

INCREASING FARMER PARTICIPATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS**Contents**

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Preface

The first draft of this paper was prepared by Tom Zalla under the general supervision of Don Brown. It was then modified slightly to incorporate comments from other ARD staff members, as well as those from PPC and S&T/AGR.

The present draft will be reviewed at the Agriculture and Rural Development Officers Conference, Ibadan, Nigeria on May 10-13, 1982. Comments from the Conference review will be included in the final draft before its distribution to AID/W and Mission officers.

INCREASING FARMER PARTICIPATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

I. Introduction

The Africa Bureau Food Sector Assistance Strategy Paper outlines a strategy for increasing food production through support for institutional and human resource development programs that provide the means for greater participation by farmers in the development process. The purpose of this paper is to describe in brief what participation means, why it is desirable, what greater farmer participation implies with respect to the way USAID approaches development, and how it can be operationally included in USAID projects and program activities.

II. What is Participation

In broad terms, participation with respect to the food sector strategy statement means involving host country nationals in the conceptualization, design, implementation and/or evaluation of rural development projects and programs as well as sharing in the resulting benefits. It includes participation in the management and control of project resources as well as in planning and setting agendas within the project as it evolves. It can be informal, of the sort observed in 4-H programs or crop improvement associations, or formal, such as occurs with federal-state-county, research-extension-farmer links or with marketing cooperatives in the U.S. It can occur at the highest levels such as between USAID program officers and project teams on the one hand and host country politicians, planners and civil

servants on the other, or at lower levels between project personnel and farmers or between members of the rural population themselves.

Increased participation for farmers obviously gives farmers greater control over development and has political implications at both the local and national level. How a government or aid agency views this increase in farmer control will have a major impact on the extent to which words are followed with actions and participation objectives are realized.

A. Participation as an End in Itself

Participation is both an end and a means. As an end it has intrinsic value based on democratic principles and Western concepts of human dignity which see man as the rightful master of his own destiny within the context of larger social responsibilities. Participation helps resolve the tension between the needs and desires of the individual and those of society in a way that respects the dignity of the individual and his need to be respected and heard. The end results are feelings of belonging and self-worth that, in their own right, have individual and social value.

B. Participation as a Means to an End

As a means, participation in development projects helps ensure the relevance of both the content and the approach of rural development efforts as well as the receptivity of farmers to the opportunities presented. It tempers the experience of outside experts with a healthy dose of local realism. Consequently it can help avoid the many errors, omissions, incorrect assumptions and oversights resulting from ignorance about the local environment that often plague development projects.

At the same time, increasing farmer participation can reduce both investment and recurrent costs for the public sector and induce additional private sector capital investments by promoting greater complementarity between the two and by shifting some management functions to local participants. Projects will be more sustainable after the withdrawal of external assistance because they will be more financially self-sufficient and viewed less as donor as opposed to indigenous projects. Participation also enables farmers to express their needs and to educate scientists, researchers and bureaucrats about the way they view the environment in which they live and what they consider important. This ensures more useful and relevant initiatives from the public sector. If properly designed, farmer participation can ensure the accountability of implementing agents and substantially improve their performance. As a result, agricultural production will be higher, implementation smoother and absorptive capacity increased.

III. The Participation Approach to Development

The approach to development which underlies an aid program strongly influences the organizational parameters of the resulting field program. Different approaches are often opposed on questions of procedure. Yet goals and procedures are interdependent. When goals change, i.e., when participation becomes either an end or means, there is a need to revise structures and procedures for defining and implementing projects in order to accommodate this change.

The penetrating or "top-down" approach to development which predominates in technical assistance aims at implementing programs. This approach

sees effective projects as the key to development and the lack of capital, coordination and expert manpower as the major obstacles. Planning, finance and professionalism are viewed as the keys to successful development.

The participation approach to development emphasizes anticipating and solving problems and usually takes the local community as its point of reference rather than the nation. The role of the outsider is not that of an expert telling people what to do but that of facilitator using his technical skills to work with farmers and planners in analyzing problems and finding solutions within their own reach. It requires a lot more listening than other approaches.

Both of these approaches have strengths and weaknesses. Each gives priority to different interests and each dictates a different approach and different points where intervention is appropriate. They do not always conflict. Most rural development programs can accommodate, indeed require, elements of both top-down coordination and bottom-up participation. The trick is knowing when one approach must begin to yield to the other in the evolution of a project or program. We need to explore ways of reconciling such divergent belief systems within a larger framework that takes the interests of all levels into account.

IV. Pitfalls in Promoting Participation

In its early stages, community development was actually an attempt to involve farmers and rural villages in project identification and implementation on a small scale. However, as the approach became more popular and resources flowed into the programs the emphasis on village articulation of

needs and on self-help declined. Government extension workers increasingly replaced local people as change agents and eventually both donors and host governments become disillusioned with the community development approach. Though many factors contributed to the demise of community development, donors and governments' impatience with the slowness of the process was an important cause.

