

Community Participation in Local Development Projects



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ABSTRACT

Participatory development is the most important approach towards enabling communities to help themselves and sustain efforts in development work. Communities are no longer seen as recipients of development project; rather, they have become critical stakeholders that have an important role to play in the management of project and projects in their areas. This training is the first step towards building their capacities to effectively participate in identifying and responding to community issues and problems in development projects. Community stakeholders are community-based mechanisms that can help support and sustain a project. Community participation is regarded as one of the cornerstone for good governance. It helps to enhance accountability, transparency and ensure sustainability of development initiatives integrating mass people in development process. For any rural community development to be successful, influential local leaders must be involved, else they might undermine the progress of such project. Therefore, any agency or organization coming up with a development project for the community must initially “clear” with these influential local leaders. The success of any development project depends on whether it has good machinery for monitoring and evaluating it. Monitoring and evaluation is necessary in order to make prompt adjustments during the project life and to ensure compliance to targeted objectives.

Keywords: Community Participant, Participant, Development Project.

1. Introduction

Societal structures in the developing world still revolve around small clusters of communities defined by geo-political, economic and cultural bonds, especially in the rural areas. To such societies, the top-down decision-making regime has been seen to be most ineffective in terms of achieving sustainable development. Most developing countries have tended to vigorously employ a non-participatory approach to decision-making. In this regime policy is dictated by those in power, and the rural communities are relegated to the position of recipients and implementers. Because of this, rural communities are alienated from resources they should rightfully control, manage and benefit.

Community participation and community based management are topical themes in current policy and discussion revolving around decision-making processes, especially those dealing with natural resources management. This review shows that while governments have accepted the need to either cede or devolve control and management of natural resources to the local communities, the communities are not part and parcel of the planning and budgeting which are crucial in decision-making. Communities were seen to be more involved in the implementation of natural resource management programs but lacked ownership of the projects. This causes lack of commitment to the programs and at times hostile reaction from the communities. The communities are always at the receiving end when it pertains to losses in the exchange.

Community participation was shown to be effective when the local population is involved not as co-operating users but as natural resource managers or owner managers. The situation of Thailand is changing rapidly in both directions of structure and prosperity in all aspects. Because of the rapid growth of the urban population the local government cannot take care of basis services. In addition, the environmental changes that have a negative impact on the health of the people is worth mentioning. The change from the agricultural community to the urban community is a major factor contributing to the increase in population and other structures led to the decline of public spaces and areas conducive to the wellbeing of people in the community, as well as to changing health behavior.

2. Community Participation

Community participation in development activities is defined as the process by which individuals, families or communities assume responsibility for their own welfare and develop a capacity to contribute to their own and the community development; it is an active process whereby beneficiaries influence the direction and execution of development. Community participation in international development discourse is commonly used to refer to the involvement of local people in decision making process and evaluation of development projects, and is associated with empowerment, the respect for, and the use of local knowledge.

For the last twenty years, the concept of participation has been widely used in the discourse of development. For much of this period, the concept has referred to participation in the social arena, in the community or in development projects.

Increasingly, however the concept of participation is being related to rights of citizenship and to democratic governance. Nowhere the intersection of concepts of community participation is seen more clearly than in the multitude of projects for decentralized governance. Linking citizen participation to the state at this local or grassroot level raises fundamental and normative questions about the nature of democracy and about the skills and strategies for achieving it.

Public participation is a political principle or practice, and may also be recognized as a right. The terms public participation, often called P2 by practitioners, is sometimes used interchangeably with the concept or practice of stakeholder engagement and/or popular participation.

Generally, public participation seeks and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision. This can be in relation to individuals, governments, institutions, companies or any other entities that affect public interests. The principle of public participation holds that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process. Public participation implies that the public's contribution will influence the decision.

Public participation may be regarded as a way of empowerment and as vital part of democratic governance. Public participation is part of "human-centered" principles, which have emerged in Western culture over the last thirty years, and have had some bearings of education, business, public policy and international relief and development projects. Public participation is advanced by the humanist movements. Public participation may be advanced as part of a "people first" paradigm shift. In this respect public participation may

challenge the concept that “big is better” and the logic of centralized hierarchies, advancing alternative concepts of “more heads are better than one” and arguing that public participation can sustain productive and durable change.

