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WANTED: CONSERVATION OUTREACH PROJECT CO-ORDINATOR Centre for Wildlife Studies, Bangalore

We are looking for Conservation Outreach Co-ordinator in the 20-35 years age-range. Interest/knowledge of wildlife conservation issues is essential. Good skills in administration, correspondence and computers are required. Should be literate in Kannada as well as English, and must possess good social/communication skills. Knowledge of photoshop and web maintenance would be an added advantage, but not essential. Excellent remuneration for the right candidate.

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INCLUSIVE PLANNING AND ALLOCATION FOR FOREST CONSERVATION THROUGH RURAL SERVICES: AN EXPERIENCE

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The Gir National Park and Sanctuary is one amongst the seven protected areas selected for biodiversity conservation through Eco-Development Project funded by World Bank. One of the major steps taken was restricting the inhabitants of this forest to enter the National Park and thus rehabilitating them to the fringes of the protected areas. This has also enacted a restriction in using the forest resources and thus has created an unsaid conflict between the forest and its dwellers. Over the years however, it has been realized that for effective management of the protected area is not possible without addressing the legitimate needs of the locals.

To protect the natural resource, eco development project was a commitment in transforming the way services are planned and financed; a new association between the local governments, NGOs and private sector agencies are being created. Much attention has focused on adoption of various techniques with special emphasis on people's participation, through which direct and intensive involvement of locals can be encouraged in decentralized planning. This trend was critically examined and potential unintended consequences are highlighted. A broader concept of accountability is outlined to illustrate a more inclusive approach to planning and allocation for more equity and sustainability in rural services.

Sloganeering about 'participation in development', which has now become mandatory to attract and passing policies, however, no longer goes without challenge. Tallying up the once-hidden vices of participation alongside its known virtues, a recent review concluded that participatory development is an 'essentially contested concept' (Cernea, 1985). Yet it is clear that delivery of sustainable, equitable and affordable rural services is helped if service users are involved in choices about priorities and delivery options. They tend to be more prepared to invest their own resources and sometimes, though not as often as hoped, this involvement makes those services more accessible to vulnerable sections of the population (Cernea, 1985).

In developing countries, it is often argued that this kind of participation is constrained by the representative political process. The political, economic and social, connections between elected leaders and their constituency is simply too great for voices to be heard and participation to be effective. Thus special measures are welcomed. In response it has been agreed that intensive community consultation techniques (such as found in the 'PRA toolbox' much popularised by Robert Chambers and associates) can greatly improve the quality of local service planning decisions. Most donors now insist that these techniques are adopted and

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many are supporting networks, training programmes, manuals and guides to help to install them in routine planning practices in developing countries.

Two issues are being debated in the present study where participatory practice is promoted by the State Forest Department (host) and the financing body (World Bank). One is about 'cost effectiveness'. Given limited resources, pragmatic local leaders ask whether the return on intensive participatory planning justifies the investment? Advocates of participation answer with a resounding 'Yes'. But the evidence is less tidy and unequivocal. It is not clear where it is best to invest scarce resources in the many decisions that need to be made in identifying and responding to service delivery needs. Where should participatory 'entry points' and 'veto points' be created in the planning and delivery process? Advocates of participation seldom give clear advice. A second issue now arising is whether current approaches to participation in planning actually divert attention (conservation of natural resources) from other, more pressing problems in ensuring services, are not just well planned but that resources are sensibly allocated and that delivery is appropriately regulated and sustained.

We try to put these contentious issues into a broader context. When asked to define 'participation' priorities, advocates tend to focus narrowly on the technicalities of a planning process. Their concern is to maximise participation when 'community-service users' identify 'needs', then prioritise investment options amongst competing possibilities and assemble these in the form of 'community plans' for action by higher authorities. In contrast, we illustrate the many other points in the process, possibly more significant, where things go wrong and, ultimately, where the actual delivery of services is determined.

Another concern which is more fundamental – in many cases the techniques of participatory planning are becoming absorbed into the routine administrative process of planning. While some advocates of these techniques applaud this, I think this both sells short the potential contribution of these techniques and, more importantly, can have adverse, negative impacts on the quality of the process of allocating resources wisely to competing priorities. This approach can weaken the relationship between leaders and their people. I argue that the key is not participation in planning, but creating an accountable, inclusive process within the broader framework of one-man representation at all levels and stages in the service planning and delivery cycle.

I strongly feel that participation be regarded as part of a broader process of 'inclusive planning and allocation'. Accountability be the key to inclusive planning and allocation. Say, accountability of the village leader to their community is the main rationale for popular participation. Accountability of technicians, the implementing agency and perhaps the financing body is also essential to ensure the range of design, engineering, fiscal, environmental and other 'technical' factors are competently brought to the attention of politicians. And finally, inclusive planning and allocation requires accountability between different levels of local and central authorities responsible to set the policy framework, regulate, and enforce compliance.

