

# Sequential steps for empowering community organisations for local development

by ANIL C. SHAH

## Introduction

Empowerment is about enabling local groups to analyse their own problems and think of possible solutions according to their knowledge and understanding. It should enable them to examine alternatives that may be suggested by a facilitating outside agency, to consider options, and to decide what they think is the most appropriate development strategy and programme.

In a good development process, the people have to have precedence. The role of outside agency should be that of a facilitator. This means not imposing directly or indirectly – or in a subtle manner – their own ideas about what is good for the local groups before **they** have analysed their situation and worked out tentative solutions. Until this stage, an outside development facilitator should avoid the temptation to offer solutions or even give advice (Shah, 2001<sup>1</sup>).

Such restraint is essential for facilitating the empowerment process. The process should make a programme sustainable – one that is continually managed by the local

Anil Shah encouraging women to describe their problems



Photo: DSC

groups, even when the facilitating agency has withdrawn or at least has diminished its involvement. This looks simple in principle but can be extremely difficult in practice (Box 1).

One way of approaching the process is to have a series of sequential steps as a guide. In this article, I want to share some suggestions based on my own field experiences of developing natural resources development programmes.

## People first, development agency second

Programme activities and structures should be ones that local

<sup>1</sup> Where Shah narrates an experience when government technocrats were taken to see a proposed watershed plan prepared by the local village group. They were asked not to give advice until they had listened to the farmers. If the visiting experts started giving advice, the development worker tapped the shoulder of the visiting experts, reminding them that it was still not time for offering advice!

**Box 1: The significance of sequence**

I was visiting a senior officer in charge of a watershed development programme in India. He showed me with some pride the latest development. Using satellite imagery, his department was preparing a colourful village map. It clearly indicated, for example, barren parts where greening was needed, and locations where rainwater storage could be located. He explained how the maps would be used to quickly work out a plan for watershed development for that village.

He said, 'The watershed expert can carry the village map with him to show villagers how easy it will be for them to plan watershed development.'

I asked, 'And what will be the role of villagers?'

He replied, 'Of course, before finalising the watershed plan, the expert will consider their views and suggestions.'

He saw that I was amused, and asked if I had any reservations about the new technique.

I said, 'Perhaps the expert could keep the map in his bag at first, and instead ask the villagers what they think are the special features of the terrain, and how they think the development could be planned. Afterwards, the expert might tell them that there are some other experts who are interested in their village. That, with the help of photographs from the sky, they could prepare more accurate development maps. Would they be interested in looking at them? If the villagers showed an interest, the expert could then show them the maps and explain how they could be used for planning watershed development. And afterwards, the villagers could offer further comments and suggestions for the expert to consider.'

The state officer was also amused at what I said. He said, with a smile, 'Well, it is more or less the same thing. Only the sequence is different.'

I jumped at the emerging point: 'Yes, the difference is in the sequence. Real development and empowerment take place when villagers take precedence over the experts. The final decision should be a blending of both the views of the villagers and of the experts.'

groups want to maintain and use even after the project period is over and the facilitating agency may not be around. So it is important to keep in mind some basic principles of empowerment:

- People have enough problems of their own. They are not bothered about your or the agency's 'mission', 'programme', or 'targets'.
- Use interactive methods so people can express their understanding or concerns about problems they consider to be important. The principle is to move the discussion from a problem towards possible solutions. This looks simple and obvious but it can be difficult in practice for development

## **"Getting the sequence of steps right does not necessarily mean lots of elaborate planning and implementation. It means people first, development agency second"**

workers who have agency agendas and targets to fulfil.

- Encourage people to look for examples from within the village, where people have successfully dealt with similar problems.
- If local examples are not sufficient for the scale of application needed, explore with the local community successful examples in other villages. Closer examples are generally better, but the solutions have to be really good, even if they come from communities further away.
- Only after the local community and groups have considered various options to deal with problems they consider important should you bring in your own knowledge to supplement local knowledge.
- Any solution to a problem has cost implications. There may be costs incurred e.g. by the government, by the community group, or by individual beneficiaries. No benefit is free. It is only when the benefits become substantially more than the costs involved that the transaction becomes worth considering. In development work, costs are usually borne by public agency. The beneficiary usually derives a benefit that is greater than the cost. Since we want sustainable development, and as such transactions take place on a large scale, development agencies working in partnership with village groups need to ensure that the benefit/cost ratio is positive.

