

3

Lessons from community empowerment programme formulation: mission-2 of UNDP, Bangladesh

Neela Mukherjee

• Introduction

UNDP, Bangladesh is currently engaged in a community empowerment programme (CEP) for poverty alleviation and sustainable human development under the SAARC¹ country co-operation framework. Both UNDP and the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) are in the process of fielding two sets of Community Empowerment Programmes (CEP), which involve direct participation of local communities in decision-making and the implementation of projects concerning them. In mid-1997, the CEP-2² Formulation Mission of UNDP, Bangladesh was on a fast track to prepare 6 project documents at the national level in 2 months. The content of these documents is indicated below.

Objectives of the mission

The Mission aimed at producing 6 project documents and two project concept papers. The project papers focused on the following 6 areas or communities:

- urban poor in 'pourashavas' (town municipality areas);
- 'adivasi' (tribal groups);
- rural poor;
- garment workers;
- commercial sex workers;
- street children.

The project concept papers related to inland fisherfolk communities and traders in the informal sector.

The CEP-2 Mission had two primary objectives: capacity building of the poorest and facilitating developmental collaboration between the communities and development agencies. However, the Mission also had a rigorous terms of reference, some of which were: extensive research in the identified sectors, consultation with poor communities, with the GOB and other development agencies, and preparation and submission of project documents within a stipulated period.

Literature survey

A literature survey on project formulation showed that few agencies prioritised community participation at the stage of project formulation: many agencies focused on participation only at the planning and/or implementation stages. The challenges facing our Mission were two-fold: one to find appropriate ways to enable the communities to broadly identify and design projects based on their 'world-view' and the other, to match community 'reality' with other stakeholders' 'reality' including consultants, UNDP and government and non-governmental organisations.

• Methodology for people's participation

We used a quick variation of PRA, which we called Participatory Rapid Rural Appraisal (PRRA). PRRA is similar to PRA but is

¹ SAARC: South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

² CEP-2: Community Empowerment Programme 2nd Formulation Mission.

designed for quicker analysis. While the appraisal was of a participatory nature, the term PRRA recognises that the appraisal was relatively short and extractive in nature. However, the approach was based on the principles of PRA: enabling local communities to analyse their knowledge and experience of development and help them to provide 'overviews' of local development status and priorities. The PRRA aimed to generate sufficient information from poor people's own experience and analysis which can form the basis for intensive participation of communities in the long term. This is consistent with PRA's principle of 'optimal ignorance'.

Phases

The different phases of the programme formulation Mission can be identified as follows.

- Phase 1- Review assignment to gain background information;
- Phase 2- An exploratory round of participatory interaction/consultation with the community using PRRA and leading to preliminary community design;
- Phase 3- Consultants preparing individual project concept papers, based on the community design and other primary data, which we presented to UNDP;
- Phase 4- Stakeholders' workshop for validation, assessment of the feasibility of options and link ups;
- Phase 5- Participatory interactions and consultations for a topical round of field investigation (used to focus on issues which are more specific and topic-oriented);
- Phase 6- Consultants revise proposals and validation/negotiations continue;
- Phase 7- Project documents submitted by consultants, appraisal and acceptance.

Of the 6 proposed projects, only 3 (those on rural poor, tribals, urban poor of pourashavas) covered stage 5. The others skipped it because of the lack of time. One proposed project, that on the commercial sex workers, was not completed. Because of the sensitive nature of the subject, each stage took a long time to

complete. Of the 2 project proposals, one (informal traders) was completed at stage 3 while the other (inland fisherfolk community) reached stage 4 to be revised for the subsequent stage. Not all the project proposals formulated were finally accepted by the stakeholders, particularly the government. The latest information is that the GOB is formalising the project documents and, according to a realistic assessment, around 50 per cent of the projects formulated will be implemented.

• Community perspective

The local communities were met in small groups of women and men. The groups initially described their state of poverty, mode of existence, their concept of empowerment, ways to overcome poverty and their own interest in the proposed project. The communities also identified their problems, scored/ranked them, listed their coping strategies, suggested project activities and proposed roles for themselves and developmental agencies. For each proposed project, the results of community interactions in different locations were organised into two large matrices. Matrix-1 was organised around grassroots concepts of poverty and empowerment (see Figure 1). Matrix-2 was organised around the problem-domain as described by communities and their suggested strategies and actions (see Figure 2).

Matrix-1 was significant because it reflected community perspectives of poverty and empowerment. It also provided the conceptual basis for Matrix-2. We found that the local communities who experience poverty were able to describe their conditions practically with the use of their own indicators. They also had their own views on community empowerment. Matrix-1 provided an opportunity for these perspectives to be revealed and to see how local perspectives differed from those of other stakeholders, such as government agencies. Matrix-2, on the other hand, helped detail community-made project designs which could be input into the logical framework analysis of project documents, as required by UNDP.

Figure 1. Matrix-1 showing grassroots concepts of poverty and empowerment

Name of project, community, location	State of poverty and conditions of existence	Concept of empowerment and strengthening linkages	Ways to overcome/reduce poverty	Reasons for project justification

Figure 2. Matrix-2 showing community problem-domain, suggested strategies and actions

Name of project, community & location	No. of sessions and size of group interactions	Nature and process of poverty	Major problem domain as described by the poor	Coping strategies, including seasonal ones	Suggested actions & community contribution proposed	Expected project impact & other remarks

• Constraints and limitations of the mission

Some constraints, limitations and learnings of the Mission are described below.

