Community participation in facility management

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Abstract

By involving the beneficiaries of a facility such as housing or an irrigation scheme, at the various stages of the project, it is possible to build their capacity in relation to the facility, which may contribute to the sustainability of the project beyond the disbursement period. A study carried out in Botswana found that the intensity of community participation at the various stages of facility development is influenced by the complexity of the technology adopted and the willingness of the facility managers to involve the community from the early stages of the project. Based on these findings, this paper proposes a framework which may be followed to achieve this end.

Introduction

Whether in urban or rural settings, communities require a variety of facilities in order to function properly. While some facilities such as housing cater for individuals in the community, the majority cater for the public as a whole, in one way or another. Most governments, especially in the developing countries, have often developed facilities such as water supply, dams, reservoirs and roads in a top-down fashion in which local communities, the main beneficiaries of the facilities, are rarely consulted. Moreover, the governments have often treated facility development as a technical and administrative issue and ignored the political and socio-economical aspects. As a result, most policies have focused on large-scale projects which, although bringing about huge physical changes, fail to solve underlying economic and social problems and are often opposed by community groups or are received reluctantly.

On completion of these facilities the same communities are expected to take part in their management and maintenance. In this kind of approach, it will require an extra effort to educate the community about the project and then train the members of the community on how to manage and maintain the facility, something which they could learn during the development of the facility, were they co-opted from the beginning. The high social and environmental costs of such schemes (now well documented) have been an important stimulus in a shift evident since the 1980s towards small-scale community-based projects.

Against this background, this paper discusses the various levels in which the beneficiaries of a facility may participate in its management and proposes a framework for this purpose.

Community participation

The beneficiaries of any facility in a community need to have a say in the decisions concerning the facility, and where possible to take part in its development and manage it on completion. This can be achieved through community participation, which according to Cernea (1985) is defined as "... an active process by which beneficiary client groups

influence the direction and execution of a development project with a view to enhancing their well-being in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance or other values they cherish". This definition implies that the context of participation is the development project; that the focus is on the participation of beneficiaries, and not that of government personnel; that the joint or collaborative involvement of beneficiaries in groups is a hallmark of community participation; and that community participation refers to a process and not a product in the sense of sharing project benefits. In other words, community participation can be said to occur only when people act in concert to advise, decide or act on issues which can best be solved through such joint action.

Objective of community participation

In the context of development, community participation may be viewed as a process that serves one or more of the following objectives (Paul, 1987):

- In the broadest sense, community partici-pation may be thought of as an instrument of empowerment. Accordingly, any project or development activity is then a means of empowering people so that they are able to initiate actions on their own and thus influence the process and outcomes of development.
- Community participation may serve a more limited objective of building benefi-ciary capacity in relation to a project. Thus, beneficiaries may share the management tasks of the project by taking on operational responsibility for a segment of it them-selves.
- Community participation contributes to increased project effectiveness when the involvement of beneficiaries contributes to better project design and implementation and leads to a better match of project services with beneficiary needs and con-straints.
- Another objective of community participa-tion is the desire to share the costs of the project with the people it serves. Thus, beneficiaries may sometimes be expected to contribute labour, money or undertake to maintain the project.
- Community participation may improve project efficiency. Project planning and implementation could become more

efficient because of timely beneficiary inputs. Community participation could be used to promote agreement, co-operation and interaction among beneficiaries, and between them and the implementing agency of the project so that delays are reduced, a smoother flow of project ser-vices is achieved, and overall costs, are minimized.

These objectives may overlap in a real life project situation, whereby a project may simultaneously pursue several objectives. While community participation can be used in any or all of these objectives, it may vary in the intensity with which it is sought in a par-ticular project or at a particular stage of a project.

Characteristics of community participation

Community participation can be divided into three stages: planning, implementation and follow up. There may be little scope for the active participation of beneficiaries in design (for example, where complex technologies and their adaptation dominate the design of the facility). However, at the planning stage, four levels of intensity in community partici-pation may be distinguished:

(1) Information sharing where project designers and managers may share infor-mation with beneficiaries in order to facilitate collective or individual action. Though it reflects a low level of intensity, it can have a positive impact on project outcomes to the extent it equips benefi-ciaries to understand and perform their tasks better.