When it comes to creating institutions which build farmers' capacities for problem solving and resource management, generating local self-confidence has great motivational significance. Such confidence cannot be bought or pushed. It can only be nurtured with small successes owned by the participants. The ideas must be theirs. Moreover, the human capacity for growth is incremental, not quantum. What comes too easily often goes just as easily. Donors need to respect the very positive role that successful struggle plays in developing such self-confidence and capacity for future growth. Providing too much guidance, too many resources or too much assistance can very quickly undermine group cohesion by reducing its members to the role of providing nothing more than free labor and materials.

Effective farmer participation requires donors and governments to become reactors to peasant initiatives rather than actors on their behalf. They need to exercise patience in dealing with emerging farmer groups. They should also be careful that their contribution of resources represents no more than a small part of the total resources controlled by a group until such time as it becomes firmly established. Money and resources should move only to the extent that the organizations develop internal cohesion and are willing to risk their own resources. In such a context technical assistance

and supplemental financial resources aimed at solving the problems identified by the farmers - though limited in quantity - can be very positive factors in increasing the capacity of farmer groups for identifying and successfully undertaking even larger projects. The line between induced dependence and induced development can be fine indeed.

It is unlikely that external donors can become more than marginally involved in promoting local level farmer organizations of the type described here. FVO's have sometimes been effective with this approach but even they are limited in what they can do by the extremely political nature of such situations. There is also potential for conflict between ministries over who organizes farmers and what structures should be used. In the final analysis effective local level participatory institutions will evolve only if governments want them. Evidence in Africa is thus far not very encouraging. An important contribution of donors in this area will be to avoid destroying with too many resources the ones which do emerge. Resources needing to be moved can be channeled into other project areas.

V. The Context of Participation

The characteristics of a project and the particular social, historical and environmental context in which it is placed condition the kinds of participation that are likely in a given situation. A separate analysis of each situation will be necessary before a particular approach can be identified as workable. Ideally, workable approaches to increasing farmer participation that are broadly feasible in a particular country

should be discussed in the country development strategy statements since many of these contextual factors will operate on most projects.

VI. Participation in the Project Cycle

Involvement of farmers in the project cycle increases the likelihood of creating people-responsive social institutions and implementation structures. It can partially compensate for the lack of data and knowledge of the local situation that so often handicaps projects while increasing the impact and sustainability of development investments. Available evidence suggests that when peasants see a project as theirs they are more likely to take an active interest in operating and maintaining it.

One assumption underlying the desire to increase farmer participation as a means of implementing the food sector strategy is that farmers know best what is important to them and what will or will not work in the context in which they feel themselves bound. Participation is seen as an important mechanism for educating scientists and planners to the realities of peasant production constraints as viewed by farmers themselves. Other things being equal, project innovations which take into account those constraints are more likely to be adopted by farmers thereby increasing the probability of achieving project objectives. This is not to deny that innovations that are sufficiently profitable will, in many cases, be adopted by farmers even in the absence of participation. However, the likelihood of developing such innovations is greater where farmers participate in defining what "profitable" means in a particular context.

Another assumption relating to the desirability of increasing farmer participation in the articulation and implementation of development projects is that many of the bottlenecks to development and achievement of project objectives are social and political rather than technical. Inputs are not available or do not arrive on time; extension agents are poorly trained, motivated and/or supervised; or the quality of inputs is low. Often this is not because of lack of awareness of the characteristics and importance of timely, good quality merchandise, but rather arises from a lack of discipline and accountability within the system. Greater farmer control over such services or providing farmers with additional sources of supply for crucial inputs can increase accountability and improve the performance of such institutions.

A. Project Identification

It is difficult for USAID to actively solicit farmer participation in the identification of viable projects in the absence of strong national government support to do so or a project specifically designed with this as a goal. It is not so difficult, however, to build AID programs around projects identified by host governments and local level political leaders or development committees to a greater degree than at present. This does not mean that AID rubberstamps such projects but it does suggest that less effort be put into convincing host governments of the merits of particular projects which they do not feel they need. Participation can be increased at several levels. Too often we ignore the need for it at the highest levels and between levels within development organizations. There may be

much more scope for increasing participation of peasants in project identification by taking projects having a high-priority with the national government and eliciting comments and reactions from implementation personnel and from the farmers intended to benefit from such projects. Most governments would be more receptive to this kind of participation while undesirable projects from the farmer's point of view might be avoided or redefined so as to better address their needs.

B. Project Design

The present approach to project design used by the agency can easily incorporate a substantial increase in the level of farmer participation. It can be done by simply having design teams meet with farmers from the target groups to discuss details of the project once the broad outlines are tentatively established. This is already done for some projects. It might lengthen the average design phase somewhat but should result in a better project with quicker approval by both USAID and the host government. Thus total resources committed to project preparation would increase by a lesser amount and may even decrease. Alternatively, local consulting firms, university professors or research personnel can be hired to discuss project goals and project design with farmers with a view toward providing material to a USAID design team, thereby reducing the design team's time in the field.

