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Participatory evaluation with pastoralists in Sudan

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Introduction

Beja pastoralists have been keeping camels and goats in the arid Red Sea hills of Sudan for centuries. After droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, they had difficulties rebuilding their herds and adapting their economy to new circumstances. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, many Beja received food aid or participated in food-for-work programmes.

The Red Sea Hills Programme (RSHP), supported by ACORD (the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development), started work in Halaib Province in eastern Sudan in 1989. It first focused on water development close to the small inland centre of Suffaya, where many mobile pastoralists were found. In 1992, it expanded operations and started some activities related to livestock-keeping and community development.

In 1995/6, the programme underwent a major review, out of which emerged a three-pronged strategy: participatory planning and implementation, gender sensitivity, and environmental management. The aim was to give local people the means to determine their own development. The stronger gender orientation was meant to ensure that this included women, in a context of very conservative gender relations. A new programme team was recruited, composed almost entirely of local people, including one woman. After six months' on-the-job coaching by a

Sudanese specialist in PLA methods, the team began working with Village Development Committees (VDCs) in the coastal zone.

The VDCs plan, implement, and monitor projects prioritised by each community. These include paraveterinary services, goat restocking, fodder supply, well repair, construction of water cisterns, making soil embankments to harvest water for cropping, setting up women's centres (with training in literacy, sewing, horticulture, etc.), cooperative shops, community funds for human medicine, and boat rehabilitation (many pastoralists whose herds were depleted have now taken up sea-related activities).

In 1998, the programme wanted to expand its community development work to the hilly inland areas inhabited by mobile pastoralists. The RSHP team and ACORD saw this as an opportune time to invite external reviewers to assess the programme jointly with the team and Beja communities. In consultation with the VDCs, the team developed a profile for the external reviewers, emphasising participatory skills, familiarity with pastoral livelihoods, mix of social and natural science disciplines, and gender balance. The team, the VDCs and the ACORD desk officer drew up Terms of Reference (ToRs), in which they even proposed specific methods, e.g. SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, for the participatory evaluation.

'We asked the committee what they considered to be desirable traits of a committee and its functioning... The VDC members reflected on past meetings and discussed who had attended and who had been involved in decision making'

ACORD headquarters added some points, such as assessing the cost-effectiveness of selected activities.

From ToRs to questions to evaluation design

The external reviewers and the RSHP team transformed each statement in the ToRs into a question, brainstormed about how this could best be addressed with the villagers, and agreed on several participatory methods to be suggested to them. The evaluation was carried out with four Beja communities – two on the coast and two in the hills – in each case, in villages relatively strong and relatively weak in community development, as judged by the RSHP team.

In each community, the evaluation started with two meetings – one with men and one with women – to introduce the external persons, stimulate a general discussion about village development, and give the Beja an opportunity to select project-supported activities to examine in more detail. At these initial meetings, local evaluators (a woman and a man) were selected by their fellow villagers.

After the larger meetings in each village, the RSHP members and external reviewers met with the two local evaluators to design the evaluation process in their village. The local evaluators suggested the size and composition of the village groups with whom different aspects of the development work should be assessed. These were interest groups involved in the activities identified in the community meetings and, in most cases, were segregated according to sex. The local evaluators arranged the various visits and meetings and decided whether the final feedback meeting with the community should be segregated or mixed. (As it turned out, in all cases, they chose the latter option.)

Exploring perceived benefits

We asked each of the different interest groups to identify the benefits of the activity in question, and a member of the evaluation team drew each benefit on an A4 sheet of paper. We placed the sheets on the ground and anchored

Using proportional piling to assess the relative importance of project benefits



them with stones.

Each village participant was given ten beans (red for men, white for women) and asked to distribute them among the benefits most important to him or her as an individual. Some people explained their choices as they placed the beans. The votes by men and women for each benefit were then counted and weighted, e.g. if five women and ten men were voting, then the votes of the women were multiplied by two so that it was easier to compare the relative importance given to the benefit by women and men.

We then posed questions to probe why certain benefits were more important overall than others, and why certain ones were more important to one sex than the other. The discussion was in Beja and recorded by a RSHP member. The non-Sudanese reviewers depended largely on the notes of the Sudanese colleagues, as excessive interruptions for translation would have disturbed the flow of discussion among the villagers.

Identifying beneficiaries

We used the proportional-piling technique for identifying wealth classes that were benefiting from the activity. We placed four piles of beans on the ground to represent different wealth groups within the village: very rich, medium rich, medium poor, and very poor. We deliberately made the pile for the very poor the smallest one. The villagers then re-adjusted the piles to represent the proportions of households in the village that were in these different wealth groups. We asked them to explain how each group differed from the other (i.e. criteria of wealth/poverty).