Background

These observations draw on experience gained through the Eco-Development Project (EDP) in the Gir National Park, Gujarat

since 1996. While ecodevelopment (ED) as a concept is widely recognized, its implementation is difficult. This is primarily because of the two important reasons. First, the ED-approach warrants reconciliation of conflicting interests between the protected area (PA) and the people with a central focus on conservation. The reconciliation is often difficult as it necessitates a close understanding of the interface between the PA and people (Singh & Kamboj, 1995) which, at times but not always, have lived in harmony with each other. Creating and expanding the harmony between the two therefore entails a process, which are not only complex but also time consuming. The second factor making the ED-approach particularly difficult is that, its implementation has to take place in a socio-economic context, which is continuously changing rather than as given. The ED thus, has to interface with the already on-going processes of developmental interventions. The coordination between the two is often not carefully worked out.

The above difficulties turn out to be constraining when the ED-process gets implemented within a project mode. This, in most cases, implies that the process becomes activity oriented, fund specific and time bound. The Eco-Development Project in Gir, like most other developmental projects, faces these compounded problems. The present exercise of Process Documentation Research (PDR) is an effort to facilitate the implementation of Eco-Development Project (EDP) in the Gir Protected Area, which focuses on the following major objectives: (1) Conducting participatory microplanning and providing support; (2) Implementing reciprocal commitments that forest alternative livelihoods and resource use to be financed by the village eco development program and that specify the measurable actions by local people to improve conservation.

The project aims to test participatory planning and decentralised financing procedures. The project tried to empower local community with responsibility for a wide range of services. The central government ministries, by and large, are left with the responsibility for policy development and for regulating and providing technical guidance to local governments. To take decentralisation further, government has defined two key tasks for the EDP. First is the need to improve the capacity of local councils to plan, finance and manage the delivery of services to their residential locale. Second, there is a pressing need to develop a system of incentives and sanctions to promote accountability and establish a clear link between monetary transfers received and services delivered (Crush, 1995). EDP is therefore piloting different approaches to decentralised planning and financing for rural services to protect the protected area.

To infrastructure the process and for the local level to organise the project, a committee was formulated popularly called "EDC". It began with an analysis of how services were currently planned and produced. Communities, local councillors, contractors, ngos and forest department officials were therefore asked to help construct 'service decision' through a microplan by talking through, in a structured way, each step in the process. This led to talks about how it could be improved before significantly greater amounts of funds became available through decentralisation. For three to five months and in some cases a year was spent in revenue villages, forest settlement villages and in the inhabitations of the forest dwellers, locally referred to as nes. The following kinds of

questions were tried to be answered.

- Why was this investment project initiated and prioritised; who was involved, with what effect?
- How were priorities designed, costed and appraised?
- How were decisions made about who would be actually benefitted?
- How were designs and bills of quantity produced and checked when facilities needed to be constructed or rehabilitated?
- What were the different arrangements for involving contractors or local; who hired them, who decided to hire them, who monitored and supervised their work, etc.?
- How were arrangements made to ensure the ancillary services (such as stones to construct houses, LPG for fuel conservation and so on and so forth) and how they were made available?

Observations

The rough and ready 'service decision' revealed interesting, sometimes surprising insights into how business is done at the local level. I learnt the following:

1. The 'formal' vs. the 'actual' way of doing business: Whilst the formal rules of the game (for planning, appraising, budgeting, delivering services) are the same across the area, there is an extraordinary range of local practices. At various times, in the same locality and for the same sector of service, rules were observed for part of the process, at times they appeared to be flouted, at times a mixture of rule and local arrangement was applied. Practices were not often just 'changed at will' but it was clear the mix of local history, politics, skills and traditions are crucially important in how local governments, community organisations, informal leaders, contractors and so on actually worked to plan and produce services.

2. Linear vs. iterative planning and allocation: Although planning and production of services is typically described in terms of a series of linear steps, actual practice is more typically iterative where steps are often 'leapt over' and missed, earlier decisions are constantly revisited. Sometimes design standards were altered, the scale of investment was increased or decreased and 'burning priorities' constantly changed.

3. Community service provision and 'transfer funding': A large share of the resources needed to establish and maintain local services came from outside the local government sector. It was learnt that the bulk of services was created and sustained by communities, with next to no involvement of local councils. It was also learnt that community contributions sometimes funded significant parts of the local authority mandated to deliver the service. School fees, for instance, were often 'trapped' at the village common fund, to cover the gaps in funds available for persuading children to study.

4. More exclusive decisions once the need had been prioritised: It was not surprising that many people were excluded from decisions, and often the 'wrong priority' was funded. As the process progressed from establishing priorities to appraisal, budgeting and delivery of services, decisions were made by increasingly fewer people and according to more exclusive criteria. Consequently, local priorities were often radically reshaped as

they moved through the hands of councillors and technicians toward final delivery. Decisions tended, therefore, to become increasingly parochial, ignoring wider ramifications and consequences, and less accountable.

