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A firm step towards sustainable development

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The Water and Sanitation Partnership Project (WPP), funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, was implemented from 1998 to 2003. It was an innovative project, meant to improve sustainable access and use of affordable water and sanitation facilities in Rajshahi and Chapai Nawabganj districts of Bangladesh. This paper presents evidence of the effectiveness of community management in making lasting changes in 642 villages with 486'842 population, within and beyond the water and sanitation sector.

Bangladesh, like many other resource poor countries, is struggling with a multitude of problems, which cannot be solved by government agencies alone. A joint effort of all major stakeholders in development is needed, including actors of the public and private sector as well as from the civil society. It has been increasingly realised that local communities and their development initiatives can play an important role in development. This should include the shift from a supply-driven to a demand-oriented approach which responds to the aspirations and felt needs of the people, including the poor.

Respond to the aspirations and needs of the people

If community members and their organisations are supposed to have a say in development projects and to actively shape their own future, community capacity building and self-help promotion have to be important elements in the project cycle. For this reason a growing number of local, national and international NGOs started to work together to build and promote self-help as an effective strategy for sustainable development. The first event, where 22 organisations presented and discussed their experiences, was the conference "Development through Self-help: be part of it", held in Dhaka in November 2001. The conference has triggered off a countrywide movement that culminated in the foundation of six

regional networks, coordinated by the National Self-help Promotion Group (1). All 15 Partner NGOs of the Water and Sanitation Partnership Project are part of the regional self-help promotion network of Rajshahi.

The conceptual development of the Project's community management component was based on experiences from other projects, which were coached by DASCOH (2) since 1995. The trainers and community organisers of the 15 partner NGOs of the Water and Sanitation Partnership Project were systematically trained. Altogether 80 staff members responsible for 16 blocks of 40 villages each attended several DASCOH training courses (3).

The following goal was formulated for the community management component: "640 village development committees are formed and can manage water and sanitation related activities in a self-reliant manner. This includes their organisational development regarding leadership and management; capacity to assess needs and to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate water and sanitation related activities; local resource mobilisation; linkage building with government agencies, NGOs, private sector providers and others."

After five years of project implementation the results of the ongoing research give ample evidence for the effectiveness of the community management component and its inherent self-help strategy. Data has been collected from 642 villages. Quantitative and qualitative indicators helped to provide information on following key areas: level of community empowerment; community management and local governance; drinking water status; and sanitation status.

Level of community empowerment

It was assumed that civil society organisations like village development committees can start development initiatives which neither of the other development actors - the government and the private sector - can do on their own. Many projects failed because they were too thin on the ground and too heavy on a higher level. On the other hand, the right mixture of support for the stakeholders at all levels could ensure a good performance regarding sector related outputs as well as social improvements like strengthening of civil society and good governance.

Taking the village as an ideal entity for development (4), the Water and Sanitation Partnership Project promoted village development committees which were formed according to specific criteria. Important was the rule that at least 80 percent of the committee members had to be from poor households. This poverty alleviation related formation criteria helped to ensure that sectorial inputs and technical support from various development actors like the government, the private sector and NGOs were benefiting the village population at large, including the poor.

Raihan Ali, the executive director of one of the implementing local NGOs, Swallows, describes his experiences with the community management approach:

"We were working in this area for a long time but with another approach. People were not satisfied; they were expecting something like our present community management approach. This approach and their expectations are matching. Only in one case we were delayed in forming the village development

committee – and that because of political reasons. Our previous work was target oriented, e.g. we targeted only one class, like landless people. But now we work with the whole community. This approach is a very unique one, where we get the opportunity to communicate with all the people from poor to rich. The leadership came from the village. From the very beginning people were involved in surveying, result sharing, planning, implementation and inspection. So they had a feeling of ownership. And they realised that they have skills.”

This shift of the development paradigm led to manifold social changes, for which a well defined monitoring system was required to understand the level of achievements in hundreds of villages. The following set of criteria was identified to monitor the degree of empowerment of village development committees:

1. Level of organization of the village development committee
2. Values and beliefs
3. Long-term motivation
4. Management capacity
5. Participatory assessment and planning
6. Implementation capacity
7. Monitoring, evaluation and action
8. Resource mobilization
9. Resource provision
10. To share knowledge and to generate knowledge
11. Mutual linkage building
12. Process extension and movement building

These 12 criteria were used to assess each village development committee at the level of knowledge and understanding, the level of actual practice and the level of administration and formal procedures. According to a scoring system the committees were graded into three categories: grade A for village development committees with 80 - 100 marks (strong performance); grade B for village development committees with 51 - 79 marks (medium performance); grade C for village development committees with 0 – 50 marks (weak performance)

The 642 village development committees (two more than planned) were assessed three times. The individual assessment of each committee gave the NGOs the possibility to provide specific organisational support to each committee according to their need. The grading of committees also helped to monitor the performance of the NGOs, i.e. each assessment showed which NGOs managed to bring a satisfactory number of committees into grade A and which NGOs did not.

