

Helping Ordinary People Take Control of Their Lives

Conference on Hunger and Poverty

The level of community participation in development projects and programs (mounted by donors or governments) has increased over the last decade: People, and the organizations they form, are consulted to a greater degree during project design, involved in project implementation, and asked their input in evaluation.

Community participation is now generally seen as providing several major benefits. First, it can lead to increased mobilization of financial and non-financial resources (labor, material, information, etc.) by communities. Second, it can make for greater effectiveness in planning and implementation of development initiatives, by adapting them to local circumstances. Third, it can help to improve the maintenance of assets and infrastructure through local resource contribution and management. Fourth, community participation can contribute to local experience in providing local services, and hence stimulate the development of other forms of local institutions. Fifth, it can enhance accountability and more equitable distribution of benefits by making local administration accountable to a more representative community.

The fourth and fifth points above go beyond the simple "beneficiary participation in projects" to a bottom-up, self-help, approach, in which the poor and the hungry, and their organizations, define and initiate their own development, where the role of outside aid and governments is to promote, support, and strengthen their initiatives. Consistent with this vision, David Korten defines development as "a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to produce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life con-

To combat hunger and poverty, three broad types of actions must be undertaken simultaneously. First is broad-based sustainable economic growth. A strategy to promote sustainable economic growth in which the poor participate is crucial, especially if women have a fair degree of control over it. Second is investment in human resources through education and health care. Included here are targeted measures leading to enhanced diets for the poor, such as nutrition education, nutrient-rich food supplementation in schools, the promotion of growth monitoring, oral rehydration, breast-feeding and immunization programs, and fortification of common foodstuffs. Much progress has been made in these areas, especially regarding iodine and vitamin A: Supplementation or fortification with these nutrients is feasible and relatively cheap. Third is empowerment of the poor, providing them with access to productive resources and to decision-making. No solutions to these problems can be found that do not start from the energies, values, aspirations, and resources of the poor and the hungry themselves.

sistent with their own aspirations." This view also holds that poor people know more than the experts think, and are capable of doing more, if given the chance. Hence empowerment is also defined as "a process of conceding to disadvantaged communities the right to question and communicate alternative options." What is needed is to give the poor opportunities to develop their own solutions, with outsiders in a support role. This vision amounts to the replacement of a system of peoples' participation in public-initiated development with one of public participation in people-initiated development—quite a reversal of the normal development professionalism, as well as of power structures.

There cannot be empowerment of a group if it does not have the possibility to participate in public life and decision-making processes. This requires changes at all levels of society. National governments must create enabling environments; local governments must provide opportunities for meaningful participation in decision making; and civil society organizations must scale up.

Local government is a crucial institution. It is at the local level that people can best define their priority problems and organize to deal with them. Moreover, poor people interact almost exclusively with the local government,

from which they seek services and support. Local governments are capable of providing public services, and can and should also be a crucial source of empowerment

In the past, most developing country administrations were highly centralized: Orders originated from on high and were relayed down to the field through layers of national, regional, district, and local officials. This top-down way of doing things has failed in most countries.

This has led to renewed calls for greater responsibility of governments and local communities.

However, positive attributes of local government do not come about automatically. Local governments in many instances are controlled by local economic, political, or social elites. Land reform legislation, for example, has often been halted at the level of local government implementation, under the influence of landlords and elite interests. Local governments can easily fall under the control of coalitions between bureaucrats and local elites designed to serve minority interests and foster corruption. Moreover, most local governments don't have adequate financial resources, or personnel. Whether local governments fulfill their potential will depend on the type of pressures and encouragements they receive from above (central govern-

ments) and from below (civil society).

