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**Proceedings of a Workshop on:
Non-Governmental Organizations and Natural Resource Management in Africa**

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AID, NGOs and Natural Resource Management in Africa**

August 10, 1993

Abstract

A one day workshop was convened on the theme of USAID/NGO effectiveness in implementing NRM activities in Africa. This event, in which USAID, NGO and the US Forest Service participated, followed on the work of a larger two day conference held in November 1992. It centered on a limited number of key issues. One main topic was the identification of success factors in NRM interventions. The participants also worked to create a vision of future USAID/NGO relationships in the field of NRM, and to suggest next steps that could be taken to realize this vision.

Schedule

After a recapitulation of major events in the year-long assessment of USAID's involvement with NGOs in NRM in Africa, workshop participants reviewed salient points from the November 1992 conference as presented a two briefing papers. Since several main findings from that earlier conference dealt with the need to analyze past experiences and know better what works in NRM, this workshop focused its morning deliberations on success factors. Three small groups considered various aspects of this complex topic and then reported back to the plenary.

The other major workshop event was a visioning exercise in which participants contemplated the desired direction for the USAID/NGO institutional relationship at the turn of the century in 1999. The day's agenda closed with a consideration of practical steps to move these ideas forward.

Summary

Background

Two briefing papers were drafted for this workshop (see Appendix A and B). One entitled, "A.I.D., NGOs and NRM in Africa: Issues, Opportunities and Actions," is a distillation of the November 1992 conference with an emphasis on conclusions and suggestions for concrete action. The second briefing paper, "Preliminary Thoughts on 'Success Factors' in NGO-assisted NRM Interventions in Africa," provided a point of departure for examining the factors that enable or constrain success in NRM activities.

Attendees

Whereas the November 1992 conference was attended by a relatively large and diverse group of people from various donor agencies and different kinds of NGOs, the August workshop had an

intentionally limited invitee list in order to focus better in a shorter timeframe. Several offices within USAID were represented, as were most of the major US NGOs working in NRM in Africa. Other NGO-based participants included the Biodiversity Support Program, PVO/NGO NRMS Project, and InterAction. The USDA Forest Service/International Forestry also participated. (See Appendix C for list of participants.)

Expected Outcomes

The workshop's expected outcomes were:

1. Further clarity on ways to identify "success" in NGO - assisted NRM interventions in Africa.
2. A shared vision for the USAID/NGO institutional relationship.
3. Identified next steps for moving the "agenda" forward. (realizing the vision).

Key Issues

During the first plenary session participants reviewed conclusions and recommendations of the November 1992 conference. Several themes emerged concerning the unique nature of NRM as compared to other major sectors of development activity, like health and population. NRM interventions typically take a lot longer to show impact and may require much longer term investments. Causality of impact may be much harder to attribute in NRM interventions, depending on the indicators available.

The diversity of players in NRM is another complicating elements that other sectors may not experience as fully. For a single NRM activity or issue these might include: informal community groups/resource user groups, government agencies at various levels, different types of NGOs (advocacy NGOs, development NGOs, purely environmental NGOs, resource NGOs, NGO umbrella groups, etc.) and bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, among others.

The distinction between "impact" and "success" in NRM received considerable attention. Although different participants used the two terms slightly differently, there was broad agreement on the importance of looking well beyond immediate project realities to the greater consequences of our interventions, and to examining the factors influencing these consequences.

With this focus in mind, the conference attendees, tackled the somewhat amorphous concept of "success factors" in NRM projects. Since post-intervention analysis may delay findings for many years in some cases, the emphasis in the present is to scrutinize on-going or anticipated programming. Looking at approaches, techniques and systems that appear to work well, what can we learn of their characteristics that seem responsible for positive achievements. Three small groups were constituted to consider various project elements or functions.

Groups One: Design and Planning

The first set of project elements or functions that was explored for success factors concerns pre-project preparation and conceptualization activities.

The major conclusion on success factors in this stage of project implementation was that two conditions are key: ownership among stakeholders and consensus on all aspects of planned activities. People vary somewhat on how strictly they interpret these conditions, but all agree on their centrality.

In order to value these ownership and participation principles requires acceptance of the concept that careful, participatory "process" is, in fact, one of the "products" in NRM, not an optional methodology that NGOs sometimes use and sometimes can by-pass. This acceptance in turn relies on the recognition of process indicators as valid measurements of progress towards success -- indicators that can assess the level and quality of stakeholder involvement in planning and design activities.

