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Participatory evaluation of a community water project in Tanzania

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• Introduction

Projects which have been taking a participatory approach are beginning to see that participation does not have to come to an abrupt halt when the time arrives to evaluate the project's activities. Thus, in recent years participatory evaluations have been coming into vogue. This is an account of the process of a participatory evaluation carried out in Tabora in central Tanzania for WaterAid.

WaterAid is a UK-based NGO which supports local organisations in Africa and Asia to help poor communities improve their drinking water supply, sanitation and hygiene.

WaterAid Tabora aims to follow a participatory approach in its work both at district and at village level. At district level, it works in close partnership with local government and with three local NGOs, in order to ensure sustainability once WaterAid itself departs.

At village level, it follows the policy advocated by the Tanzanian government of a community-based approach to rural water supply, transferring responsibility for the operation and management of the water supply from the government to the villages. It has involved the community in project planning and implementation and is supporting them in preparing for long-term operation and maintenance, by assisting them to establish and strengthen water and sanitation committees and to devise a system of collecting water funds to pay for the costs of their water supply. All this has been done through a participatory process.

WaterAid staff have accompanied district teams on their field visits to help them develop their communication skills and make effective use of participatory techniques. When it came to the time to do an evaluation, it was only natural that WaterAid would choose to try a participatory evaluation, to link in with the whole participatory process already in place.

Preparing for the evaluation

WaterAid planned a three day workshop in preparation for the participatory evaluation. On day one of the preparatory workshop, we (the three consultants brought in from outside) found ourselves faced with 30 people, our team for the evaluation. The thought did cross our minds that it might perhaps be easier just to do it ourselves..... but we bravely went along with WaterAid's convictions that this was the way that it should be done, and in retrospect they were, of course, quite right.

These 30 participants were WaterAid staff, partner organisation staff (from TAHEA (Tanzania Home Economics Association), the Anglican and Moravian churches), members of several departments of regional and district government, and representatives from the water and sanitation committees from the villages which WaterAid wanted to evaluate. They were all to a varying extent familiar with participatory skills, some having had extensive training from WaterAid and others from practical experience in the field.

Building up the methodology

We built up our evaluation methodology over three days with our vast team. We, the consultants, contributed ideas and experience of evaluations, they contributed a thorough knowledge of the project and the villages. We went step-by-step through the process of an evaluation, each step building on the step which had come before, in an unhurried, unthreatening atmosphere, gradually increasing the confidence of the participants. Most of the work was done in small groups, initially with people who knew each other, giving them an opportunity to air their opinions in an unthreatening situation. At the end of a task, there were feedback sessions as each group presented the results of their discussions.

The steps were as follows.

We began by defining and discussing the concept of participation and the reasons for doing an evaluation in a participatory way. As well as sorting out our thoughts from the beginning, it also ensured that we built a consensus round the objectives and the purpose of doing this evaluation.

We divided the participants into groups according to their institution (i.e. WaterAid staff, NGO staff, government staff, and village representatives) then the groups brainstormed all the possible issues connected with the project and its work which could be considered during our evaluation. Each group wrote each issue on a separate card. A huge range of issues came up (e.g. pumps, their maintenance, water committees, latrines, water borne diseases, women's workload, soap, extension, village government, water quality, etc.). We then came together and clustered all the issues, which fell into four main categories - gender issues, community development (including stakeholders rich and poor, institutions), technology (concerned with water and sanitation), and extension (concerned with the spread of hygiene and sanitation knowledge).

We explained the process of an evaluation, leading into the concept of indicators, with plenty of examples to illustrate it.

In the next task, the large group was divided into 'village' groups, based on the villages which we were going to evaluate. People joined a village group according to the village either that they came from, or worked in. Each group was given a task consisting of three questions:

- what was the situation in the village at the beginning of the project?
- what is the situation now?
- what indicators could we use to measure the results, changes, successes, failures of the activities carried out by the project?

We felt that the idea of indicators might be difficult to conceptualise so we carefully monitored the groups, but in fact through the examples given previously, and then through doing the exercise themselves, they seemed to grasp it very well, and feel happy about it.

The next group task was in 'topic' groups, i.e. the four topics into which we had clustered the original issues (gender, community development, technology, extension). In each village group, about two people were assigned to each of the four topic groups, according to their interests. In their new groups, they analysed the components of that topic, established indicators and compiled a basic checklist of questions to fulfil those indicators.

