central partnership is also co-operating with other government departments and local, national and international NGOs.

In summary, the NGO/Government Programme referred to in this paper involves outside funding and personnel aimed at stimulating a villager-led development planning process. This involves villagers, in close consultation with government and non-government agencies, choosing and planning appropriate, self-sustaining projects. As a Community Development Facilitator, my role was to train and support new teams of government and NGO fieldworkers to use participatory methodologies. These helped the teams to identify village problems and proposed solutions and integrate them into

Community Development Plans within the new Community Development approach.

In this paper, I consider the integration of PRA into national or regional planning strategies and tackle the following issues:

- Can PRA act as a bridge between research and development? Can it reconcile the traditional function of researchers (production of knowledge) with that of developers (implementing development action)?
- How can we deal with the problem of scale in PRA? PRA is often locality specific whereas development planning requires data aggregation at higher levels. How do we integrate PRA into development planning?

But first it is important to take a closer look at the administrative set-up in the Gambia.

### Administration in The Gambia

In the Gambia, each region is subdivided into *wards*, each ward comprises around thirty villages. Wards represent the administrative unit which work with government departments and NGOs. Each village should be represented at ward level by two Village Representatives, preferably one man and one woman. Representatives should be selected from village meetings focused on the development needs in each village. This is not always achieved, but the general principal is clear: villagers discuss their development needs, select representatives to communicate these to the ward committee (see below), who then take these needs to the NGO for funding.

The Ward Committee consists of a chairperson, treasurer, secretary, monitor etc., and is the communicator of development ideas from the village level to ward level and onwards to regional level. It is responsible for drawing up detailed project plans and budgets. Committee members are selected from village representatives and inevitably tend to come from the more powerful families who are better educated and more vocal. The NGO/Government programme has attempted to ensure an even geographical spread of committee members from the villages in each ward, and has tried to encourage the selection of women. This is one of the main challenges for the new Community Planning approach.

### **Development of the community planning approach**

Over the last five years an innovative community planning approach has been evolving in The Gambia. This draws on an approach that began in the late 1980s called 'Village Initiated Support Activities' or VISA (an NGO-led activity). VISA supported and implemented the ideas that communities had about their own development.

Under VISA, each village identified and prioritised potential development projects, largely using outside technical support and personnel to assist with the selection process. The villagers compiled a list of three or more potential projects which village representatives would present to a ward level meeting comprising ward committee members and government and NGO representatives. At the meeting, individual village priorities would be compiled and their relative merits discussed. This resulted in a ward level re-prioritisation, in order to reduce the number of projects going forward for consideration at regional level.

The next step in the prioritisation process was a ward committee and NGO workshop. This discussed: the funds available to each ward from the NGO budget, the types of project that the NGO are able to fund within their mandate and the potential of communities to pay their contribution to their proposed projects (generally, villagers contribute 10-25% of project costs). At this workshop, a final shortlist of projects is drawn up.

### **Implementation and monitoring**

When projects are approved, the ward committees and villagers take on responsibility for implementing the project. This involves purchasing materials and equipment, providing unskilled labour and hiring skilled labour where necessary. This has been achieved with only very limited intervention from the NGO representative and some government departments in an advisory and technical role (e.g., building plans, field demarcation etc.).

On the financial side, the ward committees, with the help of traditional village leaders (*alkalos*, who are also signatories to project agreements), are responsible for: collecting the village contribution, accounting for the NGO contribution to project funds, and keeping receipts and records. A more limited monitoring role is undertaken by the NGO representative in partnership with a local council official.

### **A résumé of problems encountered**

This process had proved something of a success, in that locally appropriate projects have been developed that are fully owned and maintained by the communities. More recently, however, programme staff have been attempting to tackle one of the main shortcomings of the approach, that projects were not always being chosen by the whole community, but by 'benefit captors'<sup>1</sup>.

In some instances, villages were not having in-depth discussions of their development needs. Instead projects were selected by village leaders and other 'benefit captors'. This has led to projects being selected that are not backed by the whole community and villagers have become unwilling to participate in the projects by contributing labour or payments. In

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<sup>1</sup> 'Benefit captors' are those members of the community involved in liaison with donors, who are able, through their education, influence and power, to propose projects and plans, without the agreement of the community, which are predominantly in their own interest, and for their own personal benefit. An example of this might be a village leader who pays the community's contribution to a well in order to 'capture' the 'benefit' of a donor-funded well for his family.

extreme instances, benefit captors may have paid the village contribution in order to gain a livestock well or a domestic hand pump for their personal purposes.

The operation of the Ward Committees has suffered similar problems, with members themselves becoming benefit captors. Many members are unsure of their proper roles within the development process and thus committees have tended to be dominated by their chairperson, sometimes to the detriment of the project, its sustainability and genuine community participation.

### **Transition to participatory community planning approach**

Recognition of some of the deficiencies in the VISA approach led to a review of the programme in 1995. The underlying problem was identified as a lack of genuine participation by all villagers in the discussion of village problems and development needs. Because of this, a number of changes are being instituted and the programme is in transition to a new 'Community Planning' approach. This enables communities to undertake the planning process for themselves, with support provided from government departments and NGO staff.