What this means for project design and planning is a longer timeframe, an enabling environment, sensitizing of all parties (including donors), and training/capacity building of NGOs to carry out these tasks. Ideally, we should be able to harness the diversity of the stakeholders into a pattern of multi-layered collaboration. For example, since donors' demands are respected, perhaps AID should mandate a "process" approach, and champion "rolling designs" in NRM projects. This will probably mean more use of flexible funding mechanisms such as NGO umbrella projects and endowments.

Group Two: Technical, Institutional and Training

This group's cluster of project functions concerned those relating to technical matters, the institutional relationships among user groups and various outside forces, and training/learning components of NRM interventions.

To conceptualize the interplay among stakeholders in NRM activities, the group visualized a series of large circles that all overlap in a rather small common ground in the center, which is the only collective meeting ground. These larger circles, representing host country government, NGO, donor, project and "the people," exist mostly apart from this small common area, which reminds us that all parties are involved in many other matters elsewhere.

The common ground is nonetheless precious, for it is only here where communication take place. This communication must begin well before the activities or investments themselves, particularly to establish a shared agreement on needs.

Group Two's findings on success factors single out communications, using the meeting ground of the project to bring together the major players. Key criteria of successful communications are: an improved understanding of each other's perspectives, development of a shared vision, good

facilitation and conflict resolution, and the commitment to continuing dialogue.

By focusing on what it termed "communications," this working group, in effect, mirrors the "process" focus of Group One. Both point out that without this methodology and commitment to genuine participation, long term success is not possible.

Group Three: Monitoring and Evaluation, Financial and Administration

This group's charge involved basic management functions and their possible relationship to success. First qualifications concern who defines success, who measures it, and the various uses of success by different stakeholders. This leads to a recognition of the distinct levels and kinds of understanding among the players. The roles played by stakeholders in these management functions are considered key to their shared success. Effort must be made to reduce the typically passive role of resource user communities in the project context; for example, to use Monitoring and Evaluation as collaborative tools in a learning/training process.

The financial functions in a project, likewise may be viewed from different stakeholders' perspectives. For donors, fiduciary stewardship may be the main financial concern; by contrast, income generation is often the resource users' preoccupation. The financial functions also point out the differing levels of capacity among stakeholders, which in turn underscores the need to address capacity building through training and interaction among the partners in NRM.

Success factors in the financial aspects of NRM activities include the degree of independence permitted by donors on one hand, and the ability of NGOs to work within mutually agreed parameters on the other. There is a perceived need for donors to identify and meet training needs in this area.

Vision 1999

Participants spent the afternoon envisioning the future of the USAID/NGO institutional relationship. The horizon they pictured was 1999, and the image was that of the desired changes that would ideally be in place by then. Their shared vision included a sweep of change, from improvements in performance to paradigmatic shifts in relationships among stakeholders.

By 1999 all major players will have the necessary technical and institutional skills for effective NRM activities. Overseas NGOs will help provide national NGOs with skills for the latter to act as advocates in national policy, while US NGOs will themselves be more effective advocates in the US. Other skills transferred include, feasibility analysis, Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques, and gender and social analysis.

By the turn of the century one workshop group could foresee a new USAID that has eliminated excessive "paper pushing" requirements and escaped the confines of year-by-year fiscal cycles into longer term planning modalities that are directly coordinated with other donors' programs. USAID no longer views NGOs as contractors to implement USAID's project, rather as

independent partners. National NGOs in Africa are integrally involved in USAID's planning process, and USAID regulations are more tailored to the realities of these NGOs. Also, USAID is undertaking a series of regional and country initiatives for testing hypotheses to determine effective approaches to NRM, institutional roles and responsibilities.

By 1999, so the forecast goes, NGOs have built up national and regional capacities to manage and coordinate NRM interventions that are complex and long term. At least four regional NGO centers are actively promoting improved performance in NRM through technical assistance, a roster of regional consultant expertise, and information clearing services with newsletters and workshops. South-south exchanges are a central focus, with increased capacities and opportunities of African universities and researchers to work with NGOs and the actual resource users. The NGO regional resource units have endowed core funding to ensure their survival and allow them to concentrate on their outreach mandates.

According to the workshop visionaries, resource user groups are assertive participants with NGOs and donors in design and implementation of NRM efforts. These groups propose interventions, carry out their own needs assessments, and approach outside agencies to negotiate the terms of cooperation. With users groups gaining access to technical assistance, their relationships with NGOs have evolved to where NGOs serve as advocates with governments and donors, protecting and promoting resource users' sustainable use plans.

By the turn of the century, national governments in Africa have come to understand the effectiveness of user-based governance of natural resources. As a result, they have put in place the necessary legal and administrative arrangements to support this devolution of responsibility and authority. Decentralization of governments' own structures has occurred apace, with an emphasis on playing supportive roles to citizen initiatives.

