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Participation and Intermediary NGOs

NGOs can be effective intermediaries in Bank funded projects which depend on participation and capacity building at the community level. Successful collaboration depends on identifying an organization with appropriate characteristics, and involving its staff in decisionmaking from as early as possible in the project cycle. Steps must be taken to prevent Bank or government requirements undermining the participatory orientation of the NGO and, where necessary, to strengthen NGO capacity, encourage cooperation between NGOs, and support communication between NGOs and government.

The Intermediary Role

As increasing emphasis in Bank lending operations is being placed on poverty reduction, investment in human resources, and environmental management, so more and more Bank projects depend on participation and capacity building at the community level. Participatory community-based development depends in turn on intermediary organizations with the specialized skills and experience to provide links between community level institutions on the one hand, and national institutions and the Bank on the other. The intermediary functions include facilitating communication between project beneficiaries and government; helping to identify and voice community needs; supporting participation and group formation; training and building the capacity of community groups; and channeling resources to the community level.

This bridging role may be filled in different ways, depending on institutional circumstances and the nature of the particular project. Line agencies or local government units may be restructured and reoriented to fill the role of community facilitators. Alternatively, the needed services may be contracted out to the private sector, to multi- or bilateral agencies, to NGOs, or to a combination of these. Often, the strongest grassroots links, the most

capable and dedicated community workers, and the greatest experience in reaching disadvantaged groups through innovative participatory methods, are found in NGOs.

Not all NGOs are participatory, and not all Bank-NGO collaboration has been with the purpose of promoting participation. Until recently, the Bank looked to NGOs primarily for capability in service delivery. However, in approximately two thirds of projects approved in recent years, the promotion of beneficiary participation was cited as the main rationale for seeking NGO involvement. For the task manager, the key issues are (i) identifying an organization which is willing to collaborate and whose capacity and orientation match the specific task at hand, and then (ii) ensuring that the influence of the Bank is to support rather than undermine the participatory character and capacity of the NGO.

Identifying Participatory NGOs

The term "NGO" encompasses a broad array of different organizations, varying enormously according to their purpose, philosophy, sectoral expertise and scope of activities. A distinction is made between operational NGOs, which are engaged primarily in designing and implementing projects, and advocacy NGOs, whose main purpose is to defend or promote a specific cause.

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Some NGOs engage in both types of activity. Advocacy NGOs, such as those defending the rights of indigenous peoples, may perform an important intermediary role in supplying information, facilitating communication and consultation. Generally, however, Bank-NGO collaboration on specific projects is more likely to involve operational intermediaries.

NGOs vary greatly in the extent to which they ensure beneficiary participation within their own programs. At one extreme are NGOs whose orientation and competence are very similar to the private sector firms with whom they compete for contracts in project implementation or service delivery. Such NGOs may be very efficient (and in strong demand) as service deliverers but are oriented to meeting the requirements of bureaucratic funding agencies and are unlikely to use participatory processes. At the other extreme are participatory NGOs which see themselves exclusively as enablers and capacity builders and refuse to compromise their objectives or independence by collaborating in official programs. A minority of exceptionally effective NGOs combine a high level of competence in service delivery and in community capacity building. The Aga Khan Rural Development Program in Pakistan provides an example of what can be achieved by such organizations, committed to bottom up planning and combining strong technical expertise with effective institution building at the village level. Using infrastructure projects as the catalyst for institution building, this program reached 38,000 households and created 110 women's groups within four years.

An organization serves the interests of those to whom it is accountable. In this respect, national or regional level membership NGOs, including federations of grassroots organizations or cooperatives, trades unions, peasant unions or ethnic groups can be valuable partners in projects requiring broad participation (although women and marginalized groups are not always well represented). One difficulty, however, can be that they are often more politically embroiled and subject to state regulation. Among NGOs that are not membership based, accountability to client communities—for example through community contributions of cash, labor, materials or facilities—is an important indicator of an

organizations's participatory effectiveness. Non-participatory NGOs tend to regard community members purely as beneficiaries, and the funding agencies as their clients.

