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SmartLessons

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Giving Women a Bigger Voice in Rural China

The Poor Rural Communities Development Project (PRCDP) is a rural development intervention covering some of the poorest communities in Guangxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces in China. The project, which is led by the Chinese provincial and county project offices (PMO), reaches out to ethnic minority communities, usually in remote villages, and provides subgrants for basic infrastructure and loans for livelihood improvements. The project involves farmers in important decisions about which kinds of activities will be implemented, and aims to ensure participation of both men and women in project design, implementation, and evaluation. Community members are brought together for discussions facilitated by the project team to talk about key challenges facing the community and to make sure that both women's and men's priorities are heard when it comes to deciding how village funds will be used. This SmartLesson describes how a simple "gender mainstreaming" approach was effectively adopted in targeted villages in rural China and highlighting the different ways men and women understand community priorities.

Background

In the remote areas covered by PRCDP, communities have had their own ways of pooling resources and making decisions. This often happens without much participation by women. A key element of PRCDP was therefore to provide women in targeted areas with greater opportunities to speak up at village meetings and to have a greater role in project implementation. Slowly but consistently, this gender mainstreaming approach is producing positive change.

Analysis

The initial gender analysis carried out by the team aimed to understand the barriers holding women back from greater participation in public discussions. Why weren't women attending village meetings and speaking up? The team used qualitative research methodologies such as participant observation, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. These were either separate discussions held with women only, or consultations held with groups that had an adequate balance of women and men participants. Ultimately, the analysis was aimed at increasing women's participation in

the project's community-based activities, and assisting the Chinese implementation team's efforts to increase that participation. Our team learned how men and women accessed basic services, and what their respective roles were in decision-making at both the community and household level. We paid attention to how the implementation arrangements proposed by communities would affect men and women differently. The key concern in this case was to ensure that implementation arrangements did not place an undue burden on women who already had a particularly heavy workload of agricultural activities and domestic chores. We sought to specifically understand:

- How local customs, beliefs, and attitudes limited women's participation;
- How women's economic and domestic workloads posed important time constraints on their participation in community activities;
- How customs, policies, and laws limited women's access to resources.

As a result, some simple but important changes were made in the way planning meetings at village level were conducted.

Planning and Implementation

Once we had a detailed understanding of gender dynamics within communities, it was clear there needed to be changes in the usual village planning processes. The Chinese PMO, with help from World Bank and Department for International Development (DFID) team, worked to ensure that women were at the meetings and able to express their preferences about project investments. Hongshui Township (Rongshui County) provides a good example. Miao (an ethnic minority group living in southern China) women don't customarily have a big role in community affairs. The solution there was to have separate meetings with the women before the large plenary meetings with men. Women were more confident about speaking up in the small groups without the men around. They were able to consolidate their ideas and priorities for project funds, and then were able to explain them more clearly later in the mixed-gender sessions.

Another change was to have everyone vote as individuals rather than one vote per household, where traditionally the man would represent the household. An equal number of women and men participants were asked to vote for their preferred subproject using seeds of different colors (yellow for women and white for men). Women showed a stronger preference for the construction of social infrastructure (health posts and schools), while the men tended to focus on livelihood activities and infrastructure works such as rural roads. By getting men and women to vote separately on their preferences, facilitators were able to identify key differences in priorities.

Taking it one step further, the project teams made sure that one third of the people in village organizations overseeing implementation were women. It was important to make sure that women were involved beyond the planning stage, so that they could benefit from the training provided in financial management, procurement, and supervision of contractors and construction work during implementation.

In order to support local Chinese facilitators in this, a project specific gender-check list was put in place as a step-by-step guide for gender-sensitive community planning. In addition, a strong partnership with DFID—which provided grant resources linked to the project—meant that the gender dimensions of project implementation were systematically reviewed during supervision, discussed with county and provincial counterparts, and captured systematically in progress reports.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Finally, a thorough methodology for participatory monitoring and evaluation was adopted by PRDCP, with a strong focus on assessing how men and women perceived their participation and their ability to engage in the community-level decision-making processes.

The Chinese PMO conducted specific interviews and focus group discussions with women and men participants, as well as with poor and marginalized groups within the community, which provided useful insights into the quality of the facilitation.

Collecting feedback from women during project implementation was very informative. It enabled the women to explain the difference between the original project plan and the actual implementation. Women were requested to state their satisfaction with the planning process and to rate “how well they were involved in decision making.”

Lessons Learned

1) Gain a good understanding of gender-specific barriers to beneficiary involvement in project activities.

PRCDP found that the best way to understand why women weren't actively involved in village activities was to ask them using simple qualitative methods. Having this information available was key to making the necessary adjustments to project design.

2) Create a space for women's perspectives to be heard: Arrange separate consultations/planning meetings for women.

We saw that the small meetings gave women a chance to organize their ideas and present their priorities clearly before attending the subsequent mixed-gender community sessions. This made women more confident to speak up and to articulate their point of view in larger public meetings.

3) Be aware that men and women focus on different things, and women's priorities may be lost if the men systematically represent the households in public discussions.

Changing the way villagers voted on subprojects to “one person – one vote” made a big difference in ensuring these different perspectives were taken into account. When women had opportunity to vote themselves, we saw that they tended to be more interested in health and education projects. Men voted more heavily for agricultural projects.

4) Create opportunities for women to participate in project activities and gain additional skills.

In PRCDP this meant being aware of women's specific time constraints and adjusting the time of training sessions to ensure they could attend.

5) Check with the women to see how the project really worked, and take corrective action as needed.

In this case women were involved in monitoring projects during the implementation phase. They were able to track results and assess progress. Importantly, they could also report on how effectively they were able to participate in project activities and to flag areas for improvement.

Conclusion

A key lesson from PRCD, successfully led by the Chinese Leading Group for Poverty Reduction with the support of the World Bank and DFID, was to ensure that project design was based on a good understanding of the local context. By

listening to beneficiaries and adopting a participatory approach, the project was able to introduce some important adjustments in the way village meetings were run and the project implemented, giving women a bigger voice. A critical insight from the project is that ensuring that men and women are able to benefit more equitably from project activities does not require complex interventions but rather well-targeted and above all simple adjustments that can be systematically monitored at field level. Close supervision and monitoring of these activities helped the implementing agency understand what worked and what didn't so that corrective action could take place when necessary.



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