



Community Participation in World Bank Projects

Many consider the use of community participation inappropriate, or too difficult, in large-scale internationally funded projects. But in some fields it may be the key to success

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Community participation—whereby people act in groups to influence the direction and outcome of development programs that will affect them—has been much discussed in the context of economic and social development work, particularly in projects designed to improve living standards for the poor. Some see participation as an end in itself while others see it as a means to achieve ulterior goals such as efficiency. Whatever the goal, participation signifies the importance of the “voice” of the people in the activities that affect them.

In this review of the World Bank’s experience with community participation (CP) in development projects, CP is treated as a process by which beneficiary groups (people whom the project is expected to serve) actively influence the direction and execution of projects with a view to enhancing their own well being. Though this is, perhaps, a limited concept of participation, it highlights two important aspects. The first of these is the collaborative involvement of beneficiaries in the project. The second is the nature of CP as a process, or a force that helps to sustain the benefits of the project after external aid stops.

Objectives

Community participation can be used in development projects to pursue four broad types of goals. These goals were represented in a sample of forty projects supported by the Bank and using CP. These four objectives form a hierarchy, but they may overlap in real life.

To develop beneficiaries’ ability and freedom to initiate action and thus to influence the processes and outcomes of development. Behind this concept of CP as a means of “empowerment” is the view that development should lead to an equitable sharing of power and should raise people’s political awareness and strengths. When beneficiaries have a decisive voice in project design and management, they are moving toward empowerment.

Only three of the projects had empowerment as an objective, and in all of them, governments’ active interest in this objective was critical. In the Zambia urban sites and services project, and in a housing project in El Salvador (through a nongovernmental foundation), the government was committed to a development philosophy of strengthening local communities and institutions. In these projects, therefore, beneficiary groups (generally from the poorer sections of the population) were actively involved in decisions on project design and management. Evidence shows that CP was instrumental in forging solidarity among beneficiaries and strengthening their ability to deal with a variety of public agencies effectively.

To build up beneficiaries’ organizational capacity. This is a more limited objective than empowerment. Beneficiaries, for example, may be given responsibility for certain functions such as monitoring a project. This experience may strengthen their capacity to manage at least some aspects of the project even though their role in key decisions may be limited. Beneficiaries may or may not

initiate action on their own in this case, but a role in decision making is implied.

Eight of the projects sought to build up the beneficiaries’ technical or managerial capacity, out of concern for the maintenance and continued viability of the facilities being created. In Senegal, for example, the housing authority made efforts to develop plot holders’ associations which were able to campaign effectively for transport and municipal services. In the El Salvador projects, beneficiary groups successfully maintained all the sites under the housing project and carried out such functions as the collection of dues. In some of the population and nutrition projects, community members were organized into user groups in order to educate themselves and motivate potential users.

To improve the effectiveness of projects. Effectiveness refers to the degree to which project objectives are achieved. (For example, a project to provide urban housing may be ineffective if it successfully builds the houses but the prospective residents find the design so unfamiliar that they refuse to move in.) Even if beneficiaries are not involved in decision making, the project management may solicit their views on project design and implementation. Such consultation is likely to lead to a better match between project services and beneficiaries’ needs. (See “Listening to the People” by Lawrence Salmen, *Finance & Development*, June 1987.)

Improving project effectiveness was an objective of CP in ten of the forty Bank projects. When the Tondo housing project was initiated in the Philippines, two local

community organizations perceived the threat of relocation and displacement as a result of the new project. They sought and gained a consultative role in the project, making extremely useful contributions to the strategies used to reorganize the slums. The field studies of an experimental Indonesian nutrition project showed that active local organizations and leadership stimulated better use of project services and nutritional improvement among children. In all these cases, CP led to the introduction of new and relevant services for the beneficiaries and mobilized the response (demand) so that a better match between demand and supply resulted.

To promote cost-sharing and efficiency in general. CP may be used to facilitate a collective understanding and agreement on cost sharing and its enforcement. Timely contributions from beneficiary groups can make both the planning and implementation of projects more efficient. (Efficiency refers to the cost-effectiveness of achieving project objectives.) For example, sharing of information and interaction in groups may be used to promote a smoother flow of services and an overall reduction of costs per unit of services. Information sharing and consultation with beneficiaries are likely to be the main ways to enhance the project's efficiency. Cost-sharing was an objective in nearly half of the projects, but it was achieved by very few.

