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The gains and strength in participation: a case study of the Mbiabet Ikpe rice farm project in Nigeria

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Background

Mbiabet Ikpe, a community in the Ini local government area, is located in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. It lies along the western edge of an extensive Mbiabet/Idim-Ibom swamp. This community has in it seven contiguous villages: Ikot Efa, Ikot Udo, Ikot Otok, Otung, Eyeheadia, Ikot Esieyere and Ikot Udouba. The community is part of a larger clan, Ikpe, which has 30 villages.

The villages that make up Mbiabet Ikpe community are known to be of the same parental stock, worshipping a common deity, Esiet Ikpe. The parental and religious oneness is a great factor in the unity of these villages. Interestingly, the community comes together to attack external aggression or solve key external problems, but disunites and fragments when it comes to domestic problems. This fact is traced to their highly suspicious nature, even among themselves (NAISRDS, 1995). This particular feature or characteristic can act as a deterrent to any development facilitator or others seeking collaboration with the community.

The major occupation of this settlement is farming. The major crops cultivated are rice and cassava, but rice is more dominant than cassava. A field survey conducted (NAISRDS, 1995) suggests that over 88% of Mbiabet farmers cultivate rice. As a result of this concentration, they are known as a rice community.

The evolution of rice cultivation in Mbiabet Ikpe

Rice cultivation started in the community as a small experiment in 1950 by a colonial agricultural officer. Quite a few farmers then decided to go into rice cultivation. During this time, farmers were either seen as lazy, college dropouts, or uneducated illiterates from the villages. This could explain why many parents in the community struggled to send their wards to school and encouraged them to become teachers. However, a prominent rice farmer told the author that nowadays, even the educated cultivate rice.

With the potential to increase rice production in the Mbiabet swamp, the government decided to acquire the swamp for improved and mechanised rice cultivation by annexing the land, although without payment to the community. In 1972, the South Eastern State government (now Akwa Ibom State) annexed the Mbiabet rice paddy, and decided to expand the cultivable swamp size, by removing all non-rice resources (e.g. raffia palm, oil palm trees and fish biomass). Presently, of the acquired 100 hectares of cleared swampland, only 70 hectares is put to use. The remainder suffers from flooding, which makes rice cultivation unprofitable.

After acquiring the rice farm, the government handed over the operations and management (OM) of the farm to the Ministry of Agriculture. With the creation of Akwa Ibom

State, the OM of the farm was transferred from the main Ministry of Agriculture to one of its various parastatals, the Akwa Ibom Agricultural Development Programme (AKADEP).

The rice farm prior to current reforms

Of a total paddy size of 100ha, the cultivable portion of the Mbiabet rice farm (70ha) is divided into 700 (0.1ha) plots. The plots are separated by bunds specially built to give way to flowing water for draining the rice plots. Prior to 1995, part of the rice field (40 plots) was reserved by AKADEP for seed multiplication, research, and workers' cultivation. The remaining portion of the rice farm was rented out to interested farmers within and outside the community, who would hold such title in trust for a year. Before 1989, N5 was paid per plot as rent. By 1990 N30 was paid. This price was maintained until the take-over by the community of the farm's OM.

The problem

The long years of government OM of the rice farm generated both positive and negative results. The positive results included:

- the expansion of the cultivable rice paddy;
- the building of a dam and waterways for proper drainage;
- the provision of equipment e.g. silos, and a generator;
- the building of farm houses and provision of a mill to process rice;
- the provision of technical expertise to help local farmers with their rice cultivation; and,
- the opening up of roads and construction of two important concrete bridges to link some villages in the community network.

The negative impacts included:

- massive fraud in allocating rice plots to farmers: outsiders and a few powerful insiders were given large plot holdings whilst others received none;
- farm provisions like dams, waterways and bunds were not adequately maintained;
- the silos had never been put to use and had been seriously vandalised and looted;
- conflict, fights and killings were recorded each time the government agent (AKADEP) rented out plots to farmers, as there was no equity and transparency in their approach; and,
- farmers refused to maintain their plots effectively as they thought they would not be given the same plot in the next planting season.