The steps that follow are not inviolable prescriptions. Instead, they are suggestions. They can be tried in an adaptive manner, depending on the nature of the programme, the local situation, your own relationship with the community, and local responses.

Getting the sequence of steps right does not necessarily mean lots of elaborate planning and implementation. It means people first, development agency second. So it is important to develop an understanding and to gain experience in handling this interactive sequencing.

### **An interactive sequence of steps**

Imagine that as a development worker, you go to a new village. You have a mandate to introduce a new development programme. You want it to be both participatory and sustain-

**Enabling communities to describe their problems in irrigation canal systems**



Photo: DSC

able. You hope that the local community will consider it its own and that eventually they will manage it themselves.

### Step one

Start meeting people in a casual manner to get ideas about e.g. who the local formal leaders are, the main communities/castes, or how many households there are in the village.

### Step two

Meet the local leaders. Introduce yourself as a development agency worker interested in providing support to community-based groups and organisations. It is important not to go into details of the scheme. At the moment, you only assume that it will be relevant to that village's development.

### Step three

At that or the next meeting, get an understanding of the local situation. Visit different parts of the village, especially

the areas where the poorer community members live, such as the tail end of irrigation canals, to learn about their problems.<sup>2</sup> Stop whenever you notice anything interesting: a crop, individuals or groups, or an unusual tree. Ask simple questions about what you are observing and listen intently to what people say.

### Step four

Move on, and if you meet a large group, sit down. Ask questions about problems which might be related to your programme. For instance, if it is a watershed development, you could initiate some discussion about what crops they are raising, the yields, and why some have higher yields than others. Ask them to explain the differences by asking them to draw on the ground or on chart paper (which you always carry with you!). When the villagers start drawing their

<sup>2</sup> For more information, discussion and recommendations, see, 'The tail-enders and other deprived – a research study by Development Support Centre.' Ahmedabad, India: DSC.

**Box 2: Watershed development example**

In the community meeting, you can:

- Say you are interested in helping the village community to increase e.g. agricultural production, productivity, and income. So you want to understand the present level of agriculture productivity in the main crops of their village.
- On the chart paper, encourage people to draw village boundaries, slopes, streams, areas of forest, public land and common lands, and areas that have better irrigation facilities or a village well etc.
- Now you can discuss productivity of the main crop: which parts of the village or farms are **more** productive? Why do the farmers in these areas think this is so? Which farms are **less** productive? Why? What are the factors? What should these farmers do to reach a higher level of productivity?
- Some factors that may come up could include water facilities, land shaping and erosion, etc. You could ask: if such facilities are created in the village, where should they be located? What would be the likely benefit, in yield and in money?

You may now be tempted to mention that you have a watershed development programme that may assist with these problems. You will be itching to tell the community that your agency can provide large financial support provided the local community gives a small contribution. The villagers will also be wondering when you will unveil your scheme with pots of money. Resist the temptation! This is extremely difficult because the development worker has his/her own programme targets to achieve. It appears the community is ready to take up the watershed development programme. **This is not true.** The village community has only just begun to analyse its problems and think of possible solutions. It still does not know what the programme would mean for the community and the individual members – or what it can expect from the outside agency.

perceptions and understanding of the situation, you are already engaged in the process of empowerment. Your intense curiosity – reflected in your questions – has put the local community above you. **You are the learner.**

**Step five**

By now, you should have a general idea about the overall village situation related to your programme. However, you know that a village community is not one entity but consists of various groups, some better placed than others. It is essential to take the initiative and **go out and meet** such marginalised groups – perhaps marginal farmers or those of 'lower' castes. Visit where they live or the areas where they are likely to be, and talk with them. With intense curiosity, try to understand their situation and problems as they understand and perceive them. Again, bring out your chart paper and pass them the pen. This part of the process is about respecting