(2) Consultation which occurs when benefi-ciaries are not only informed, but also consulted on key issues at some or all stages in a project cycle. There is an opportunity here for beneficiaries to inter-act and provide feedback to the project agency, which the latter could take into account in the design and implementation stages. If, for instance, farmers are con-sulted on extension practices and arrange-ments, project outcomes are likely to be better than if they were merely informed.

(3) Decision making that occurs when bene-ficiaries have a decision-making role in matters of project design and implemen-tation. Decisions may be made exclusively

by beneficiaries or jointly with others on specific issues or aspects relating to a project. Farmers may, for instance, decide by themselves on a programme for the distribution of water for irrigation. Decision making implies a much greater degree of control or influence on projects by beneficiaries than under consultation or information sharing.

(4) Initiating action, which occurs when beneficiaries are able to take the initiative in terms of actions/decisions pertaining to a project. Initiative implies a proactive capacity and the confidence to get going on one's own. When beneficiary groups engaged in facility development identify a new way of running the facility and respond to it on their own, they are taking the initiative for their development. The intensity of community participation in this case may be said to have reached its peak because this move is qualitatively different from their capacity to act or decide on issues or tasks proposed or assigned to them.

Community participation at the implementation stage can be divided into sharing of costs and furnishing of labour. In most cases, cost sharing is achieved according to one of two alternative principles. One is to make those members of the community who will benefit from the facility bear the cost. The other is to let members of the community freely make donations according to their perceived interests. Projects aimed at improving essential community services, such as water works and sewer systems, are usually financed by means of compulsory cost sharing. The free donation method is adopted for construction of essential community facilities, such as children's play grounds.

Sharing of labour is also achieved in two different ways. One is direct contribution of labour; the other involves initially contributing the monetary equivalent of one's share of labour, then getting the money back in the form of wages by personally participating in the work. For small-scale cooperative projects, members of the community will usually carry out the project by directly contributing their labour. If a project is larger, and is implemented through government agencies contracting the work out to some construction firm, the latter method of labour sharing is often adopted.

As a project nears completion, community participation varies greatly depending upon the project and locality. In a successful community-based facility, the bulk of the work starts at this stage as the community will carry out the day-to-day management duties and all the necessary maintenance requirements.

Community-managed infrastructure facilities in Botswana

A study carried out in Botswana (Ngowi, 1997) found that the government of Botswana, as most governments in developing countries, does not mobilise the full potential of the people who benefit from the infrastructure facilities it sponsors. However, a case study in a major village in Botswana showed that community participation could improve the way projects are planned, implemented and maintained if the following are clearly identified:

- the stages of the project at which community participation was best suited;
- the capacity of the community to take specific tasks;
- the attitudes of the members of the community in development projects and their previous experience in such activities. Such tools as house-to-house surveys may be employed to gather this information.

Working within the existing institutional structures in the village, it was possible to give the members of the community the opportunity to express their needs in a democratic setting in which they had the right and capacity to negotiate. Given this opportunity the members of the community in the village gave their full support and participated in all stages of the project.

Problems facing community-based facilities

In spite of the advantages obtained when the members of the community participate in all the stages of the project, there are some problems with these projects that the implementing parties need to be aware of and, where possible, resolve them in order to give community participation a better chance to succeed. Emerging critiques of such projects highlight how, for instance, farmers are used as labourers for construction or the interests of the weaker sections of the society are

overlooked so that they bear the labour burden of the project for little benefit. Some schemes have floundered in the face of local resource conflicts. In other cases, communities accept otherwise unsuitable programmes because they offer a short-term source of income and access to subsidies, but resource management efforts are not sustained beyond the departure of the implementing agency (Leach *et al.*, 1997).

At the project implementation stage, critics have been quick to point out that there is often is a limited number of members of the community participating in such schemes. In addition, their participation is generally restricted to simple matters, such as provision of labour and cost sharing, and not with the important issues faced during the process of decision making as it relates to project initiation and execution (Park *et al.*, 1996). Furthermore, there often is lack of competent voluntary leaders. Indigenous leaders cannot afford to devote enough time and energy to the task. Community-based activities, therefore, tend to lose momentum in many small-sized community units. Also, governments have been criticized for creating some of the problems. At times, governments have sponsored community activities of their own initiative, but these activities have often not been diversified. Government assistance, although often substantial, has tended to be extended only to those projects in favour of improving the civic minimum, community-wide basic physical services. Improving social and economic conditions specific to individual communities, on the other hand, has not received sufficient consideration.