The community felt that the negative impacts of the government's OM of the rice farm far outweighed the positive impacts. To change this was somewhat difficult as they

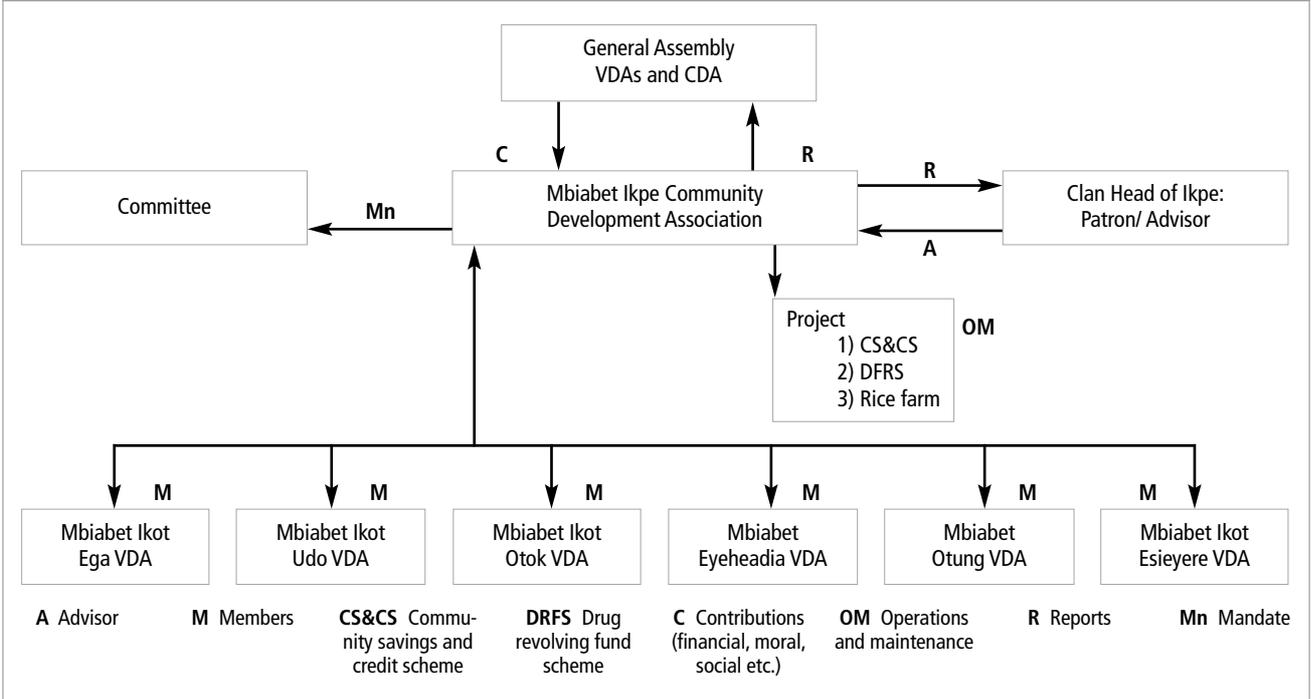
“With constant meetings, village workshops and action research, the villagers starting developing some level of confidence in themselves and their abilities. They began to ask questions and argue together about their future”

had no immediate technical expertise with the necessary capacity to effect change. They accepted the status quo as unchangeable. Although there were pockets of discontent, the big farmers (those allocated many rice plots) and outsider farmers were consolidating their financial returns, while the small village farmers who had no access to such plot holdings were reeling in poverty. Income disparity in the community widened. This affected the socio-cultural foundations of the community, and threatened the democratic nature of the people.

Transition

In February 1994 the communities along the Enyong creek and Ikpe river swamp benefited when an Africa Development Bank (ADB) funded a swamp rice development survey. The terms of reference were to explore the possibilities of cultivating swamp rice all through the stretch of Enyong creek and Ikpe river swamp. It was decided that customary owners and users of these natural resources should be consulted. Moreover, they should participate in every stage of evaluating, planning, designing and eventually implementing the development and usage of the swamps, in order to produce realistic, viable plans for sustainable development in the swamps. The consultants used Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methods to source information and hard facts. Three important communities, in the judgement of the consultants, located in the three strands of the Enyong creek and Ikpe river basins were selected for the PRA. Mbiabet Ikpe was among the three sites. At first, it was difficult to convince the people of Mbiabet Ikpe to believe in their abilities and strength to carry out their own development. They were more passive and depended on outsiders (researchers and town dwellers) to tell them what to do. With constant meetings, village workshops and action research, the villagers starting developing some level of confidence in themselves and their abilities. They began to ask questions and argue together about their future. Realising their individual inability to achieve the desired goal, they slowly and gradually decided to collaborate and work together in a participatory

Figure 1: Administrative Chart of Mbiabet Ikpe Community Development Association



way to undertake their development.

