Lessons from capacity building at Ha Giang, Vietnam

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Introduction

Adopting participatory approaches (PA) to use in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of large projects, increases both the significance of and the challenges faced by, PLA/ PRA-type approaches. Whilst the 'open ended' approach and methodological innovations in PA have opened new vistas in the developmental scene, counteracting stereotyped 'mindsets' has not been easy. In centrally planned economies like Vietnam, transformation from 'top-down' planning to 'bottom-up' participatory planning based on PRA/ PLA-type approaches not only requires policy-level commitment from the 'top' but also more learning-by-doing approaches at the 'bottom'. New concepts, methods and ways of doing local level participatory planning often give rise to new issues and challenges, some of which are described below from Ha Giang Province in Vietnam.

In this article we share some lessons from the training workshops conducted for capacity building in PA at Ha Giang in Vietnam. Such lessons relate to finding out ways of influencing commune-level planning and recognising variations in the participatory planning done by literate and non-literate groups.

Background

Ha Giang Province is situated in the northern part of Vietnam bordering China, with relatively lower level of literacy, especially in its remote areas. Many inhabitants in the Province are from multicultural and multilingual ethnic minorities living in mountainous terrain, in difficult living conditions.

Two basic training workshops and a Training of Trainers workshop in participatory planning were conducted for 62 participants from 15-20 December 1998. The participants included project officials and members of the Farmers' Union and Women's Union. The workshops were designed around the principle of learning-by-doing, with participants working in small informal groups with farmer groups from different villages. The aim was to increase capacity building for field inquiries by conducting participatory micro planning both at village and commune-level, based on PLA processes, principles and methods, including gender issues.

Objectives

Although capacity building was the overall goal of the training workshops, two grassroots objectives emerged from the needs assessment:

- To learn ways of influencing the conventional 'top down' commune-level planning for broad-basing participation
- To learn participatory methodology for community-based planning in areas of both low and high literacy.

Influencing the commune-level planning process

One main objective was to demonstrate ways of influencing commune-type planning from the 'bottom up' where individual village plans would lead to a commune level plan. Influencing the commune planning process was visualized as a three-step approach, though in actual practice, it was not possible to cover the third step during the training period.

1. Both women's and men's groups of villagers made their own plans and presented and validated them in their own villages;

2. Commune-level meeting/discussion where villagers from each village shared and discussed their plans; and

3. Putting together all the village plans to arrive at a commune-level plan where the resources, time etc. would be allotted and matched against one another to make the plan ready for implementation.

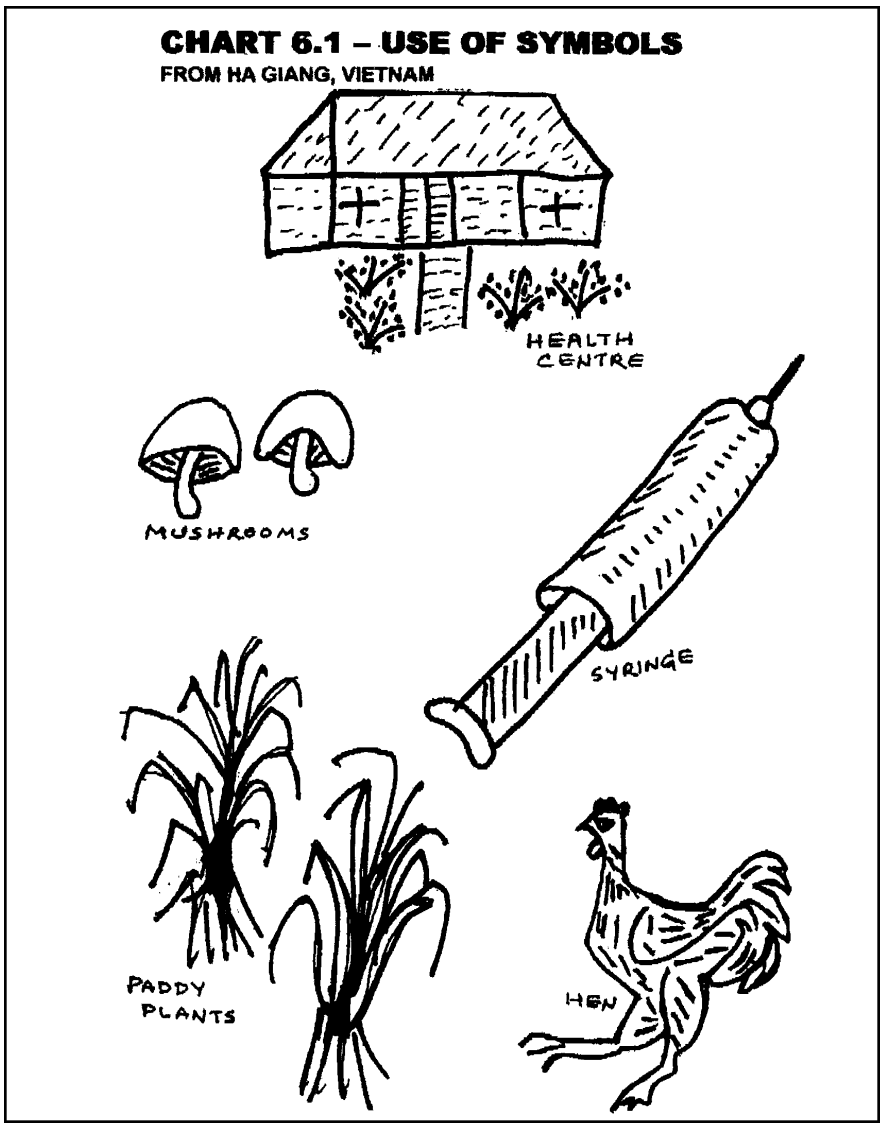
These steps were in sharp contrast to the normal practice at the commune-level, where the decisions from the 'top' would get passed to Provinces, Districts and then to the Communes with pre-determined funds, targets and time.