Specific criteria for selecting an NGO—in terms of technical and operational capacity, outreach potential, skills in community capacity building, and knowledge of conditions in target communities—need to be matched to the specific task at hand. Guidelines for assessing the participatory effectiveness of an NGO are summarized in Box 1. Assessment should be based on the NGO's proven track record as well as its stated objectives. Paper credentials and financial or organizational strength are often less important than dedication, commitment and enthusiasm.

Operational Challenges

Supporting the Participatory Process

A paradox confronting the task manager is that the qualities which make NGOs participatory—and therefore attractive as intermediaries—are incompatible with many government, donor and Bank requirements. One of the major constraints to group formation and capacity building is donor or government pressure to disburse and deliver

Box 1

Indicators of Participatory Effectiveness in Intermediary NGOs

- A flat management structure with decentralized authority.
- Organizational structures at the community level to which funding and/or other decisions are delegated.
- Use of iterative planning, involving consultation with local communities.
- Contributions of cash, labor, raw materials or local facilities by community members and organizations, making them clients rather than beneficiaries of the NGO.
- Staff recruitment criteria, incentives and training which support participation.
- Strong field presence outside metropolitan areas with high proportion of staff of local origin.
- Community leaders and members have a positive perception of the NGO.
- Turnover of client groups as they "graduate" over time and intensive field attention is transferred to new groups.

services quickly. Unless procedures are made more flexible, and both the Bank and the government are committed to supporting participatory processes, the NGO is pressed into a service delivery rather than capacity building role. This has happened in a number of Bank funded projects, including Liberia's Second Education Project. Under this project, schools were constructed rapidly and at low cost; however, no attention was given to supporting the intermediary NGO in building community ownership of schools and planning for maintenance. As a result, many schools deteriorated and some went unused. Similarly, in the Zambia Squatter Upgrading Project, it was agreed in principle to pursue long term community development goals by promoting active beneficiary participation; however, a stipulation was included in the final agreement that, if the collective self help approach to be used by the two intermediary NGOs interfered with the predetermined project schedule, then contractors would be employed to carry out the work.

Creative TMs have found ways to ensure that they support rather than undermine the participatory strengths of NGO partners by introducing mechanisms which permit revisions in project priorities, greater flexibility in the timing and scale of implementation, and alternative procurement procedures, or which allow NGOs to design and implement their own programs.

Consultation from the outset concerning development objectives can help resolve the tension between the short term project focus of the Bank or government and the long term community development goals of NGOs. The most successful cases of Bank-NGO collaboration have involved mutual transparency and shared

decision making from very early in the project cycle. If NGOs are to participate in a Bank financed project in a significant way, it is important that they have a say as early as possible in the design of the project and in defining the terms of their involvement.

The Question of Scale

Highly participatory NGOs tend to work on a very small scale and some of their programs depend on staying small and resource-intensive. In other cases, NGOs have established participatory processes which they have themselves extended to large scale programs, or which have proved replicable by other organizations or by government agencies on a large scale. Various approaches have been used to enable successful NGO programs to be scaled up and "mainstreamed", where possible, without losing their essential participatory qualities, and without individual NGOs having to grow to the point where they become hierarchical and bureaucratized. This may involve strengthening the capacity of NGOs, both through training and through promoting NGO partnerships between NGOs.

Scaling up may also involve training government staff in participatory methods and relaxing some government regulations. When working with governments to encourage NGO linkages, it is useful to consider that government agencies, as well as the Bank, may have to scale down in the sense of decentralizing and building flexibility and micro-variability into their operations. This not only pushes decisionmaking down closer to the populations most affected (and is in this sense itself more participatory), but also makes it easier to work with regional and local NGOs. The community support process under

Box 2

Mainstreaming a Successful Participatory Process

The Community Support Process, included in the **Baluchistan Primary Education Program**, is establishing new community girls' schools in remote rural villages. The process began in 1992 with a pilot project by a small national NGO whose community workers went door to door, urging parents to form village education committees, identify a potential female teacher, and select a site for a school. The success of the pilot led to full acceptance and ownership of the program by the government which is now funding the program on a province-wide basis using IDA credit. Because of the experimental nature of the project, Bank support has only been possible through the new lending approach which supports the entire primary education program rather than selected components.