**Box 3: Participatory irrigation management example**

You have visited an irrigation canal. You met several farmers and, through PRA mapping, have learnt about various problems of water conveyance and distribution. You know the deprivation of the tail-enders. You hold a meeting with farmers affected by the irrigation system. But you need to proceed cautiously. Do not mention the Government's participatory irrigation management scheme. Using chart paper, help the villagers to delineate the entire canal system and indicate the problems. Again, you are tempted to say that under the PIM scheme, the Government would offer, say, 80% funds to fix the canal deficiencies – provided the farmers form a registered group and provide a 20% contribution. **Don't do it. It is premature.** Farmers have still not fully analysed their problem in terms of cost/benefit or worked out possible solutions.

Once they have located the canal system problems, ask which problems are most important and whether the problem affects the farmers who have their land in a particular area. The answer could be that they are not getting enough water. Ask, what is the consequence? The response would be less production. How much less? Say 200 kg per hectare. What does that mean in money terms? Maybe Rs 2000 per hectare. Work out the financial consequences of the deficiencies in various parts of the canal system and you may come up with a loss of Rs 2 lakh (1 lakh = Rs 100,000) per year. Mentally, you calculate that if the deficiencies were rectified, the additional income could be Rs 10 lakh over 5 years. This should be an extremely worthwhile investment. But hold back and keep this calculation in your mind.

Suggest that you know of villages that dealt with similar problems satisfactorily. Would they like to visit? Mention that the development agency has funds to contribute to learning visits with small contributions from the local groups. This would be the most worthwhile expenditure for a facilitating agency to promote sound development.

the disadvantaged. This has to be done cleverly without estranging the village leaders.

**Step six**

Now you should have a broad idea about the village situation, and the options available as solutions related to the programme that you want to promote. It is time to hold a meeting with the larger community. Since you have already established contact with disadvantaged groups, make sure that they know about and can attend the meeting to present their problems and views. You are already becoming a development worker who has special concern for the disadvantaged. You are not their spokesperson. You are trying to embolden them to present their views.

This is the occasion to review issues that have emerged – the general problems, as well as specific problems of the disadvantaged. You may present stories and audio-visuals of

**Working with women after the earthquake in Kutch district in 2001, trying to understand what kind of houses they would like**



Photo: DSC

other villages that have faced similar problems and dealt with them satisfactorily. Usually this arouses people's curiosity to know more about such successful villages. Boxes 2 and 3 give two examples of how community meetings might be conducted in different situations.

### Step seven

Exposure/learning visits are a crucial stage in the process of empowerment. The villagers can see for themselves how the situation has been transformed by another village community which has faced problems similar to theirs. Let them find out from the villagers – men, women, leaders, and both dominant and disadvantaged groups – about how they have benefited from the development.

You accompany the visiting group. Again, restrain yourself from driving them to similar solutions of similar problems in their village. You have only to facilitate as much learning

as possible, not only what was done, but also how it was done. For example:

- who took responsibility for negotiating terms?
- how was the contributory fund (if required under a scheme) decided upon and collected?
- how were groups formed to do the work, to procure materials, and get designs approved?
- who did the account keeping and audits?
- who checked on quality?

Let the visiting group learn about the crucial issue of maintenance and operation, costs, fees, and collection, etc. This is never smooth. A core group is usually needed to take responsibility for handling disagreements over these issues. The learning group will have to do all this in its own village and may benefit from the experiences of a successful village. Encourage them to ask questions and, for those who are literate, ask them to make notes.

## “It is now time to move carefully and steadily towards solutions. Not your solution, not your scheme – but their own solutions and decisions”

### Step eight

You are back in the village with local groups. People are excited about the possibility of undertaking similar development in their own village.

During this visit, organise a meeting of the entire community. Make sure that those who took part in the learning visits also attend. Let them share their experience and ideas with the entire community, with as many people as possible, both men and women. They will be more articulate than you expect. This is the moment of elation and ferment in the village. It is now time to move carefully and steadily towards solutions. Not your solution, not your scheme – but their own solutions and decisions.

They would now like to deal with their problems in their own way by applying lessons from what they have seen. They may turn to you for advice. Is a similar scheme and funding available for their own village, as they have seen in the other village?