The author, who was in the team of consultants from the swamp resources development survey, was assigned the special task of encouraging participation among the villages of Mbiabet Community for the action research component of the survey.

The villages of Mbiabet were encouraged to set up Village Development Associations (VDAs). By March 1995, of the seven villages, six had established and launched VDAs. By June 1995, the VDAs had increased their membership, had their own constitution, were meeting regularly, had organised small savings and loans schemes and were collectively discussing their problems.

As the VDAs became stronger, they thought it wise for all of them to collaborate to build a strong viable Mbiabet Ikpe Community Development Association (MICDA), to take care of the interests of the larger Mbiabet Community. The VDAs met and elected members from every VDA to form the executive committee of the CDA. The CDA executive was made accountable and responsible to the general assembly of the VDAs. The chief advisers and patrons of the individual VDAs are the village traditional chiefs, while the clan head is the overall patron and adviser of all the groups (see Figure 1).

The CDA has committees that consist of members of the

various VDAs. It also has projects, prominent among them being the Community Savings and Credit Schemes (CS&CS) and the Drug Revolving Fund Scheme (DFRS).

With constant interactions, meetings, workshops and assessment of needs and wants, the VDAs and CDA decided to start addressing their local problems. The first of these was their dissatisfaction with the management of the government rice farm. The MICDA identified the following issues:

- farm plots were allocated to outsiders, rather than to natives who had nothing to do and no farmlands;
- the unserviceable nature of farm facilities, including rice plot bunds, water channels and reservoir sluice gates; and,
- the uncompetitive rent charged for rice plots, which encouraged some members of their society to rent rice plots at low rates from the farm managing agency, and re-rent at exorbitant rates to outsiders. The outsiders eventually took over the land, leaving the real owners as on-farm labour.

The MICDA assembly (CDA executives, all VDAs executives, and the villages' traditional heads) then wrote to the government to request the handing over of the operations and management (OM) of the government rice farm to the CDA. In their proposal, they stated such benefits to be derived from their OM of the farm as:

- increased revenue to government – with desired increase

Table 1. Summary of rice farm plot holdings by farmers in Mbiabet before and after OM of rice farm by MICDA

Year	Total no. of plots	Available plots after demonstration plots	No. of rice farmers renting rice farms	No. of 'big farmers' renting rice farms	No. of 'small farmers' renting rice farms	Average plot holdings by 'big farmers'	Average plot holdings by 'small farmers'
1984	700	660	24	14	10	280	380
1985	700	660	33	14	19	280	380
1986	700	660	39	14	25	280	380
1987	700	660	46	15	31	300	360
1988	700	660	53	15	38	300	360
1989	700	660	67	15	52	300	360
1990	700	660	102	15	87	300	360
1991	700	660	102	18	84	280	390
1992	700	660	103	19	84	285	375
1993	700	660	104	19	85	285	375
1994	700	660	98	20	78	300	360
1995	700	660	115	20	95	200	460
1996	700	660	150	6	144	42	618
1997	700	660	203	4	199	32	628
1998	700	660	215	3	212	24	636

in farm plots rent. CDA would pay the full value of the previous rent to government while retaining the other half for minor repairs to farm fittings and facilities;

- improved maintenance of farm facilities;
- eradication of fraud in plot allocation and farm management;
- reduction in farm maintenance costs to government;
- retention of government ownership of the rice farm;
- increased professional capacity of the AKADEP staff managing the farm: once they were made technical advisers, the task of administration and management would be taken off their shoulders; and,
- increased productivity due to greater commitment by farmers and intensive cultivation.

Although government accepted and approved the request of the MICDA, it had some doubts, for example:

- whether the CDA would ensure peace in the community,

through equitable plot distribution, and whether it would be able to maintain good relations with government; and,

- whether community members who were opposed to the views of the CDA would foment disturbances and violence.

As a result of these doubts, the government accepted Mbiabet's request with a probation period of two years to assess progress.

The breakthrough

In 1995, less than 40% of farmers in the community owned a rice plot (NAISRDS, 1995). This problem constituted the biggest obstacle to the CDA's hopes of making plot allocation more equitable. The rich and big farmers threatened to stop any attempt to reduce their rice plot holdings by the CDA.