1. Too many projects

There were too many projects in quite diverse fields and keeping pace with all of them, within the stipulated time frame, was difficult. Interactions and negotiations with stakeholders, other than the community, were often time-consuming. As for the interactive sessions with the rural community, most of them had to be completed before the onset of the farming season. For the urban poor community, time for interaction was again at a premium. We were constantly reminded that community time was limited.

2. Problematic road-side villages

We paid less attention to the roadside villages and decided to concentrate on interior villages, which we assumed would be poorer. However, for the project on rural poor, we found that even road-side villages had a staggering amount of poverty and deprivation, especially amongst women. Thus we decided to include appropriate samples of such villages in our study.

3. Not all answers exist

Communities or groups in different sectors poured out their minds and hearts while describing the problems, but when arriving at solutions, they had many empty boxes. Although they were ready to contribute, they expected other stakeholders to come up with a range of options for problems that they found difficult to solve. Sometimes, there were limited answers to many of their problems, such as ways of dealing with outsiders' attitudes to street children.

4. Outsiders' reality

The Mission started with exploratory PRRA for the community to derive preliminary project designs by identifying their 'problem outline'. However, not all of the national level consultants (associated with the projects) appreciated our task, since not all of them had been exposed to a participatory approach. Some would have been happier with 'questionnaires'. Slowly and steadily, as the PRRA output got organised into matrices and scaled up, most consultants felt encouraged. But the problem of using PRRA, which generated micro level data, in a project document was a real issue. Questions were raised about how to organise such data into the logical framework analysis. This was achieved by using matrices and adapting portions of the standard logical framework.

5. Matching diverse realities of stakeholders

Matching the community's 'reality' with that of other stakeholders/institutions was not easy. There were both social and political parameters within which any project has to work. For example, commercial sex workers of Tangail expressed that gaining social recognition was a priority for them. They symbolised this with fresh white flowers and they scored it against other priorities in a matrix. Little did they realise that they were considered 'outcasts' and a 'threat to society's moral fabric' by other groups. Thus, their stated priority was contrary to that of many other stakeholders. Faced with multiple perspectives, we felt sometimes that we lacked clarity on the positions of major actors in many issues emerging from the field.

6. Mission process vs. output

Often we found that the participatory process was becoming secondary to output. Many stakeholders at the workshop failed to realise that the Mission had gone through an intense participatory process to arrive at the output from PRRA sessions. The underlying participatory process, though not obvious to many, was key to the entire Mission.

7. Legitimacy of output

In stakeholders' workshops, some people raised questions about the technical validity and legitimacy of the community perspective. The question referred to the legitimacy of communities projecting their own 'reality' in their own way and with their own emphasis. It was not easy to handle such issues.

8. Community perennially hopeful

While they designed their projects, we tried our best to lower community expectations, because this was a formulation mission and there was no guarantee that projects would be implemented. However, in spite of reminding the community that the interactions might lead only to project proposals, they were still hopeful that something would surely happen.

· Innovative features of the mission

1. Participatory preliminary project design

The poor community did the preliminary design of the projects in the initial stage of project formulation. They identified their problem set, qualified their problems and described activities to overcome their challenges. This is quite different from other projects, where the community gets involved at later stages of planning and implementing, once project formulation is completed.

2. Scaling up of PRRA output

Different groups of poor people contributed their perspectives, but the issue became how to organise them and project them upwards for project designs to emerge. As indicated earlier, output from field-based sessions was organised into large matrices, which made comparisons possible. Based on the community's scoring/ranking of problems, simple indices were constructed to enable a common prioritisation of such problems.

3. Community-design based discussion by other stakeholders

The different problem-solution sets from the communities were presented to other stakeholders for discussion in workshops. In these workshops, the communities were mostly represented by local grassroots NGOs. The problems were worked upon and a number of solutions were offered by other stakeholders which helped in determining project activities and identifying preliminary institutional link-ups.

4. Emergence of community concepts

Community concepts of 'poverty', 'poor person', 'capacity building', 'justification for intervention' etc., emerged from the PRRA output. These often contrasted with the conceptual frame of UNDP, the GOB and NGOs. The communities' definitions were novel and innovative.

• **Preserving grassroots reality**

We strove hard to preserve as much of the grassroots reality as was possible given the parameters of the mission. The major risk was that the ‘reality’ of the poor community would get undermined in the process of matching the realities of different stakeholders. So we devised ways and means to highlight the issues which local communities so eagerly placed before us during the participatory sessions. We organised the community’s perspective (the PRRA output) into large matrices and placed them before the experts for validation. We arranged stakeholders’ workshops where the agenda of the community was placed as inputs for the other stakeholders to deliberate on, examine feasible options for, and identify activities which would resolve such issues.

Matching the diverse ‘realities’ was the most difficult task. There were occasions when we stumbled and faltered, got disillusioned with the process and felt discouraged and thought we would never be able to achieve our goal. But we usually emerged resilient, by becoming courageous, adjusting our steps and revising our approach.

• **Dr. Neela Mukherjee**, 52 Pocket, 29 Chittaranjan Park, New Delhi –110019, India. Email: neelamuk@del2.vsnl.net.in

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As team leader for the Community Empowerment Programme Formulation Mission-2 of UNDP, Bangladesh, the author provides an overview of the Mission and also the lessons learnt. The author wishes to thank Yee Woo Guo, Michael Constable, Gemini Wahaj, Dilwara Khanoum, Hasina Begum, Makshuda and Nahid Pervin, Lena Hasle, Farah Gaznavi, Najma Sadiq, Durafshan Chowdhury, William Masolin; Government of Bangladesh; selected village and slum communities of Bangladesh; Nilufar Matin, Pradeep Gain, Salma Shovan, Khorshed Erfan Ahmed, Shenaz, Shireen Akhtar Khan and all others who helped the Mission.