Then we asked them to indicate which group(s) benefited most from the activity. This led to lively discussion and

A ranking exercise in Yomont village



to redistribution of the beans, sometimes even to creation of a new pile. For example, when a group of villagers realised that the pile of beans representing 'very poor' included people with a few livestock and those with none, whereas the paraveterinary services were benefiting the former and not the latter, it decided to subdivide the fourth pile into 'very poor' (few livestock) and 'very, very poor' (no livestock). The discussion then moved to why certain wealth classes were benefiting more than others.

Assessing local organisational capacities

The VDCs assessed their own organisational capacities by applying the SWOT method, writing in Arabic on a poster on the ground. This was a method they already knew. However, the RSHP team was eager to learn other ways of helping local committees assess their capacities. Therefore, the external reviewers introduced what the team called the 'moons exercise', based on an approach developed by Uphoff (1991). We asked the committee what they considered to be desirable traits of a committee and its functioning. For example, a trait stated by one group was: 'All members attend meetings regularly and take part in decision making'. Then we drew four phases of the moon on the ground (crescent, less than half moon, more than half moon, full moon) and suggested that this could stand for few/some/many/all members attend meetings regularly and take part in decision making. The VDC members reflected on past meetings and discussed who had attended and who had been involved in decision making, until they reached agreement about the appropriate moon phase. We then asked them what they still needed to do to attain the ideal state (full moon), in which direction the committee would develop if support from the RSHP continued or

ceased, and why this would happen.

In all villages, the RSHP had started by promoting the creation of separate men's and women's development committees, each focusing on activities most important to that gender. In some cases, the villagers had already started to form a mixed-gender VDC. In one village where this had not happened, we facilitated a brainstorming and visualisation exercise (in written Arabic) on the pros and cons of a joint committee. As the villagers, through their experience with scales in the cooperative shop, were familiar with weights, they could weigh the relative importance of the pros and cons. The men and women together came to a decision that the pros weighed heavier. This type of evaluation tool served two purposes: to assess the strengths of the separate women's and men's committees, and to further the process of local organisational development.

In those villages where a Venn diagram had been made during PLA exercises two years earlier, the Beja drew a new one to show the present situation of institutional linkages and compared this with the old one. However, the new situation had become so complex that the new Venn diagram could be understood only by those directly involved in drawing it. Nevertheless, they could explain to us and later to the other villagers what the major changes in the last years had been, e.g. that women used to have no contacts outside the village or only indirectly through men, but were now interacting with circles outside the village, such as traders to supply their cooperative shop. Women were actively involved in VDCs, had more freedom of movement, and generally had a much stronger profile in public.

Analysis and feedback

Each village evaluation culminated in a feedback workshop in which the Beja-speaking members of the evaluation team showed the results, received comments and posed questions to advance debate in the village, particularly about institutional development. The village evaluation reports, including the drawings, were distributed in print in Arabic and on cassette in Beja. The RSHP team facilitated discussions of these reports in the villages, as part of the process of further local planning.

The data from the participatory evaluation were analysed at several levels by different groups:

- village evaluators were involved in analysis at village level while preparing and conducting the feedback workshop;
- the RSHP team was involved at programme level while discussing and comparing the different village findings and preparing the initial evaluation report;
- the external reviewers analysed the functioning and tech-

Women in Dunganab village rank the perceived benefits of different project activities
Credit: Sara Pantuliano



nical expertise of the RSHP team, although the team later had the opportunity to comment before the external reviewers produced the final report.

In addition to the village evaluation reports, the villages received an Arabic summary of the main recommendations from the overall report. The revised evaluation report in English was sent to ACORD and the RSHP team to serve as a reference for present and potential donors.

Assessment of the evaluation

ACORD was sufficiently interested in the evaluation process to send someone from headquarters to document it (Pantuliano, 1998). As part of this process documentation, the RSHP team (without the external reviewers) assessed the evaluation. The team found it to be a learning experience that contributed to the programme's own methods and findings in PM & E. Indeed, this had been why the team had wanted a participatory mid-term evaluation: to contribute to its own learning and to that of the villagers with whom it worked.

Favourable conditions for the participatory evaluation were:

- the RSHP team and local evaluators were already experienced in applying participatory tools;
- ACORD accepted a limitation in the scope of the evaluation, realising that all aspects of the RSHP could not be evaluated in a participatory way in a short period of time.