The promotion of empowerment necessarily passes through the national government. It can create an enabling environment that will allow the energies and creativity of civil society to be harnessed to eradicate poverty and hunger:

i) National governments can provide a general political, legal, and administrative framework supportive of civil society initiatives;

ii) National governments can strengthen local governments that are accountable to the people. They can do so through decentralization and devolution of powers, and by issuing clear guidelines for local government reform, such as introducing measures to achieve cost-effectiveness, and improve service provision standards;

iii) National governments can help improve the implementation of local revenue reforms generation to support programs that benefit the poor people. Including regional equalization, assisting poor regions and laws that promote voluntary organizations.

iv) National governments can collaborate with communities to provide services such as agricultural extension, environment and natural resource management, human capital formation and capacity building, etc., in particular where the private sector is weak; and

v) National governments can facilitate local institutional development by providing economic and social services such as investment in infrastructure and research to promote long-term growth prospects in agriculture.

A key condition for empowerment is the establishment and strengthening of civil society organizations acting for and representing the interests of the poor and the hungry. There is abundant evidence that participatory efforts are ineffective when they are pursued outside and beyond an organizational framework: Participation has a collective dimension. By pooling their energies and resources, the poor can increase their economic, technical and political capabilities. They will grow increasingly self-confident, and realize their abilities to innovate,

invest in joint infrastructures, promote local change, and participate in the decisions that affect them. No meaningful local governance can be envisaged without organization by the poor.

Currently, hundreds of thousands of civil society organizations can be found in Africa, Asia, and Latin America: Peasant associations, neighborhood committees, people's movements, alternative trade organizations, community initiatives, urban action committees, intermediary or support NGOs, producer cooperatives, women's associations, and consumers' organizations, filling the ranks of an "associative" or "third" sector (as distinct from the "first," or public, and the "second," or private enterprise sector). These organizations are increasingly active in all sectors of life, whether income generation, enhancing the access of the poor to productive assets, or the promotion of food security. They have different structures, mandates, procedures, members, and visions: The organizations of civil society are characterized by their diversity.

These organizations have great potential, and are already among the major promoters of social change in many of the developing countries. However, they also have limitations. The challenge of securing rights for the least-privileged is by no means solved by all civil society organizations. They often profit elites more than others, or exclude minorities or women from their benefits, or are subject to debilitating internal dissent between different power groups, or between 'free-riders' and those who abide by the rules.

Moreover, civil society organizations often lack competent administrators and technicians, or financial and material resources. Many NGOs are highly dependent on foreign aid, which often reinforces their already weak systems of accountability to those for whose benefit they ostensibly exist. Also, civil society organizations are usually small, localized, and uncoordinated. They cannot control the large-scale variables of development, at the level of national policies or of the international economy.

Hence, one of the main challenges now facing these organizations, as well as other actors sympathetic to them, is the one of scaling up, i.e., increasing their impact in a sustainable and efficient manner. Doing so entails a variety of related but not identical processes. Concretely, we can look at scaling up in terms of structures, programs, strategies or resource base.

The first type is to be seen where a program or an organization expands through increasing its membership base (in the case of grassroots organizations) or its constituency (for grassroots support organizations) and, linked to this, its geographic working area or budget. This is the most evident kind of scaling up, equaling 'growth' or 'expansion' in their basic meanings. It can be called quantitative scaling up. It happens when civil society organizations draw increasing numbers of people into their realm.

A second type finds a program or organization expanding the number and the type of its activities. Starting in agricultural production, for example, it moves into health, nutrition, credit, training, literacy, etc. This can be labeled functional scaling up. It takes place when civil society organizations add new activities to their operational range.

The third type refers to the extent to which organizations move beyond service delivery toward empowerment and seek to change the structural causes of underdevelopment—its social, political and economic environment. This will usually involve active political involvement and the development of relations with the State and the international system. This process is often referred to as political scaling up.

Finally, programs or organizations can increase their organizational strength to improve their effectiveness and efficiency. This can be done financially, by diversifying their sources of support, by increasing their degree of self-financing through income-generating activities, or by securing the enactment of public legislation earmarking entitlements within the annual budgets for the program. It

can also be done institutionally, by creating collaborative links with other development actors, such as governments and the private sector, by improving the capacity of the staff, or by adopting flexible programming systems. This can be called **organizational scaling up**.