Another approach to increasing farmer participation in project design is to make farmer review an integral part of project implementation while allowing wide latitude for revising project content and implementation structures over the life of the project. This approach more explicitly recognizes

the interactive nature of participation as well as the virtual impossibility of anticipating all essential contingencies during the project design phase. Such a feedback mechanism, coupled with the flexibility necessary to utilize the information it provides, would greatly increase the likelihood of achieving individual project objectives. It also provides a way of eliciting farmer participation in project design that is more compatible with the top-down approaches to development that typify most African countries.

C. Project Implementation

Implementation structures for agricultural projects need to be flexible so as to accommodate the environmental diversity and the technology of agriculture in a way centralized structures cannot. This means people at the field level need to have decision-making authority and resources at their disposal. On much of the immense acreage of large-scale irrigation projects in Africa, for example, more decentralized control over water management and improved availability of inputs and spare parts in local markets would overcome important constraints on increasing yields. There is plenty of scope for experimenting with water users' associations and small input and output marketing associations that give farmers greater control over production resources. There is even room for using farmer groups for establishing small scale irrigated perimeters at greatly reduced cost over large scale centralized methods.

Anytime one speaks of farmer groups or marketing associations in Africa the sorry record of so many of the cooperatives comes to mind. It is

important, therefore, to examine the reasons for this poor performance before using similar structures for promoting farmer participation in a given country. One of the important ones, namely the use of cooperatives as structures for carrying out government programs rather than as organizations to address the felt-needs of farmers could be addressed by encouraging farmers to organize in affinity groups or around specific goals rather than along geographical lines. Such groups would be much smaller but could increase their power by associating with other groups once they become internally cohesive.

Farmer participation is increased by decentralizing decision making and delegating authority with respect to project implementation since local level managers and government agents are in direct contact with farmers. Community level institutions for problem solving and resource management can be designed in such a way that local managers maintain freedom of action in allocating a portion of project funds during implementation as conditions dictate. This requires both design and management flexibility throughout the life of a project. Alternatively, feedback mechanisms can be structured into projects to promote action learning as a project unfolds. This is the case with most farming systems research projects.

Promoting institutional pluralism is a less direct but often very effective way of increasing farmer participation in project implementation. Market forces provide strong incentives for learning and adapting to farmers' needs. Removing such discipline by creating a monopoly, whether it be in

the supply of inputs or in the marketing of output, reduces these incentives. This method of promoting farmer participation in project implementation is consistent with the food sector strategy initiative relating to institutional development.

There are several other ways of increasing farmer participation in implementation that do not require a change in AID's approach to project design and implementation: training selected farmers as para-professional links between researchers and farmers or between extension agents and farmers; assigning extension or veterinary agents to cooperative societies with a part of their salary tied to performance to be paid by the cooperative, possibly with funds provided by USAID; providing adult literacy and numeracy to foster greater farmer control over cooperatives; requiring public disclosure of the allocation of cooperative loans or equipment sales and the reasons for the allocation; making veterinary supplies and agricultural chemicals available through rural stores licensed to handle such products and instructed in their use; providing matching funds to projects conceived by groups organized with local initiative; making project managers accountable to client groups; and group-lending programs are but a few examples.

D. Project Evaluation

It is not uncommon to use farmer responses to structured questions as a source of data for evaluating a project but seldom are farmers asked directly whether in their eyes a particular project achieved its objectives. Farmers are usually so poorly informed of a project's objectives that their response to such a question would not be very meaningful. As greater

farmer participation is elicited at the identification, design and implementation phases, farmer evaluation will take on greater importance and usefulness.

VII. Participation in Project Benefits

It is in the participation of project benefits that the heterogeneous and oftentimes conflicting interests of various members of rural communities are revealed. Women are often excluded from technology and capital, from credit and extension advice and from cooperative membership. USAID could easily insist on changes in these areas as a condition for its involvement in a project. Criterion for allocating credit or scarce inputs can further favor particular groups or the rural poor if that is desired. The distribution of benefits is an intensely political issue, however, and an aid agency can quickly find itself in a difficult position vis-a-vis the national government on the one hand and its own on the other.

VIII. Conclusion

The best way to ensure achievement of an objective is to embody processes of accountability to the target group. Increasing the participation of farmers in the development process means increasing their power relative to the present situation - an inescapably political act. Greater participation can mobilize the underutilized resources and the talents of the majority of farmers for rural development. Where governments want this to occur, then enhancing farmers' capability to help themselves increases the ability of a government to achieve its goals. To be successful, however,

participation should not be viewed as a separate program but a component of all projects and programs. It should be based on building local organizations and organizational plurality. The structures of participating institutions should give attention to the distribution of assets and structures of accountability. Finally, it is important to recognize the potential conflicts in interest within local communities as well as between local communities, regional and national centers, and to find and build on the common interests among them.

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