



# Participatory Practices: Learning From Experience\*

PN-ABZ-560

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### *ENGAGING CUSTOMERS IN ACTIVITY DESIGN Democracy Partnership in Bangladesh<sup>1</sup>*

#### **The Problem**

In November 1994, as part of USAID's reengineering effort, USAID/Bangladesh volunteered to be a "country experimental laboratory" (CEL) for the design and implementation of democracy activities. The Mission developed a new approach to program design based on the Agency's core values of customer focus, teamwork and participation, empowerment and accountability, and managing for results. It then created the Democracy Team, which applied this approach to its first task--to design a democracy program responsive to ultimate customer needs.

#### **The Participatory Practice**

The Democracy Team developed its new strategic objectives, intermediate results and activities by listening to the views of ultimate customers, defined as the socially and economically disadvantaged. By visiting communities throughout the country and discussing the meaning of democracy with men and women, they were able to understand local perspectives on democracy and governance.

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**USAID PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE** is a series studies of participatory approaches in USAID programs. They are intended to help staff consider similar approaches and share experiences. USAID's Participation Forum and GP-NET, an electronic conversation group, enable development practitioners worldwide to discuss problems and successes in the use of participation. For further information please E-mail Diane La Voy (DLAVOY@USAID.GOV) or Wendy Kapustin (WKAPUSTIN@USAID.GOV).

*Wendy Kapustin and Anne Sweetser drafted the following summary after extensive consultation with Karl Schwartz, USAID/Dhaka, and a thorough review of available project documentation.*

### **\*The Detect Needs Troop\***

The Democracy Team created a time-limited sub-team called the Detect Needs Troop. Twenty Bangladeshi staff were recruited from throughout the Mission to enlarge the number of native speakers available to the Democracy Team for customer appraisal work. Eleven men and nine women with diverse backgrounds volunteered to join the troop.

### **\*Training of the Detect Needs Troop\***

In April 1995, Anne Sweetser (AAAS Fellow in PPC) trained members of the Detect Needs Troop in rapid appraisal (RA), a rigorous, flexible method of qualitative social research based primarily on conversational interviewing. Classroom preparation consisted of a series of exercises and discussions, often in small groups. To understand their biases, trainees first explored their own presuppositions about democracy and the poor, and then reflected on how poor Bangladeshi women and men might view democracy and governance. Next they sketched ways of initiating conversations and probing attitudes about civil society, governance, rule of law, and elections. After generating many possibilities, they agreed upon a short list of topics -- not specific questions -- to cover in each interview. Finally, trainees went into poor neighborhoods in groups of three to practice semi-structured interviewing, observation, and notetaking. Immediately afterward, they reviewed the conversations and compared what each person had noticed and learned as they prepared reports on each interview.

### **\*The Customer Appraisal and Program Design\***

The customer appraisal was conducted in three week-long iterations. During each, four teams of two men and two women traveled to different areas of the country to interview men and women, respectively. For three days each pair conducted two or three interviews daily with individuals or groups. Sampling was purposive: half of the interviewees were women and half men; two-thirds were rural and one-third urban; and proportionate numbers from different ethnic and age groups were included. All regions of the country were visited and approximately 500 customers were reached, including some members of major political and civil associations. Interviews often focused on recent local events as the Detect Needs Troop worked to understand customers experiences with democratic institutions.

At the end of each day in the field, interviewers reviewed their work, distilled significant findings, and prepared reports on their interviews. The entire Troop reconvened in the Mission at the end of the week. In a series of small group discussions on specific cross-cutting topics, individuals shared what they were learning about customer attitudes in different areas of the country. The full Troop then discussed the important observations that emerged from the small groups which enabled them to articulate their emerging understanding of customer perspectives.

While the next interviews were conducted in the field, a member of the Democracy Team prepared a synopsis of the work to date, including points from the interview reports and from the weekly discussions. The field teams reviewed and updated the summary when they again returned to the Mission. After the final field trip, they finalized the appraisal report together, which was then shared with all USAID/Bangladesh staff, the Ambassador and interested Embassy staff, interested government officials and political party leaders, academics, and NGOs.