The El Salvador housing project, which was successful in this respect, followed an effective strategy to promote cost sharing which included the following elements:

- extensive dialogue with beneficiary groups before implementation;
- hiring and training motivated field workers to follow up on individual beneficiaries;
- a monitoring system that kept track of payments and proposed action in case of default;
- a system of investigation and negotiated action in cases of default;
- accessible field offices to assist beneficiaries with information and problem solving.

About half of the forty projects sought to improve their efficiency (apart from cost sharing) through the use of CP. Their aim was to reduce costs by shortening or eliminating the delays in implementation that can arise from misunderstandings or conflicts between project staff and beneficiaries.

In some cases, efficiency became a concern because of the need for better operational maintenance. Irrigation projects in the 1970s focused initially on installing technology and hardware and did not take the participation of water users seriously until inequitable and poor use of water and low rates of cost-recovery compelled them to do so. In the course of implementation, the National Irriga-

tion Authority of the Philippines, for example, realized the limitations of the purely technical approach and turned to the functions of farmer organizations and their development. Similarly, in the Jotlihur irrigation project in Indonesia, the initial focus was on the completion of civil works. It was the deterioration of the tertiary system of smaller distribution channels that led the management to set up water users' associations to improve efficiency.

Intensity of CP

It is also useful to distinguish between different levels of intensity in CP, though different levels may coexist in the same project.

By sharing information with beneficiaries, project designers and managers may facilitate individual or collective action. In family planning or nutrition programs, for example, such information sharing can be critical to the success of the project (see box).

When some beneficiaries are not only informed, but consulted on key issues at some or all stages in a project cycle, the intensity of CP is higher. Beneficiaries can provide feedback which the project agency can take into account in the design and implementation stages.

Beneficiaries may have a decision making role, either exclusively or jointly with others, in project design and implementation. Thus slum dwellers might decide jointly with project staff on the design for upgrading their housing.

When beneficiaries take the initiative in actions or decisions pertaining to a project—for example, when beneficiary groups identify a new need and decide to respond to it on their own, CP is at its most intense. Their taking the initiative is qualitatively different from having the capacity to act or decide on issues or tasks proposed or assigned to them.

Projects may vary in the intensity of CP at different stages in their life cycle. It is common to rely on information sharing and consultation at the design stage, when beneficiary groups are yet to be formed, and then to give beneficiaries a decision making and managerial role during implementation.

Forms of organization

The institutional devices appropriate for achieving CP vary with the objectives at hand and with the project context. They may be grouped into three categories.

Field workers of the project agency can be used to mobilize and interact with beneficiary groups. In agricultural and irrigation projects, field workers are often used to organize and interact with farmer groups. Field workers' training, orienta-

tion, and commitment to CP are key determinants of their effectiveness. If they see themselves—and if beneficiaries see them—primarily as agents of the government or donor, their ability to promote and sustain CP is likely to suffer.

Community workers or committees may be used as mobilizers, either paid or unpaid by the agency, but with their selection and roles influenced by the community. They are often more effective than project staff when more difficult objectives have to be pursued.

User groups, which entail an intense form of participation, are viable when the number of beneficiaries is manageable. Whenever beneficiaries are expected to initiate action or decision making, user groups will probably be the most effective form of organization. On the other hand, if the only objective of using CP is to improve efficiency, field workers of the project agency may be adequate to the task. All instruments and all levels of intensity can technically be used to pursue any of the four broad objectives of CP described earlier. Generally, however, the more complex the objective of CP, the greater the need for a higher level of intensity and more powerful instruments.

Applications

The nature of the project, beneficiary characteristics, social traditions, the role of elites in the community, and other related factors must be assessed before deciding whether to incorporate CP in a project. Moreover, it is worth noting at the outset that the use of CP in projects supported by the Bank depends ultimately on borrower governments, who have the final say on whether and how CP will feature in projects that the Bank supports. The Bank can act as a catalyst, influence decisions, or respond to borrower needs, but not decide for them.

This said, however, the Bank's experience suggests that there are four sets of circumstances in which it is advisable to use CP in a development project.

When the main objectives of the project are to empower beneficiaries and strengthen their organizational capacity. CP will then be necessary in all phases of the project cycle. It should be noted, however, that local organizations and voluntary agencies (nongovernmental organizations) may be able to adopt and pursue these objectives more readily than external donors. The former have greater and more continuous local presence and acceptability, and are generally smaller in scale and more flexible than large external donors.

Community Participation at Work

Health care. In an effort to bring basic services to whole populations, primary health care programs usually stress the importance of community participation so as to reach people more effectively at lower unit costs or to stimulate a sense of involvement in and responsibility for improving and preserving health and well-being. Nongovernmental organizations have made considerable contributions in this regard, mainly by supporting and implementing innovative pilot projects and small-scale programs.