So far, the NGO has succeeded in mobilizing community members to establish 200 schools. Replicating the process on this scale, and incorporating the schools and their teachers into the government system once the school has proved viable, has depended on the willingness of the Ministry of Education to relax a number of its regulations, so that girls with as little as eighth grade education can qualify as teachers and can receive training at home by mobile training teams.

Baluchistan's Primary Education Program (Box 2) illustrates how flexibility on the part of government can allow an innovative pilot project by a small NGO to be expanded successfully and linked into government programs.

Enhancing NGO Capacity

Training of NGO staff is often needed, to ensure that the institutional capacity of an NGO partner matches the scope and demands of the project. Although it is very difficult to generalize for the sector as a whole, common areas of weakness in NGOs are: limited financial and management expertise; limited number of staff with training and experience in community mobilization; lack of technical capacity; limited coverage, in terms of scale or area; concentration in urban centers; lack of communication or coordination with other organizations (including government agencies); and limited understanding of the broader social and economic context in which they are working. Since institutional gaps can be difficult to foresee, it is important to build flexibility into the provision of training.

As the examples in Box 3 demonstrate, facilitating cooperation and partnerships between NGOs can be a highly effective means of organizing training, as well as enabling small organizations to contribute to large scale projects, and developing the capacity of the local NGO sector as a whole.

Strengthening NGO-Government Linkages

Relationships between government and NGOs vary greatly between countries (and between NGOs), on the basis of historical, political and ideological differences. Simple lack of communication, however, is often responsible for mistrust and misunderstanding about the other's objectives, concerns and constraints. The Bank can help to promote state-NGO communication by sponsoring joint training, workshops and conferences in advance of project appraisal and, in particular, by including both government and NGOs as stakeholders in project design.

A number of Bank projects (the West Bengal Population Project, for example) have also led to the creation of NGO liaison units in government.

Box 3 Encouraging NGO Partnerships

In the **Benin Food Security Project**, partnerships were encouraged between stronger, larger NGOs and weaker, newer NGOs to stimulate the transfer of methodologies and technology. This project began as a pilot which involved international NGOs and a few Beninese NGOs. After two years of the pilot experience, NGOs were brought together with government and donors at a workshop to design a new project based on the pilot phase. One of the findings at the workshop was that geographic concentration in the capital isolated many large NGOs from target communities. International NGOs had the human and financial resources to submit competitive proposals for inclusion in project activities; however, they often had the least recent or direct experience with potential client communities. Where local NGOs lacked transport to access project areas, international NGOs had the necessary equipment and staff, but lacked the local contacts. At the workshop, consensus was reached to modify the project in several ways, including creating incentives for NGOs to establish field offices in the project area, giving regional offices the authority to approve microprojects and disburse funds, and requiring international NGOs to partner local NGOs to facilitate technology transfer and information sharing.

For the Bank-financed **Improved Environmental Management and Advocacy Project (IEMA)** in Indonesia, an international NGO teamed up with twelve Indonesian NGOs to strengthen the capacity of local intermediaries to address the environmental consequences of pesticides. The international NGO assists local counterparts in developing primary learning approaches to educate local people about environmental problems and solutions. This collaborative NGO effort is a broad-based initiative to develop education and training programs for farmers, consumers, and provincial-level regulatory officials. It also serves to transfer skills and knowledge among NGOs.

The goal of the **Uttar Pradesh Sodic Land Reclamation Project** is to reclaim salt-affected lands using participatory management techniques that could serve as a model to be replicated more broadly in the future. Farmers' water management groups will be organized and community volunteers will be trained in technology transfer by small local NGOs. The staff of these grassroots NGOs will be trained in turn by larger intermediary NGOs with previous experience in participatory management.

Other projects, such as the **Participatory Forest Development Project** for Bangladesh, are using a similar structure in which advisory NGOs coordinate the implementation activities of small locally-based NGOs. These projects are coordinated at the national level by a single organization that works directly with the government to ensure compatibility with national goals and policies.

