Benin: Faster and Lower-cost Community Development

The World Bank-assisted Borgou Regional Pilot Rural Support project was designed as part of the "participatory management approach." It originally involved 250 villages of Benin's Borgou region participating to the 'Village Level Participatory Approach' (VLPA) with the objective of bringing to the local and stakeholder level the design of local development plans and activities.

Implemented by the government and communities from March 1999 through June 2002 at a cost of US$5.06 million, it illustrated how transferring responsibility to communities can reduce costs and increase the pace of rural development.

Project objectives
- Improve the capacity of rural communities to 'better manage their socio-economic environment,' supporting communities' implementation of sustainable development activities;
- Meet the Borgou's immediate needs in service delivery and productive and social investment; and,
- Test new resource mobilization and implementation arrangements, as a prelude to Benin's 1999 Decentralization Law.

Project characteristics:
- Building upon local resources, such as for staff recruitment and public services: creation of local development committees who elaborated local development plans, submitted funding requests, contracted and paid project contractors;
- Cash contributions from the communities (20% of project costs) in exchange for quick sub-project implementation and the discretion to choose the sub-projects themselves;
- Flexible project framework and management: clear, simple lines of authority for efficient services and accountability;
- Bank support: week-long launch workshop was called upon with the participation of 500 Borgou residents; Constant technical and managerial support from country office and headquarters.
**Project benefits**

**Tangible development benefits.** Two years after implementation, 229 communities in the Borgou had completed 296 infrastructure projects, of consistently high quality, and made more than 30 natural resource management improvements. Over 14,000 Borgou residents had participated in capacity-building activities, from 5,638 people trained in basic literacy to the 22 women trained as midwives. Project activities significantly increased the government’s service delivery capacity in the Borgou. For example, the construction of new schools brought 5,400 new students to school, representing a 5 percent increase in the region’s school enrollment. By shifting procurement responsibilities to communities, almost all of the sub-project works were contracted to local firms, providing work to 70-80 informal enterprises.

**Empowerment.** With virtually all responsibility for sub-project selection, implementation and supervision transferred to communities, the Borgou’s rural communities gained control over their development decisions.

**Rapid sub-project implementation.** Fifteen days from approval to fund transfer; four months from submission to implementation.

**Low management costs.** Twenty percent of the Borgou project’s costs went to running the TSU, compared to up to 60% for comparable pilot operations executed through NGOs or other intermediaries.

**Project weaknesses.** In future iterations of the project, more targeted measures need to be taken to enhance women’s influence (2 in 10 members of village development committees), and to ensure sub-project operations and maintenance. Sub-projects that were continually used by community members (schools, roads) were maintained, while storage facilities and similar sub-projects were not maintained to the same degree.

**Lessons learned**
- Transfer sub-project design, implementation and supervision responsibilities to communities to the maximum degree possible;
- Retain a flexible project design, and clear, simple lines of management accountability;
- Reinforce a light technical coordination unit with consistent World Bank backing, including regular technical support mission from Bank country offices, supervision from headquarters, and continued financing for successful projects;
- Incorporate the target zone’s strengths into project design, such as the Borgou’s pre-existing village development committees, and the strengths of government agencies, such as the rural development expertise and oversight ability of the CARDER government extension service.

**Wider applicability**
A highly decentralized community development project can, in the most instrumental terms, provide rural communities with public services and basic productive and social infrastructure quickly and at low cost. This project model allows communities full discretion over local development decisions, while ensuring that development activities are compatible with the rural development priorities of sectoral ministries. Observers have consistently cited the transfer of responsibility to communities as the project’s most important design feature. Though without Bank support, Benin’s Central Commission for Decentralization has adopted the Borgou model for decentralized government service. More critically, a highly decentralized project can help communities to develop the tools (management ability, negotiation skills) to hold their elected officials to account. A project of this type should precede decentralization, so that communities have the time to hone these skills before local elections take place. Although the Bank abandoned the funding of this ‘scale-up’ after it chose to support Benin through budget assistance (PERC) in 2001, it has readily used the Borgou model in numerous other African countries.

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