An impressive example is Project Piaxtla in Mexico. The project began in 1963 with services provided by outside volunteers. It now serves about ten thousand people in a hundred villages. Villagers operate, direct, and supervise all services via a local project team in the central clinic and active health committees in the villages. Volunteer expatriates organize the project and have trained local people, but the current role of outsiders is now purely advisory. The project is supported by its own resources and raises funds through its own support organization, the Hesperian Foundation.

The use of CP can lower per-client treatment costs substantially, and can lower overall costs through contributions of community labor and materials. For example, use of community volunteers in a nutrition project supported by the World Bank in Indonesia resulted in a cost per child served that was 60 percent lower than the cost for clinic-based well-baby services, and also reached a much higher proportion of low-income people (73 percent vs 9 percent for clinic services). One component of a Bank-assisted nutrition project in Brazil provides supplementary feeding to children 4-6 years old through the regular school system. By 1983 it covered 876,000 recipients and was largely financed by the Ministry of Education. The program's costs per beneficiary were found to be 33 to 55 percent lower than those in other Brazilian school feeding programs largely because community cooperation sharply reduced food and facility costs.

Small farmers. Despite the drought affecting Zimbabwe, like the rest of southern Africa, in the early 1980s smallholders managed to increase their output of maize substantially. In 1984 they produced 400,000 tons for market instead of the 150,000 expected by government planners. This boost partly reflected the improved use of modern technology, but also was the result of the contribution of the widespread system of farmer organization that had been built up, channeling inputs and extension advice to smallholders. In a district with poor soils and rainfall, there was a three-fold difference in output between members and nonmembers. Throughout the country, farmers in farmer groups were found to have higher yields, produce more, and sell more maize than comparable farmers.

Rural banking. The Grameen (village) Bank of Bangladesh was established in 1977 to encourage the generation of rural income and employment. Supported by the Bangladesh Bank and seven other government-owned commercial banks, by the end of 1981 the Grameen Bank had extended its operations to 433 villages. By June 1982, it had lent Tk 64 million (about \$2.7 million) for over 200 different rural activities to about 3,000 male and nearly 2,000 female groups of the landless, comprising over 15,000 and 10,000 members respectively. The loan recovery rate has been over 96 percent. Since lending began in 1978, the Bank has mobilized over Tk 6 million as additional rural savings.

Grameen Bank workers carry on a motivational campaign to bring the Bank to the people. They visit villages and explain the bank discipline to the target population (landless and other very poor rural families) who are required to form groups of five people of roughly equal economic and social status. These groups elect their own leaders, and maintain group discipline through peer pressure; members can engage in individual or group activities of their choice, but they are required to hold weekly meetings at which they are expected to deposit their weekly installments as well as savings.

When the *design of project services calls for interaction among groups of beneficiaries as a basis for identifying their needs and preferences.* This is particularly relevant when little is known about the type of service that would match beneficiaries' preferences and attributes. Examples are urban housing projects and population and nutrition projects, which require collaborative actions and mutual reinforcement among beneficiaries.

When the nature of the project *demand frequent dialogue and negotiation among beneficiaries and between project authorities and beneficiaries.* The distribution of water in an irrigation project is a good example of a case where the absence of consensus among users can lead to bottlenecks in the allocation and actual flow of water to the farms. Population and health projects require demand mobilization, which in turn may call for community support. When beneficiaries are responsible for cost sharing in housing projects, a great deal of information sharing and negotiation will be required.

When a *part of the project operations will be better managed by beneficiaries (with initial*

external support) than by an already overloaded or weak bureaucracy. A project may perform better, for example, if beneficiaries are able to monitor operations or resolve conflicts. This is often evident in on-farm development, water allocation, and operational maintenance in irrigation projects.

Governments and donors

What should governments, donors, and other development-oriented groups do to

promote or foster CP, when the conditions are appropriate?

In the context of poverty alleviation, the policies of many developing country governments and donors have rightly emphasized the importance of increasing the access of the poor to development services. It is necessary to reinforce this concern by highlighting the role that community organizations can play in improving the access to services of the weaker segments of the population.

Policies also need to be more explicit on the important role of projects in developing beneficiaries' abilities. The use of CP as a means of sustaining project benefits, in a variety of situations, needs to be explained and effectively communicated to donor staff as well as to borrower governments.

Governments and donors need to pay special attention to the growing experience of many countries with community participation. Small-scale experiments are under way in many parts of the world, at the initiative either of local communities or of NGOs which act as catalysts in the process (see "Nongovernmental Organizations and Development"



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