Now you can inform them about your scheme and the role and responsibilities expected from the village community. Now it is time to recall the information that you had collected about the ‘costs’ of the problem they were facing – such as the cost of foregoing production because of unreliable canal water supply. Now you can compare these financial losses to the small financial contribution needed from villagers to implement the scheme you have in mind.

### Step nine

The development agency is lucky if the process proceeds as planned and the village chooses to go ahead with the scheme. They may not do so. In some cases, this may be due to economic, social, or political problems. The proposal may have to be dropped or postponed until more successful cases create a more favourable environment. If however the community response to undertaking the scheme is positive, you can now outline the conditions of responsibilities the village community has to take, e.g.

- attending training programmes;
- preparing plans and getting them approved;
- implementing plans;
- maintaining accounts;
- keeping records; and – very importantly –

- maintaining the system afterwards at their own cost.

Remind them that they will have to make regular maintenance contributions for using and maintaining structures and facilities. Now is an opportune moment to recall the costs of **not** having a good system in terms of loss or opportunity foregone. Proper maintenance and management are crucial for sustained development.

### Step ten

At this stage you should get into the nitty-gritty of organising the community in developing, implementing and managing **its own scheme**. If the process has gone well, as a development worker, you will be excited that your crucial role is almost over. The village community is ready to advance swiftly and accept the responsibility for development. You have only to provide technical, administrative and financial support until the work is properly organised and implemented. Afterwards, you should have the satisfaction that the community has set up its own executive committee and other committees to look after and manage the scheme with efficiency, equity, and sustainability. The development agency’s role is slowly but decisively diminishing. It has not withdrawn completely. Its services are always available for **new problems** and **new opportunities** that the community might yet face.

### Step eleven

Through this process, the original agency scheme should firmly be the **community’s scheme**. Others who want to learn from the community’s experiences can now visit the village. The villagers should be able to explain enthusiastically how they developed **their** scheme and – in the process – create confidence in others to do the same. In fact, community members who have been actively involved in such successful villages – men and women, traditional leaders and new leaders – can become resource persons, addressing conferences, gatherings, workshops and seminars. They can proudly present **their** achievements. What more reward can a facilitating agency expect?

### The final step: empowerment ‘not through *lobh* but *labh*’

In Indian language ‘not through *lobh* but *labh*’ means that it is not the lure of subsidy but the benefit of development that empowers.

This is the first stage of development, almost a confidence-building demonstration, that development benefits are much greater than the costs. However, as long as the cost is borne by government or other donors, there are restrictions and limitations on growth. Local community groups and

individuals cannot contribute to this amount, even if it would be highly beneficial. They cannot experiment with or explore innovative ideas. Local groups or enterprising individuals would always be trying new ideas at their own cost, drawing on whatever savings they have. But this could have small incremental benefits.

To break the barrier of subsidy-based development, community groups and enterprising individuals need access to large flexible funds with only one condition – the additional income should be high enough to cover the cost of paying loan instalments with interest. That will be the credit-based investment – a route that may open new vistas of locally preferred, appropriate development for which the groups and individuals are willing to take responsibility and risks. With successful experience of working together for

local development as their social capital, it should be possible for community groups that have satisfactorily developed and managed local programmes to access funds from organised sources on reasonable terms and set out on a journey of development, adequately empowered to realise the full potential of growth. This should be the starting of real empowerment emanating from the liberation from dependence on government/donor subsidy.

As a development worker, your last role is to facilitate the final step of accessing an enlightened credit agency and helping the local groups to negotiate terms for their first loan that will be reasonable to both parties. If you succeed in the first round, you may not be required in the second and subsequent rounds. Your partner has already graduated, adequately **empowered**.

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#### REFERENCE

Shah, A. (2001) 'Shoulder tapping.' In S. Iyengar and Hirway, I. (Eds.) (2001) *In the Hands of the People*. Ahmedabad, India: Development Support Centre (DSC), pp. 103–160

#### NOTE

Author Anil C Shah sadly passed away shortly before this article was published. Anil was Chairman (Emeritus) of the DSC and a valued member of the *Participatory Learning and Action* series International Editorial Board.