Within three weeks of completion of the appraisal, the Democracy Team finished an RFA for additional design work -- to be guided by the results of the customer appraisal -- and implementation of the new activity. The Asia Foundation (TAF) and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) were selected to join USAID in the Democracy Partnership. Together with members of the core Democracy Team in the Mission they formed the extended team. The partners twice validated the suitability of their proposed design through additional rapid appraisals, once working independently, once working with people in the Mission.

## **The Results**

The strategic objective, intermediate results, a customer service plan, and monitoring plan were developed jointly by the partners--TAF, BRAC, and USAID--based on what they had learned from customers. After these documents were developed, they too were shared with interested individuals, both within and outside the Democracy Partnership.

USAID, TAF, and BRAC will monitor the work annually by eliciting customer feedback. They can thus be sure that the intended results framework and intermediate results continue to correspond with customers' perceived needs.

Having an empowered team significantly increased participation in the design process and reduced the time by more than 75 percent. From the time the Democracy Team was formed to the beginning of the implementation , only five and a half months elapsed.

Customers felt increased transparency and accountability of local government would contribute to more equitable allocation of public resources. Consequently, the democracy program now emphasizes local elected bodies rather than the National Parliament. In particular, it stresses participation by women in local associations and enhanced capacity of local groups to advocate on behalf of their customers.

In early 1996, the Mission reported: "It is not an understatement to say that these appraisals have transformed our thinking. As a mission, we are now far more keenly aware of and attuned to what poor Bangladeshis think; we are using this new awareness in the design of our new programs and in the modification of our existing programs.... The sensitivity to the

problems of the poor that we have gained from this direct, face-to-face contact with the poor is of direct, daily utility in keeping our focus on our overall goal of poverty reduction."

The model was also used to develop new programs in family planning, health, and income generation.

## **Discussion Points**

- 1) The most radical departure from the old method of project design was the direct interaction of USAID staff and that of its partners with customers. This occurred twice. First, using rapid appraisal (individual interviews and focus groups), USAID/Bangladesh identified customers' democracy needs. Second, customers reviewed proposed activities to assess their acceptability.
- 2) Each complete appraisal cycle cost about \$25,000 for per diem and travel. Some consider this expensive; others anticipate long-term advantages of far greater value. If the sum were to be drawn only from the operating expense account, this might present significant budget implications.
- 3) Because the educated tend to redefine the stated needs of the less educated, development professionals must be sure to listen to customers to help them identify feasible activities.
- 4) This approach had a strikingly positive effect on staff morale, notably on the Bangladeshi support staff who made significant contributions to field teams. All staff are now more knowledgeable about USAID's democracy program and speak with more confidence about the program and their role in the Mission.
- 5) High-quality listening requires great sensitivity. Researchers who are aware of their own expectations or prejudices are more able to detect what is different or significant in respondents' or fellow team members' remarks. When team members are comfortable discussing at this level, they can arrive at a fuller understanding of customers' perspectives.
- 6) The USAID, TAF, and the BRAC partnership was conceived as a joint venture. This allowed each partner to retain its institutional identity while working towards a common goal. Given that there are various types of partnerships, it is critical that the partners clarify their expectations and define the nature of their relationships.
- 7) The design effort was successful because the Democracy Team and Mission Management delineated their respective responsibilities at the beginning. Among the issues the Democracy Team raised to management were: potential or actual violations of acquisition regulations or guidelines; work delays and the reasons for them;

substantial revisions to the experimental design model; breakdowns in the team process, including relationships with partners; and results of the customer needs identification and verification work.

## **Resources**

"What Can Change When We Listen Harder?" Participation Forum Summary #14 (USAID, 1995).

"Bangladesh Results Review & Resource Request (R4) Report." (USAID/Dhaka, 1996).

"Bangladesh Team Members Reflect on the Design Process," On Track 1, no.6 (October 1995).

Sweetser, Anne. "Customer Surveying: Rapid Appraisal Methodology," USAID Participation Initiative Trip Report (April 1995).

USAID Bangladesh Democracy Team. "Bangladesh Reengineering Report 4: Evaluation Findings," USAID (October 1995).