Engaging civil society and citizens’ groups in resources management has enabled improved service delivery and accountability of the public sector. It has given the people greater opportunities to influence policy-making processes and the implementation of policies, programs and projects. Entry points for civil society to influence budget processes and the idea of engaging the people in the management of natural resources is a key dimension of good governance.

3. Participation in Local Development Project

The project should encourage a maximum number of people in the participation of development projects. Such involvement should give the participants full inclusion in designing, organizing, and implementing activities and workshops in order to create consensus, ownership, and action in support of development projects in specific areas. It should include people and groups rather than exclude any individuals. Public involvement is a process for involving the public in the decision making of an organization (Becker, 1997, p. 155). Participation actually brings the public into the decision-making process.

Community public involvement can take place at several stages in the establishment and management of marine protected areas. These stages are: (1) the recognition of a need; (2) discussions with interested parties and integration with the community; (3) baseline studies and monitoring; (4) education; (5) core group building and formalization of reserves; and (6) enforcement.

Recent decades have seen a dramatic increase in public participation in decision-making conducted by government agencies. This increase has been driven both by citizens who demand a greater role in shaping the decisions that affect their well-being, and by agencies that recognize the benefits of involving citizens in their decision making processes. It is now widely believed that members of the public should participate in decision making (Webler et al., 2001), and there are many laws, regulations, and policies that call for public participation in environmental decision-making. The forms and processes of public participation in environmental decision-making by government agencies are highly variable. There is a rich literature of case studies that describe these many forms and processes, assess their relative merits, and provide insights about what works and what doesn’t.

Agencies now have much to guide them in developing environmental public participation programs that can meet their needs and circumstances. Community dissatisfaction with agency characterizations of risk and with agency cleanup decisions in relation to hazardous waste sites has created public demand for more community involvement in decision-making about these sites (Ashford and Rest, 1999). Many people argue for the importance of involving the public in the process of gathering scientific data for risk assessment, and in making decisions about managing environmental and health risks associated with the cleanup of hazardous waste sites. These advocate that public participation as a basic human right. They also believe that participation can help increase trust in government, and in the legitimacy, credibility, and acceptability of risk management decisions (G. Charnley, 2000; Folk, 1991; Rowe and Frewer, 2000). Public participation also contributes valuable local knowledge and experience that supplements that of “technical experts”, aiding in the ecological risk assessment process, and in more effective risk management decisions. However, other people criticize the public participation process, asserting that it increases rather than decreases conflict between agencies and the public, increases rather than decreases the costs of making and implementing policy decisions, and is unduly time consuming (English, 1996). In addition, some people believe that involvement processes are counter-democratic, claiming that they increase the influence of special interest groups. Moreover, some people believe that decisions involving complex technical and scientific issues should be made by experts, viewing members of the general public as being unqualified to address them, and too emotionally involved in the problems to be solved (Folk, 1991). In light of these kinds of concerns, agency managers may only support public participation programs if it can be demonstrated through evaluation that they are useful for improving decisions or reducing conflicts, and worth the commitment of resources.

Evaluation is also the best way to learn how public participation programs can become more effective. Furthermore, evaluation makes it possible to see how well government policies regarding public participation correspond to government practices for involving citizens in environmental decision-making. The requirement of decision making applies to all parties involved in the project, such as project management, external organizers, and traditional leaders, as well as any emergent leadership from the ranks of the poor and the disadvantaged (Adnan, Barrett, Alam, and Brustinow, 1992, p. 32). The agencies involved in project management and implementation are procedurally and periodically answerable to the people in the project area, as well as the citizens of the country in general. All people should be aware of their roles in the project and the planning of activities of the project.

Accountability of concerned community members must be ensured, particularly after the decision is taken.

Participation plays a major role in people's management of their own affairs. Ownership and control of resources have a profound impact on participation in development projects (Mathbor, 1990b). Ferrer (1988) emphasized four areas to be worked toward in a participatory coastal resource management program: greater economic and social quality, better access to services for all, greater participation in decision making, and deeper involvement in the organizing process resulting from the empowerment of people.

4. Conclusion

Community participation is very important because it creates awareness among beneficiaries and stakeholders on how funds are being utilized in development projects. When the community participate there is an increase of transparency and accountability to leaders, i.e. leaders become accountable for their actions. Participation helps to have projects of quality standard and foster development in wards. Community participation gives citizens a chance to decide on projects of their interest and generally make decisions concerning their social development.

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