According to the third assessment already 47 percent of the village development committees achieved grade A capacity level (first assessment: 11 percent), which means that towards the end of the project they showed a strong performance in all respects. 41 percent of the committees were functioning well but needed some additional capacity building to reach their

organisational self-reliance. Only 12 percent of the committees (first assessment: 57 percent) still had a weak performance after five years of project implementation. Although community empowerment can be considered successful, the project did not allow all the committees to achieve organisational self-reliance and to consolidate this status for a suitable time period. An additional time period of two to three years would be required to achieve the desired stage of organisational development. This is in accordance with international experiences with “community empowerment” processes (Laverack and Wallerstein, 2001) (5).

An important indicator of well managed village development committees is the degree of linkage building. A big range of 16 different local and national organisations is collaborating with the committees.

It is obvious that the promotion of linkage building has yielded good results and that the village development committees can serve as an effective platform for local development initiatives. Linkages between committees and other organisations go beyond what has been envisaged at the beginning of the project and the linkages do not only relate to improvements in the water and sanitation sector but to various other development activities as well. Research also showed that village development committees consider themselves as general development organisations rather than water and sanitation committees. The fact that they are working with so many agencies can be considered as an important indicator for their self-help capacity and empowerment.

Community management and local governance

In the project area village development committees started to initiate ward development committees (WDCs). (6) Depending on the size of the ward, three to five village development committees are part of a WDC. The WDC usually does not only include one female and one male representative of each village development committee but also freedom fighters, teachers, imams and the ward member of the Union Parishad. WDCs are supporting the activities of the village development committees and are an effective platform for the interaction between civil society and local government. According to the WDC members, local communities can get better and need based support from the government since their formation. In fact, the formation of WDCs helped to a great extent to promote the linkage building between village development committees and the government agencies mentioned above. In this respect, the elected ward member of the Union Parishad, who at the same time is the ex-officio chairperson of the WDC, often plays a vital role.

The interface between civil society and local government at WDC level is not only appreciated by the WDC members but also by government staff who realises that organised village communities provide a better opportunity for coordinated and demand-oriented service

delivery. In the project area, officials express their willingness to work with the village development committees, take part in the committee meetings and channel their services through the committees.

The mobilisation and provision of local manpower also finds its expression in the representation of village development committee members in the Union Parishads. 34 percent of the committee members nominated in the 2003 elections succeeded in the last Union Parishad elections. They fill 19 percent of all seats even though in some unions not all villages have village development committees.

Water supply and sanitation improvements

The success in achieving improvements in water and sanitation played a key role both in mobilizing communities and in consolidating the village development committees. The sector focus provided a suitable context for practising key functions of the committees such as problem analysis, selection of beneficiaries, mobilizing resources and suppliers, monitoring and evaluating progress in adding water supply points and sanitation facilities in the village. Practical successes were immediately visible and added to the motivation of committee members.

Some examples of changes in water and sanitation status:

Water supply: the sources of drinking water (various types of tube wells and pumps) increased from nearly 20,000 in 1999 to close to 32,000 in 2002. Some tube wells were provided by the project (635) and by government or other NGOs, but by far the most (80 percent) were organized through private initiatives. Sources of irrigation water nearly doubled from 2861 in 1999 to 5658 in 2002.

Sanitary latrine coverage: increase from 19 percent at the start of the project to 68 percent by 2002, partly through direct project support to install latrines after a flood situation, but mostly through own initiatives of village development committees. Supply channels stimulated by the project remain available in the area.

In the course of the project a new problem, i.e. arsenic contaminated groundwater, added to the challenge of supplying safe water. All ground water sources had to be tested for arsenic contamination.

Arsenic Screening Teams (trained village volunteers) appointed by the village development committees tested all ground water sources. In some areas contamination levels were so high that tube wells were no longer an option, and alternative safe water sources had to be piloted and supplied. By mid 2003 the exact number of families without access to arsenic safe water has been identified and those families are targeted with safe water supply interventions.