Some important questions need to be answered about scaling up. How can civil society organizations move beyond their original local constituency and have a larger impact while continuing to foster participation? Will enlargement lead to "diseconomies of scale," top-heaviness, and distancing from the grassroots? The second question raises the issue of external funding and self-reliance. Can donor support be provided in such a way as to not forfeit autonomy but rather to strengthen domestic institutional capacity? A further question relates to what exactly should be scaled up — the benefits provided to the poor? The civil society organizations working with the poor? The organizational capabilities of the poor themselves? Some or all of these questions are likely to arise in the process of scaling up, and answers to them will need to be found if effective progress is to be made.

We need to move toward a larger role for civil society in development, all the while recognizing the contributions of central and local government and the private sector. The combination of private, community, and public institutions of various types is more likely to lead to development that serves the needs of the rural poor than an exclusive focus on one type of institution. Concretely, there are three ways in which a focus on civil society goes hand in hand with attention to the two other sectors of society, in particular national government.

First, for civil society to function properly, it is essential that central governments fulfill their irreplaceable role in the provision of basic social services and, especially, the creation of an **enabling environment**. Better public policies are needed to foster local initiative and unleash the energy of communities.

Second, as explained before, empowerment of the poor and the hungry

requires mechanisms for their participation in public decision-making and resource allocation, especially at the local level. Organizations representing the poor should have the capacity and opportunity to influence the public policies that affect them. This can be done through formal mechanisms of consultation and participation, and informal approaches, such as lobbying, advocacy, and networking, can also contribute to this process.

Third, given the nature and scope of the problems facing the world today, it is essential that **partnerships** are developed between civil society and the public sector (and the private enterprise sector). Worldwide, experience provides evidence of successful partnerships between governments and civil society organizations, and convincingly shows that such partnerships have the potential to tackle complex, large-scale problems in new ways, marshalling substantial resources in the form of creative energy, community support, and a multiplicity of problem-solving perspectives. Successful partnerships of this kind will strengthen governments' willingness and capacity to foster enabling environments.

However, such a vision of the potential and actual role of civil society, and its links with the contributions of other actors, is rarely met with in practice. The main actors involved in the development process—civil society organizations, the State, and the donor community—are generally not predisposed to pursue this partnership approach.

Many civil society organizations are distrustful of their governments, or have conflictual relations with them. In many cases, from the point of view of the poor, the history of grassroots interaction with governments (and, often, international agencies) is filled with broken promises, indifference, corruption, and clientelism. Small wonder that new grassroots organizations are reluctant to deal with governments, often defining themselves precisely through their capacity to "go it alone." The first issue, then, is to create on the one hand an environment that will render future interactions between civil society

organizations and governments different from their past ones, and, on the other, governance structures that render governments more accountable to the needs of the poor.

Government predisposition, policies, and practices are frequently at odds with popular participation. Fear of political abuse and civil strife, lack of information about NGO programs and functioning, past experiences of political conflict with civil society organizations, or suspicion with regard to the consequences of social engineering from outside, are often the source of government wariness. A persuasive dialogue based on demonstrating and publicizing the net benefits of participatory policies is required. IFAD experience has shown that in many instances central governments have welcomed and embraced the suggestions of the Fund for ameliorating the conditions of vulnerable groups through existing or newly established grassroots organizations.

On the donor side, there are now certain programs which have been developed and dedicated to the construction of the civil society and to the promotion of empowerment processes—but not comparable to the massive intellectual and material resources devoted to the public and the private enterprise sector (e.g., structural adjustment, International Finance Corporation). Sectoral adjustment loans, for example, typically accord only minor roles or none at all to farmers' organizations. What is required is more forceful action, with ample resources and a long-term perspective and commitment, whereby the strengthening of civil society is treated as a complement to and on an equal footing with strengthening the public sector and promoting the private enterprise sector. □

Excerpted from "Empowerment of the Poor," Discussion Paper #1. Brussels: Conference on Hunger and Poverty, 1995, pp. 5-11. See the report on the Conference later in this issue for further information. The Conference was sponsored by the International Fund for Agricultural Development