Most of these problems can be traced to misleading assumptions about "community" and "participation" informing these approaches. One fundamental assumption is that a distinct community exists, and approaches commonly focus on "... the people of a local administrative unit ...of cultural or ethnic group ... or of a local or rural area, such as the people of a neighbourhood or valley" (IUNC/WWF/UNEP, 1991).

Such communities are seen as relatively homogenous, with members' shared characteristics distinguishing them from "outsiders". It is important to recognize that "communities" are not bounded, homogenous entities, but socially differentiated and diverse. Gender, minority, wealth, age, origin and other aspects of social identity divide and cross-cut so-called "community" boundaries. Rather than shared beliefs and interests, diverse and often conflicting values and resource priorities pervade social life and may be struggled and "bargained" over (Leach, 1994; Moore, 1993). Once this is recognized, it is, therefore, easy to pay serious attention to social differences and their implications when conceiving projects in which community participation forms a part.

It is also important to pay attention to power, which is a pervasive feature of social relations, and to the ways that institutions, which might appear to be acting for a collective good, actually serve to shape and reproduce relations of unequal power and authority, marginalising the concerns, for instance, of particular groups of women or poorer people (Goetz, 1996). Awareness and minimization of these problems may give community-based projects a chance to succeed.

A framework for incorporation of community participation in facility development

Most institutions such as the World Bank and non-government organizations (NGOs) have policies that are supportive of community participation, but do not have an operational framework that could assist the staff to translate the concept into design features. The nature and scope of community participation may vary by sector, task and country. Therefore, what is required is not standardised guidelines, but an operational framework which focuses on sector or sub-sector for which staff could be trained to adopt to specific countries and social settings.

The framework

Community participation feasibility should be assessed as early as possible. For instance, in the reconnaissance stage, basic information could be gathered on the nature of beneficiaries, role of the community, power relations, etc.

During identification, a needs analysis of beneficiaries could be attempted as a basis for designing the project to match community needs and capacities. It is in light of this exercise that a judgement should be made on the feasible objectives of community participation in the project. Information gathered during reconnaissance will be useful at this stage.

If a feasible objective has been identified for community participation during the participation stage, consultation could be started with the community on its role in the project. Sample studies of beneficiary groups could provide inputs for the consultative process. Specific tasks to be performed by the community could thus be identified to be incorporated into the project design.

During implementation, an important function of supervision will be to assess the progress of community participation and the delivery of input to the community to perform its role. Again, visits to beneficiary groups in the project area (on a sample basis) will provide ample evidence to make a judgement. Assistance to solve the community participation problems on the ground is as important a task of supervision as the follow-up on procurement or disbursement problems.

Under this framework, community participation may be incorporated in any project. However, community participation is not a risk-less enterprise. To start with, community participation may tend to raise expectations in the public eye, which in some cases may be difficult to meet. Organizing beneficiaries is a time-consuming and complex process, which may disappoint those who expect quick returns. Furthermore, the risk of failure and the visibility of the consequences of failure of community participation are also pretty high because of the emotional involvement of the people. Also, the elites among beneficiaries tend to appropriate a disproportionate share of project benefits if inequality of income and power is considerable in the community where community participation is practised. The likely impact of inequality on community participation therefore deserves special attention in the design stage.

Conclusions

All communities need a variety of facilities in order to function well. While some of these facilities need outside input to implement, the majority may be planned, implemented and managed by the beneficiaries in one way or another.

Several advantages may be attached to community-based facilities, but critics have been quick to point out visible inequalities among the various categories of the community. Community participation should, therefore, be practised with full awareness of the heterogeneity of the members of the communities and the actual power structure in the community in question.

A study of community-managed infrastructure facilities in Botswana has shown that, with a proper approach, the beneficiaries of the facilities can be mobilised and made to democratically participate in all stages of the project. However, it should be clear that community participation is not a cost-less process. Therefore, the project agency should set aside the extra funds required to get community participation going.

Many institutions have policies that are supportive of community participation, but do not have an operational framework which could assist staff to translate the concept into design features. Such a framework has been briefly described in this paper.

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