Hygiene behaviour changes: recognizing that increased access to water and sanitation facilities alone would not reduce health risks the project gave training on hygiene to village development committee representatives. Also here achievements were remarkable. The

percentage of households using safe water for cooking and drinking rose from 30 to 73 percent. Keeping food and water covered and safe became normal for 30 percent more households in the course of the project. Close to 50 percent more households were seen to maintain cleanliness of homestead and cleaning of latrines.

Conclusions

The community management component has been implemented for five years in a large area of 642 villages. It provided 15 local NGOs the opportunity to interact with village communities in a truly participatory manner. The NGO staff, mainly the front-line workers, has been systematically trained by DASCOH to empower village development committees to become the main stakeholders in village development. The results prove that the community management approach served as an effective strategy to facilitate considerable improvements in the water and sanitation sector and beyond, based to a large extent on people's organising capacity and self-initiative.

In September 2003, nearly 90 percent of the village development committees were functioning quite well or even reached a self-reliant status regarding their capacity to manage village development activities. Many linkages were built with political and development agencies which found it attractive to work with and channel their services through organized committees.

Officially recognized village development organizations are rare in Bangladesh. Further, there is no legal administrative and political entity at village level. Village based civil society organizations mainly center on the management of schools, madrasahs, mosques and business associations, but do not aim at development of the village at large. Most of these organizations are also dominated by influential male citizens. In the working area of the Water and Sanitation Partnership Project, however, village development committees include a representative number of women and underprivileged villagers. These village based organizations constitute a relatively more representative platform to deal with a multitude of development issues, taking into account the interest of more vulnerable community members than other village based organizations. Mature committees tend to seek registration with a government department to formalize their recognition as a village based development organization.

The Ward Development Committees, formed by associations of three to five village development committees, are active in 315 wards. These associations - comprising not only village representatives but also committed civil society members and politicians, who are elected members of the Union Parishads – are an important link between village and union level. At WDC level the development of different villages is coordinated and joint plans are forwarded to the Union Parishad. This bottom-up process already led to good results where government officials were responsive. WDC members are of the opinion that their WDCs are likely to become the Gram Sarkars that are mentioned below.

Several governments so far have intended to introduce government bodies beyond the union level, to bring government bodies closer to the village level. The current government policy to introduce Gram Sherkars at ward level has a good potential to fill the vacuum of governance lower than at the union level. However, the success of the Gram Sherkar, or indeed any other form of local government body, to stimulate community centred development will depend a lot on transparency and accountability towards the public as well as on decentralised decision making and resource provision. The interaction between civil society organisations and local government bodies will be crucial in expecting and obtaining transparency and accountability from these local government bodies. This major social change can not be obtained by one magic solution; also the village development committee and WDC developments are just one but powerful part of a broad approach of community empowerment activities. The project area provides a unique opportunity to effectively support this interaction and to facilitate a more democratic and need-based development. Experiences from an eventually evolving 'Rajshahi Model' can become an important stimulant in the Bangladeshi development context.

Notes

(1) For more information refer to www.selfhelpbangladesh.org

(2) DASCOH (Development Association for Self-reliance, Communication and Health) is a non-profit organisation mandated by the Swiss Red Cross (SRC) to support SRC funded NGOs, other like minded organisations and international agencies. DASCOH promotes a self-help oriented participatory development process through training courses and workshops, implementation of pilot projects, material production, research and systemic process consultancy.

(3) The training courses covered following areas: approach setting for the Water and Sanitation Partnership Project, formation of village development committees, village profile preparation and village action planning, participatory monitoring and evaluation, rural leadership development, financial management and bookkeeping, linkage building, arsenic issues. Training manuals are available for all the courses.

(4) Village level bodies like the gram panchayats in India and the Village Development Committees in Nepal are playing a key role in local development of these countries. In Bangladesh, however, there is an institutional vacuum at village level.

(5) Laverack, G and Wallerstein, N. (2001) Measuring community empowerment: a fresh look at organisational domains. Health Promotion International, Vol. 16, No. 2, 179-185.

(6) There are nine wards in one union. The union is the lowest political and administrative government unit.

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Partners: Fifteen local NGOs worked as facilitating organizations with so called “village development committees” (VDCs). The Water and Sanitation Partnership Project furthermore collaborated with government line agencies of different ministries and the Union Parishads, which are the lowest political and administrative entity in Bangladesh. DASCOH was responsible for the design of the community management approach and the coaching and training of the local NGOs. The Project was funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

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