We came together into our large group for the next step, which was to brainstorm the methods the participants knew which were suitable for generating discussion and the sort of information which we needed. The range of methods they came up with included mapping, daily routines, timelines, 3-pile sorting, wealth ranking, pocket chart, transect walk, posters, chapati diagram, seasonal calendar, problem ranking, etc.

Back in their topic groups, the participants looked at the variety of methods and decided which they would use to achieve their aims, e.g. mapping to discuss the location of the traditional wells and the new ones, the distances involved, who uses which well and the criteria involved in choosing the site of the new well; chapati diagrams to examine the institutions at village level; social mapping combined with wealth ranking to see if there was any correlation between wealth and

sanitation practices, or wealth and the siting of the new wells.

Pilot field work was carried out in one of the project villages for one day to familiarise ourselves with the process and iron out any hitches.

The final step before the evaluation proper started was to have a feedback session in order to assess the methods we had used during the pilot field work, to finalise the checklists and to do the logistical planning; quite an exercise with so many people!

The fieldwork

The fieldwork was done over a total of seven days in four villages of Tabora Rural district where WaterAid projects have been established. The large group was divided into five small groups, who were also divided between different subvillages within each village.

These five groups each had a different activity:

- Group 1 talked to women;
- Group 2 talked to men;
- Group 3 talked to various leaders (e.g. village government, water committees, hygiene promoters);
- Group 4 went to see the pumps installed by WaterAid and talked to people they met around them. (These four groups followed rough checklists worked out during the workshop); and,
- Group 5 walked around the village visiting houses randomly and talking to the occupants about hygiene and sanitation practices, following a structured observation schedule.

We worked in each village for two days, and at the end of each session of research, we held a meeting for all those in the village who had participated, to share the feedback of our discussions with them and invite comments, objections, opinions, etc..

At the end of the field work, the workshop participants came together again for a further two days to compile the findings. We sat in our topic groups and pooled all the information and impressions we had gathered, then made a

summary of the important points to come out of the evaluation on our topic. Each group also drew up recommendations based on their information. This all fed directly into the evaluation report. All the workshop participants then contributed to a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) of all the institutions involved in the project. The final activity was the invitation of a range of representatives from the district government to a presentation by each group of their summary findings, opinions and recommendations, followed by a discussion.

• Comments and lessons learnt

Using 30 people to evaluate a project might seem to be unnecessarily cumbersome and even a recipe for chaos, but in fact in the end, it turned out to be extremely effective. The workshop where we devised the methodology step by step, with everyone given an opportunity to contribute their ideas, was, we feel, a valuable exercise in building the capacity of the local staff and villagers, and the evaluation itself gave them a deeper insight into the workings of the project in which they had been involved and an opportunity to analyse it, question its direction and make recommendations based on the evaluation and their own experiences. None of this would have happened if the three of us from outside had gone out alone to do the evaluation. We felt by the end that there was a real sense of ownership of the evaluation process amongst the participants.

However, at the same time, the act of doing a participatory evaluation highlighted the flaws in the actual participatory process which had been followed by the implementing teams. Although all the right tools had been used, and much discussion had been held with villagers, helping to define the direction of the project, the implementers had not involved all the villagers, and in particular, they had failed to involve the women, who after all, would be the main recipients of water, hygiene and sanitation activities. They tended to use village meetings as the medium for involving the community, but in a culture where women often do not attend village meetings, and if they do, are not expected to talk in front of

men, women's views and comments generally went unheard.

This had many ramifications, from understanding the crucial importance and difficulties of the water supply in the area, to setting up water committees with 50% women members, to the design of the new water pumps. All this had implications when we were trying to evaluate women's participation in the project - we found that women either were hopeless and resigned about the chances of them having any part in running the activities, or they were defensive, even hostile, when questioned about how much they had participated in the project, because they hadn't been involved, or at least, the right circumstances hadn't been facilitated to allow them to be involved.

Thus trying to do a genuinely participatory evaluation before the whole participatory process is in place is like jumping ahead, missing out steps in this process. In this case, rather than the villagers evaluating their own project, as with a truly participatory evaluation, we were evaluating our project in their villages. But participation is a slow process, and takes much time to become firmly established, and under the circumstances this evaluation was as participatory as it could be, and far more participatory than if we had done it ourselves as external consultants. The implementing institutions all realise the importance of participation and are enthusiastic to continue with it. Doing this evaluation in this way will have reinforced the value of participation, highlighted the flaws in the process so far, and pointed out the right direction in which to proceed.

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