Another workshop group posited that by 1999, programs rather than projects are financed through umbrella projects endowments and other flexible local arrangements, with NGOs serving as intermediaries. The program approach, which groups a series of interrelated activities or projects, reduces the unproductive and wasteful burdens of frequent funding negotiations. It shifts from the current forms of getting and spending, to the essential process of genuine participation and communication among partners.

Next Steps

What to do next with the findings of this conference provided the closing topic of the day. Dissemination of the proceedings of the event is one obvious and necessary step, with a brief version drafted as an article for the InterAction newsletter.

Another step would be a presentation at the regular Friday PVO/USAID meetings, and if possible, a meeting among high level administrative people in both USAID and the PVO/NGO community. Representatives from the three participating consortia groupings, i.e., InterAction, PVO/NGO NRMS and Biodiversity Support Project will also meet to consider how their good

offices might be used. Finally, the congressionally mandated committee of voluntary foreign assistance might be tapped as a communications channel.

APPENDIX A

USAID, NGOs and NRM in Africa:

Issues, Opportunities and Actions

Workshop briefing paper for August 10, 1993

Purpose:

This paper is meant to help workshop participants prepare for an intensive day of reflection on key aspects of the relationships between USAID and NGOs in their mutual involvement with natural resource management (NRM) in Africa. It is a distillation from the documentation of the November 1992 conference on this subject, tempered by subsequent discussions with some of the conference participants and others working in NRM. Rather than a recapitulation, it is an attempt to take the conference discussions a step further -- to extract essential conclusions and to suggest a limited number of recommendations for concrete action.

Conclusions:

From the myriad of insightful observations and opinions on USAID-NGO relationships in NRM, a few cross-cutting themes emerge:

- 1. Diversity.** In discussing the numerous actors involved in NRM in Africa, even when the focus is narrowed to USAID and NGOs, multiple players are represented. These include: various USAID Washington offices, dozens of USAID missions, project entities both mission and centrally funded by USAID, international PVOs and NGOs, Africa national NGOs, perhaps subnational NGOs, and NGO consortia, among others. Within each group is yet more diversity with regards to mandate, constituents and other institutional parameters. We are indeed a heterogenous lot, with all the entailed opportunities and challenges.
- 2. Mutual unfamiliarity.** In turn, each of these players is faulted as inadequately familiar with and sensitive to the others' needs, constraints, and capacities. For example, NGOs often feel USAID does not take the time or interest to understand their complex intermediary position; USAID personnel complain that NGOs are insufficiently responsive regarding USG requirements for accountability; and many African NGOs find the regulatory culture of USAID incomprehensible. These may all be accurate or reasonable positions for agencies whose self-interests coincide, overlap and compete at various times and places.
- 3. Shortcomings.** What the various players do know about each other forms

the basis for astute mutual critique, though self-examination appears less perspicacious. NGOs' weaknesses in strategic thinking, methodological rigor and administrative competence are pitted against USAID's perceived inflexibility, weighty bureaucracy, and controlling arrogance. Many NGO personnel consider A.I.D. dismissive of the time-consuming process required for NRM activities and overly focused on delivering technical solutions; USAID staff may fault NGOs in the opposite direction.¹

4. Participation. Despite their divergent institutional imperatives, attitudes and approaches, professionals working for these various players seem to share a deep seated concern and desire for an authentic participation of the populations involved in NRM activities. Especially in private, many will concede that the development community rarely does this fundamental step well, and that we may not yet know how to do it well, particularly within the confines of the project paradigm.

5. Knowledge questioned. Another area of common concern is that collectively we do not know enough about what is working, what is not working, and the factors that enable or constrain success in NRM activities. Despite pioneering studies on impact indicators and on identification of successful initiatives, no general framework for assessing (much less predicting) success is routinely applied, nor are enough post-intervention studies done to track crucial concerns for sustained impact. In fact, we have yet to articulate a commonly accepted definition of success.

6. More learning required. Concomitant with several of the above conclusions is the shared recognition that too little learning takes place either intra- or inter-group. NGO communities at national levels have begun to develop forums for information exchange and collaboration, although funding is a serious constraint in many settings. Regular NGO exchanges among African countries are even more problematic, despite their great potential. USAID missions maintain umbilical connections with Washington, but treat neighboring missions like distant relatives. NRM techniques, lessons and findings infrequently transfer systematically from country to country -- a heavy penalty is paid for restricting programs and funding to the national level.