A weakness of the evaluation was that non-beneficiaries, particularly non-Beja people, hardly participated. The external reviewers' contacts were confined to people in contact with the RSHP team (all Beja). Moreover, the contacts within the communities were via the VDC, the composition of which reflected largely the traditional power structure – with some important adjustments, such as the creation of a women's or joint development committee. However, the villagers tended to select traditional leaders and/or their relatives to be local evaluators.

ACORD's questions about cost-effectiveness could not be adequately answered, because the participatory evaluation tools and limited time did not permit collection of suffi-

A committee leader comments on the village findings in Mohd



Group discussion in Gebiet village



cient quantitative data. Also, before the evaluation, the project had not recorded basic data needed to assess cost-effectiveness. This made the evaluation largely dependent on villagers' qualitative perceptions and opinions, and their rough estimates of costs and benefits.

Impact of the participatory evaluation

The participatory mid-term evaluation brought about several changes in the RSHP. More attention was paid to environmental issues, both on land and at sea. Awareness-raising activities were introduced that drew inspiration from the traditional *silif* system of natural resource management, and the RSHP facilitated inter-village visits to share relevant experiences. The programme increased its sea-related activities: it began to support oyster farming and provided loans for fishing boats on a full-recovery basis, instead of with subsidies, as the evaluation had shown that this activity brought sufficient income for the beneficiaries to repay a loan. This freed up funds for activities to support more disadvantaged groups among the Beja.

There were also changes in project management at village level. In one village, the participatory evaluation prompted the VDC to become more inclusive by bringing on board more representatives from outlying areas instead of just the core village. Another village recognised that too few individuals were controlling decision making without sufficiently consulting the people who should benefit from the different projects. It therefore set up a Project Committee composed of members of each local project, to liaise with the VDC. This model is now spreading to other villages.

The RSHP team continued using tools applied during the mid-term evaluation and integrated them into a Participatory Impact Monitoring (PIM) system that was set up subse-

quently. The programme's sustainability lens no longer focuses on the technical sustainability of particular activities but rather on the sustainability of the development process as a whole: more attention is given to strengthening community capacities to plan and implement projects, including raising and managing funds, and reporting.

Greater diversification of livelihood options is encouraged. The RSHP regards the various local projects as community-managed experiments through which the Beja learn about the feasibility of new possibilities, at the same time as learning how to identify and manage projects. The RSHP gives strategic and gradually diminishing technical support to specific projects, and more attention to helping the Beja build up representative committees within villages and spanning several villages to manage local development.

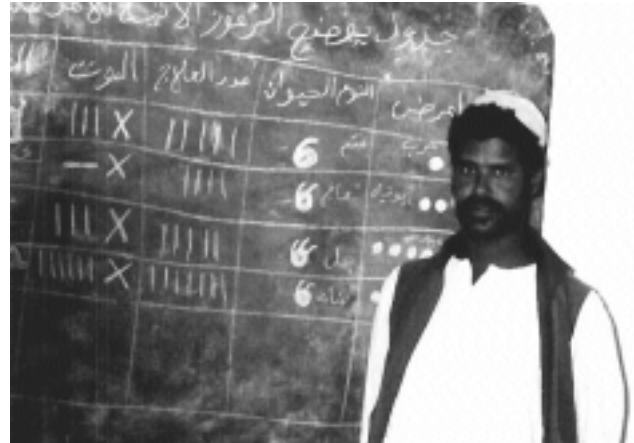
The RSHP brings together the development committees and other community members to select their criteria for committee performance (e.g. regular meetings, follow-up of plans, record keeping). They apply various tools for assessment, including the 'moons exercise', and spider-web diagrams to assess key performance elements such as meetings, attendance, and follow-up. The VDCs then plan actions to improve their performance. For example, one community appointed a person to remind the committee members about meeting dates. In another community, the VDC dismissed its chairman because he was absent too often. In a recent appraisal by a VDC in a coastal village, the recommendation was to hand over some of the financial control to women. This indicates that women have gained competence and that community-level evaluation gives recognition to this.

The local committees present their findings to each other and to their own communities in various visual forms (charts, tables, matrices, diagrams), in addition to oral feed-

back. Some written records are kept by the few literate persons in those villages where they can be found. In addition, the RSHP does its own monitoring of the village projects and local organisational development, applying visual techniques used also by the local groups, such as Venn diagrams and mobility maps.

The participatory mid-term evaluation and subsequent PIM activities offered the Beja communities some structure and tools for their own monitoring and evaluation. These have gradually being institutionalised and increase sustainability in managing activities to improve local livelihoods. PM & E, including aspects of external evaluation, is playing a key role in improving the performance of community organisations in managing development.

Villagers draw up a community PIM framework showing expectations/fears, indicators, and observation methods



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