### **The strategy**

The new approach of the NGO has been to employ Community Development Facilitators, as an institution building measure, to work within the government's Community Development Department. The facilitators' role is to establish a more participatory approach at village level, through the formation and encouragement of Village Development Committees (VDCs). VDCs are comprised of 35 individuals selected by the community to ensure that chosen projects reflect collective needs. Their role is to discuss development problems with all sectors of the community, including young and old, men and women, wealthy and poor, all ethnic groups etc..

Under this new structure, two VDC members in each village are also the village representatives who take the prioritised list of village projects to ward level. The VDC is also

main actor in the implementation and monitoring of projects.

The facilitator also assists in the training of VDC members in how to perform their roles, in particular how to conduct and facilitate a village meeting and use PRA tools. This has required the formation of multidisciplinary teams of ward level facilitators from different government departments (education, health, agriculture, livestock, water and rural development) and field level staff from interested NGOs and local development organisations. The multidisciplinary facilitation teams assist VDCs to use PRA tools to discuss and prioritise their development problems.

### **Priorities**

Through the VDCs, changes are being instituted to try to build the capacity of villagers to prioritise in a more participatory way. Attempts are being made to improve the selection, degree of representation and functioning of the Ward Committees, who translate individual village priorities into a small list of ward level priorities that will hopefully go on to gain donor support. It is a step at which many of the problems associated with participatory development planning have arisen.

In essence, Ward Committees, or in some cases, individual Ward Committee members, begin to perform a filtration process, where smaller, less common projects, often those that are deemed less likely to gain donor support, are weeded out. This is not always a deliberate act, rather Ward Committee members have experience that certain types of projects have been unsuccessful at gaining donor support in the past.

Imagine the consequences of this scenario where a village identifies a need for adult literacy, but this is an area in which the biggest NGO donor does not work. One, the literacy need is likely to be filtered out in the ward level re-prioritisation process, as the Ward Committee has come to realise that the main donor does not fund literacy projects. Two, other agencies or government departments currently running adult literacy campaigns or willing to support such an activity, may never

get to hear of the need, because the village level information is not shared and because no clear pathway exists for village needs to be communicated to partner agencies.

Currently the Community Planning approach is trying to ensure that the village prioritised lists of problems remain intact. In this way, villagers, Ward Committees and village based development organisations can 'shop around' amongst local development organisations and government departments, as well as outside donors, to find suitable development funding providers and assistance. Thus, a link needs to be established between the villages and alternative development providers. Achieving this would involve training and empowering villagers and their ward level representatives to look for development providers. This is not an easy task.

### **Strengths and shortcomings**

What has begun is a strong people-centred development planning process, which is an effective method of identifying genuine village needs. Identified projects are likely to reflect real needs as the village contributes, in terms of both labour and finance. This helps to establish a sense of local ownership of the project: the more that villagers are involved in the implementation of their own projects, the more likely they are to be able to maintain or replicate their successes. The knowledge gained in the successful completion of other projects also empowers villagers to tackle their own development challenges, either with or without the support of others. Not all development problems can be satisfied by outside finance alone. Often it is important to first recognise and gain community consensus on the solutions to village problems, and then find a combined and co-operative approach to solving it.

The Community Planning approach has revealed the potential for, and value of, communities being involved in the monitoring of their own projects. Self-monitoring could become a future participatory and empowerment tool, enabling villagers to control, closely observe and instil positions of trust and authority in their own people.

### **Issues arising**

Planning strategies differ in different regions of the Gambia. In one region, the use of problem and solution ranking methods are envisaged, and in another, transects and village resource mapping are planned. It is evident the programme is in the experimentation stage particularly in terms of how to translate the results of the PRAs into development plans. When information begins to emerge from the villagers, how is this going to be used by the system of ward committees? Will the re-prioritisation at ward level provide an effective and representative short list of projects from the many suggested by individual villages? How will the criteria for the re-prioritisation of projects be defined? What methods, if any, will the Ward Committees use?

Other problems exist in the establishment of a procedure for collating village level development problems, prioritising them in a participatory way and translating them into development plans at regional and national level. Some discussion has centred on the compilation of village level plans into regional plans and onwards to national development plans. The national backing for such a decentralised approach is unknown in a country in political transition, and the practicalities of how such a planning strategy would be organised have not yet been considered. In addition, ways to establish stronger links between villagers and development providers are sought and the modality for sharing village level information emanating from PRA for the benefit of development as a whole remains unsolved.

The broad approach to decentralisation may well be right, but discussion as to the answers to some of the key questions concerning outcomes and detailed strategies is lacking. Many of these are questions that have not begun to be tackled, but for which others with experiences elsewhere may well be able to assist.

### **Conclusion**

The Gambia provides an example of a country where PRA is being used to bridge the gap between research and development. The challenge is to make use of the information

provided in participatory village meetings to produce development action, in the form of Community Plans, which are then aggregated and filtered to produce Regional Plans. The initial progress has been good and positive plans have been established, but some problems still remain and some difficult questions remain unanswered.

The Community Planning approach is a comparatively new and still evolving process in The Gambia. Little information is available concerning its application elsewhere. Dialogue is sought with those who may have ideas, or experience of similar approaches elsewhere, particularly in West Africa, in order to begin to tackle some of the methodological issues arising from integrating local participation into development planning. This paper has not provided many conclusions. But it has hopefully provided a starting point for discussing key challenges in community planning.

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