¹ These rather sweeping generalizations about each other's deficiencies were played out to some degree at the November 1992 conference. In evaluating the conference itself, some A.I.D. participants expressed frustration that the discussions did not get into the 'meaty' technical matters of NRM. On the other hand, some NGO participants thought relationship issues were shortchanged, like pursuing to conclusion the call for reducing A.I.D.'s structural rigidities.

Recommendations:

Under the stern discipline of practicality, several suggestions for concrete recommendations result from these conclusions. Key criteria for inclusion are that recommendations require neither unrealistic changes from agencies or individuals, nor unobtainable resource inputs. The open-ended list includes:

1. NGO involvement in USAID planning. NGOs' insufficient comprehension of USAID's strategic thinking, programming procedures and reporting requirements can best be tackled through mission-level workshops with NGOs. On a parallel track, **increased NGO participation in missions' long term planning exercises and major project design work should become an iterative process of substantial consultation**, rather than simply summative presentations to NGOs of mission decisions. Such encounters would increase mutual respect and understanding, and hopefully, coordination.

2. NGO training for USAID. Lack of familiarity and empathy for NGOs on the part of USAID personnel can be remedied with reasonable mutual effort. Recommended: that **pre-departure training programs for all USAID personnel who are likely to interact with NGOs include a learning module on working effectively with the non-governmental sector**, and that in-service field-level training for such personnel already at post be instituted as well. NGOs should take responsibility for developing and presenting these training modules.

3. Flexibility and responsibility. Imposition of USG accountability standards and regulations in situations where they appear to be counterproductive is mitigated by employment of intermediaries. This recommendation **confirms the utility of PVO/NGO umbrella projects, endowments and other mechanisms that serve as a conduit and filter between USAID and NGOs involved in NRM**, allowing for flexibility, innovation and creativity while maintaining clear lines of reciprocal responsibility .

4. Strengthening NGOs. Collectively and individually, NGOs need to reinforce their managerial, technical and methodological capacities. Given USAID's mandate to work with NGOs and given NGOs' proven effectiveness in grassroots NRM, it behooves **USAID missions to invest in improving the capacities of NGO communities as a necessary step to attaining missions' own objectives**. This recommendation urges USAID to assist in personnel training, organizational strengthening and inter-agency coordination of NGOs based on in-depth needs assessments.

5. Participation. Assuring genuine and effective participation of the populations involved or influenced by NRM activities is the shared responsibility of all parties. **Participatory techniques and methods need to be made more widely available**

to NGOs through training, and use of these tools should be further developed and consistently applied in NRM activities. It is also recommended that USAID provide positive incentives for NGOs to encourage growth and development of independent resource user groups and to institute other appropriate measures for increasing beneficiary empowerment.

6. **Success factors.** The identification and analysis of success factors in NGO-assisted NRM activities needs much more attention than heretofore given, including a connotative exploration of success. This recommendation calls for a **practical, solution-oriented assessment of NRM effective initiatives in Africa, with the objective of isolating factors that contribute to success**, from activity design and implementation elements, to site-specific and post-intervention influences. (Some preliminary thoughts on such a study are presented in a companion briefing paper.)

7. **Learning from each other.** Concurrence on the importance of increasing regional sharing and learning is certain. This agreement leads to the recommendation that **USAID and NGOs create more mechanisms for inter-country exchanges involving parties working in NRM**. Building on existing models like the PVO/NGO NRMS Project or Solidarite-Canada-Sahel, we must find cost-effective ways for practical experiences and useful findings to cross borders and invigorate the work of colleagues toiling with similar problems.

APPENDIX B

Preliminary Thoughts on "Success Factors"

in NGO-assisted NRM Interventions in Africa

Workshop briefing paper for August 10, 1993

This paper follows up one of the key conclusions of the November 1992 conference on USAID-NGO effectiveness in natural resource management (NRM) interventions in Africa:

Collectively we do not know enough about what is working, what is not working, and the factors that enable or constrain success in NRM activities. No general framework for assessing (much less predicting) success is routinely applied, nor are enough post-intervention studies done to track the crucial indicators of sustained impact. In fact, we have yet to articulate a commonly accepted definition of success.

Searching for the truth about "success" in various aspects of NRM in Africa is no easy task. The following approach is taken in this brief sketch of the subject:

Rather than starting with a potentially tedious exercise in defining the term, let's instead think about what "success" would look like if we found it and where we might go looking for it.

At this stage in the investigation these preliminary thoughts are mainly intended to provoke discussion among people concerned with the subject, particularly those attending the August 10 workshop on USAID, NGOs and NRM in Africa. As such, it is a collection of musings to stimulate discussion.