Commune-level plan presentation

When making the village-level plans during the training workshops, it was possible to cover only 6 out of 10 villages of Phuong Do commune due to the lack of time. Commune-level presentations, organised on that basis were scheduled for half a day in which farmers from different villages, both women and men, made short presentations of their local-level plans for different project

components. These plans were exhibited at the presentation hall of the Commune for everyone to see and discuss. Farmers' presentations were preceded by an 'overview' given by the Chairman of the Commune, with the help of a sketch map of the Commune, a 'visual' problem chart and basic statistics relating to the Commune. The presentations were followed by a question and answer session on the issues raised. Though only 6 of the Phuong Do Commune villages were covered, one basic objective was achieved in terms of initiating and demonstrating a participatory process to influence commune-level plans.

For the third step, which involved arriving at an overall commune plan, finding ways of putting together the PLA village plans was important. However, aggregating the plans was not that simple since such plans were diverse, and any one format for aggregation would limit such diversity. This was overcome to some extent by suggesting formats for component-wise aggregation of the village plans for administrative and financial convenience.



Participatory planning in low literacy areas

Participatory planning in high literacy areas was not much of a challenge. It took relatively less time with both women's and men's groups participating. However, local-level planning in villages with low literacy was tried in several ways:

1. Utilising the services of a literate person in the village to act as a scribe for the non-literate villagers participating in the planning process.

2. Using different symbols to represent the issues that the villagers raised and then scoring them as per their preference.

3. Drawing objects on paper and making pictorial plans with scoring/ranking of the villagers' priorities.

4. Using picture cards to help the villagers make their plans.

In some villages, villagers adapted different combinations of the 4 ways of local-level planning as given above. Ways adopted in areas with low literacy were more diverse than those with high literacy were.

Lessons

- The fieldwork in low literacy areas showed how the pictorials created by the villagers could be used for planning. Only those villagers willing to draw pictures helped with the pictorial plans while others discussed and watched. Participants of the training workshops discussed other options that could be explored in order to help involve more people in the planning process, such as the use of video or other audio-visual techniques. Though the participants were shown some videos about planning, it was felt there was a need for video-films appropriate for ethnic minorities.

- With many pictures drawn by farmers, it was suggested that the project office could select a range of them and print them to make copies for distribution to project staff so that farmers could use them for local level planning. The farmers' pictures represented pigs, buffalo, fields, trees, ducks, hens, schools, irrigation canals, water taps, disease, crops, forests, farmers, attitudes, behaviour and so on.

- Simple plans could be understood and validated more easily. In low literacy areas simple micro plans with two rows were used, where one showed the problems while other showed the solutions. Sometimes a utility matrix on the topic concerned also preceded such plans.

- Pictorial planning took time as each pictorial required additions and alterations as suggested by the farmers. Often the farmers were reluctant to draw and motivating them required time and patience.

- The local plans prepared by the villagers, both literate and non-literate, were returned to the village communities. The village communities in many villages wanted to retain the plans for future use whether by the project or other development agencies.

Limitations

- At the commune-level presentation, only a few farmers from each village could be accommodated for lack of space. Broad-basing of face-to-face participation was not easy at the commune level, especially because the commune was so large.

- The larger the village/commune size, the greater the time taken for presentation and discussion. Planning for so many components and activities took time, and it was not easy to organise presentations by, and with, busy farmers in the village/ Commune.

- It was difficult to copy pictorial plans for official report writing. The participants faced problems in retaining copies of pictorial plans for future use. Since many plans were made on large-sized chart papers, photocopying of pictorial plans was not easy.

- Often more time and imagination were needed to make local plans for low literacy areas, which was not thought convenient for the stipulated time frame of the project. There was a limit to pictorials for each and every activity. The farmers were also busy throughout the year.

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