With its improved capacity in management and conflict resolution, the CDA organised a series of workshops, meetings, village-by-village meetings, and house-by-house interactions to educate community members about their mission and encourage participation and awareness. Meetings were also held with the rich farmers.

The result of the intensive mobilisation and facilitation by the CDA was massive support for its activities and programmes by the community. New members were registering in large numbers with the VDAs. The CDA was acquiring more strength and popularity with each achievement. As the big farmers became aware of this, they decided to submit to the dictates of the CDA over the OM of the farm. In a CDA meeting many 'big farmers' (albeit under considerable social pressure to do so) voluntarily relinquished part of their plot holdings to be shared among other farmers in the community.

The CDA finally took over the OM of their farm in 1996. The first rice plot allocations that were handled by the CDA were very successful. The rich and influential farmers who had hitherto sworn not to negotiate with the CDA reneged on their earlier positions and decided to work with the CDA to bring about stability in their community.

Table 1 shows how the allocation of farm plots changed between 1984 and 1998. Of a total number of 660 plots available for cultivation, rich or big farmers reduced their 1994 plot holdings from 300 plots to 200 plots in 1995. More small farmers were then accommodated in this arrangement – with 100 plots left to be rented among them. Between 1995 and 1998, the number of 'big farmers' reduced significantly from 20 in 1995 to 3 in 1998. Total plot holdings by 'big farmers' reduced from 200 plots to 24 plots between 1995 and 1998. The number of farmers owning rice plots increased steadily from 98 in 1994 to 215 in 1998, ensuring more farmers had access to plots.

Table 2. Revenue accruing to rice farm from plot rent

Year	No. of plots rented	Revenues earned No. of plots x rent	Farm revenue remitted to Government (Ministry of Agriculture)	Funds for Community Development
1984	660	660 X 5 = 3,300	–	–
1985	660	660 X 5 = 3,300	–	–
1986	660	660 X 20 = 13,200	–	–
1987	660	660 X 20 = 13,200	–	–
1988	660	660 X 20 = 13,200	–	–
1989	660	660 X 20 = 13,200	–	–
1990	660	660 X 20 = 13,200	–	–
1991	660	660 X 30 = 19,800	–	–
1992	660	660 X 30 = 19,800	–	–
1993	660	660 X 30 = 19,800	–	–
1994	660	660 X 30 = 19,800	–	–
1995	660	660 X 60 = 39,600	19,800	19,800
1996	660	660 X 60 = 39,600	19,800	19,800
1997	660	660 X 80 = 52,800	19,800	33,000
1998	660	660 X 100 = 66,000	19,800	46,200

Source: Computed from Farm Allocation Register of AKADEP Farm Manager and CDA records

Table 2 shows revenue accruing to the rice farm in the different operations and management years. Between 1984 and 1994 when AKADEP managed the farm, revenue earned was fully reinvested back into farm maintenance. As well as this, the farm management was to collect money from the government for the maintenance of the farm (although in some years the government did not release or delayed the funds). Nothing accrued to the community. However, with the takeover by the CDA in 1995, a new revenue arrangement was put in place. With an increased rent, the CDA

made more revenue, of which they paid part to the government, and retained part to use in maintaining farm facilities. Part of the revenue retained by the CDA is used for community development activities. Although the proceeds may seem small, there is a remarkable change in attitude and a building of a spirit of accountability and transparency in the business of public utilities management.

Conclusion

The CDA takeover of the OM of the government rice farm has been very successful. They have:

- provided revenue to the government through rented farm plots;
- improved maintenance of facilities (including bunds, waterways, dams) by CDA and individual plot owners, who dedicate more time to maintaining the rice plots because they now have a stake, as opposed to when government controlled the farm without the participation of the indigenous communal people;
- eradicated fraud in farm allocation and management. The CDA allows every stakeholder to participate in its activities in order to discourage any corrupt tendencies and practices;
- greatly reduced government's maintenance costs. The CDA did not wait for government subvention to strengthen farm bunds or clear waterways, for instance. They made use of retained rental income for this; and,
- taken the decision to make AKADEP staff technical advisers; they now concentrate more on technical matters and have discovered several technical methods for improving the rice yield and storage of harvested rice.

The intensive nature of the facilitation where community members played active roles, coupled with the long periods of engagement, which accorded people time to adjust to new challenges, contributed to the success of the programme. The CDA found that with the realisation of their targets, it confirmed to them that there is strength in participation. If other communities and even government could learn from this and act similarly, it could improve the process of rural development.

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