1. We begin with the obvious. One might say that **a project or other intervention in NRM is a success if key people believe it is. This apparently simple-minded tautology may hold some useful truth.** For example, if the major stakeholders in an NRM project (let's say broadly, the resource users, government, implementing agency and donors), each using their own criteria agree that is successful, such a situation bears investigation. Even if some affected parties are not unsatisfied with the project this may not indicate fatal flaws. For example, if local merchants are unhappy because a village cereal bank reduces their profits from hungry season price gouging. At most this method only helps point out which projects to study for success, but does not suggest what to look for as causal factors.
2. It might be argued that **the highest measure of "success," and some might say the only important one, is what happens after the intervention when physical resources and other**

kinds of support are withdrawn.² The problem with this wait-and-see approach is that it relegates the search for "success" to a post-mortem drill with no formative influence on the NRM intervention itself, or on concurrent work in the same subsector. What is more, it postpones the investigation for years, maybe a decade or more in the case of some types of interventions -- an unacceptable time lag.

3. **Yes, we must carry out more, and more thorough post-intervention studies. These need to be designed during the life of the projects** so later assessments will have access to baseline data and guidelines of where and how to look for intended and unintended results. It would be an interesting experiment to require major NRM projects to present detailed plans for follow up assessments at, say, two year intervals. How could these be made affordable, and who would take responsibility for them?

4. In the more immediate time frame of on-going NRM activities, or even ones in the design phase, "success" also has meaning. While still avoiding a head-on effort at defining the term, let's make a **distinction between "success" and "impact,"** the later being more a creature of the project/intervention itself. Difficult as measuring project impact may be, it is a far less complex than assessing "success." To create a simplified example, a woodlot project may reach its intended impact when 20,000 seedlings are planted and survive their first two years of life or even reach maturity. This intervention could still lack "success" if, say, the top-down process of project implementation further alienated farmers forced to work on the woodlot from which proceeds are inequitably distributed. It seems that appraising "success" necessitates more of a systems approach than required for impact.

5. This impact-success differentiation points toward more subtle issues in success (not that impact analysis lacks subtleties). It suggests that **one place to look for success factors is within the operation of the NRM project or intervention itself.** The idea would be to identify project approaches, techniques and systems that appear to work very well, and then try to tease out which of their characteristics seem responsible for the achievement of desired results. Here's a starter list of project elements or functions (often overlapping), and some early indications of what might affect, or even effect, success:

* **Design and planning:** who participates in the design and how; does it match resource users' expressed needs and interests; does the overall time frame move at a pace that affected people can accept, especially if local institutional development is required; are government policies involved, i.e., are waivers needed; are related agencies on board; have tenure issues and gender issues been addressed; what post-intervention follow up or support is envisioned, and is it

² For this paper we are dealing only with NGOs' purposeful attempts to influence NRM practices. Undoubtedly, important NRM changes take place through other processes, such as ideas imported by migrant workers, government policy reforms, or adjustments in NRM generated by users without intentional external inputs.

practical; ...

* **Technical:** hardware and software aspects: are they culturally appropriate, and likely to meet the needs of would-be beneficiaries with acceptable levels of risk -- equipment and its ownership, physical techniques, etc.; are TA methodology and extension delivery systems user friendly and compatible with existing sources of advice and assistance, and are they building national or local capacities to continue and extend needed services; ...

* **Institutional:** What kinds of user groups and other local institutions are involved or required; are they self-defined or created by outside forces; what is their legal status and their rights; who controls them; what strengthening do they need and how best to provide it...

* **Training:** by whom, for whom, with what frequency, objectives, methodology, follow up ...

* **Monitoring and Evaluation:** are adjustments and course corrections made in timely manner; by whom and with what mechanisms; does the project change as needs be, discarding what proves dysfunctional to meeting its larger objectives; are evaluations taken as opportunities for profound reflection and improvement, or donor-inflicted torture; ...

* **Financial:** are resources commensurate with needs and expected outputs; who controls the resources; what are prospects for continued availability of resources (if appropriate to the NRM activity in question), when the intervention ends; ...

* **Management and Administration:** is the locus of project management physically near the NRM site(s) and accessible to user groups and other stakeholders; have national and local sources of personnel been optimized before resorting to imported ones; to whom does project management feel responsible or accountable, and how is that expressed; ...

6. Reviewing this first cut at a list of places to look for success factors, it seems that **certain threads weave throughout, namely, process, participation and sustainability**. Perhaps this simply reflects the bias of the list maker, but it may point to areas for more detailed investigations.

APPENDIX C

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