5. Participation and priorities for improvement: Most people wanted greater say in how investment priorities were decided. But more were concerned with what happened once the list of priorities had been decided, regardless of whether they had been directly involved. In other words, more people were concerned about the fact that the technical quality of decisions was often poor (Day, 1997). They were annoyed that what was often defined as a 'technical' issue was often a 'self' judgement. And irrespective of whether their priorities had been accepted, local people were often more concerned that leaders and technical staff tended not to be accountable for their conduct once decisions had been made. The most important was to ensure community access to the 'front end' of the planning process, when needs were assessed and priorities decided. This was clearly mis-placed. As the respondents said, "It doesn't really matter whether it's the roof that's improved this time, or that drains on the edges of the market are given priority. The priority is less important than what they actually do on the ground".

It therefore seemed that large parts of the kind of 'capacity building' delivered in decentralised or participatory planning and financing programmes was ill suited to the needs. Undeniably, technical skills could usefully be enhanced. But of more significance were the political skills of bargaining, compromise and assembling the many social, technical, financial and other factors necessary for leaders to make wise decisions throughout the service planning and delivery process.

The limits of front end participation

During our consultations, most communities were able to articulate a 'long list' of many and varied needs. People were concerned that priorities were often determined by the boys in the backroom, and then given a rousing beat up by the implementors or the village leader when presented to the expectant mass as their 'real priorities'. They wanted a wider range of priorities to be considered. But in the main, people seemed less concerned with the actual 'need' that was finally decided on, than they were with the problems that arose following this decision. Certainly, more anger was expressed about mis-management of resources, failure to honour commitments, poor co-ordination and so on, than ever arose about whether one priority or another was agreed to.

This contrasts with conventional thinking about participation, which focuses on planning, and, within this, narrows to discussion of the best approaches to encourage direct community participation in the early steps in the process. Why is this? One reason is perhaps a legacy of the 1970's tradition of development where special prominence was given to the production of plans (national, regional, community, project) and to the central role of technicians, particularly planners (De Valk & Wekwete, 1990; Kullenberg & Porter, 1998; Porter *et al.*, 1991). In rural service planning, the approach is a linear process. First, baseline studies establish the 'local situation'.

Ironically, the contemporary emphasis on decentralisation and

participation shows how development policies travel along many paths in many directions. Both concepts have visited development previously, but then in a kind of elliptical orbit they shifted away from popular attention in the 1980s. Now they have returned, bending back, not to where they had been before, but nevertheless pulled in part by lingering influences from the past. In the remainder of this article I illustrate how this is occurring in recent attempts to improve decentralised, participatory planning in service provision, the unintended and negative consequences of this, and how it might be averted in future practice.

Local accountability: representative and direct participation

How to get leaders to listen to the voices of their constituents, to make decisions which balance both parochial and general interests and then to stick with the decision once made, all this has been a major concern of public administration and popular democracy. It has evidently surprised many development agencies that bringing local leaders 'to account' has become even more problematic with devolution of key powers and responsibilities to local governments. Perhaps this surprise reflects the mistaken tendency to see the local space of politics (in contrast with the national scene) as tending toward harmony, common interest and relatively easy compromise. It may also be the result of a long running hostility to local representative government, and to local political leaders.

The central difficulty of this approach has been how to establish the legitimacy of a planning and allocation process that effectively sidelines and limits the involvement of political leadership in the representation of local needs and priorities (Tendler, 1997). The special privilege given to administrative practices in decentralised planning and financing. The increasing popularity of PRA amongst all shades of development professionals is in large measure explained by these problems. First, PRA promises direct access to 'needs' (within the limits of what is judged administratively reasonable by the agency directing the process). Second, it offers the authority of having 'spoken to the people' and is in practice becoming an essential support to the administrative cadre in their contest with political leaders. And, thirdly, in the 'best case' PRAs, it offers the veiled threat of direct action by a newly empowered community in the event that leaders choose not to adopt the results of direct participation. In short, techniques of direct participation (and PRA is only one of a range on offer) provide political legitimacy to the first steps of an administratively dominated process.

Capacity vs. Performance in inclusive planning and allocation

The case studies of how particular services were planned and delivered in Gir surrounded villages clearly affirmed the importance of 'vertical' accountability in producing quality outcomes. The responsiveness of village leaders to constituents is undeniably important, as is the contract of accountability between professionals and elected EDC president. But these relationships seldom in themselves determine whether enduring arrangements are made for equity, quality and sustainability in service delivery. As one astute local official remarked, 'Decentralisation and centralisation are two sides of the same coin'.

Here officials acknowledge that decentralisation and local democracy implies a fundamental reorientation to central government. It must move from a 'command and direct' relation with local governments and develop a 'monitoring, mentoring and regulatory' function. But how to achieve this has been elusive. Clearly, under

decentralisation, new skills and capacities are required in central and local authorities to apply standards, to follow procedures, to ensure more participatory or technically competent decisions. But the results of the popular focus on 'capacity building' often fall short of expectations. In part this is because capacity building efforts frequently emphasise 'inputs' at the expense of 'outcomes'. And judgements about required inputs tend to reflect externally driven perceptions of needs. Unless there is a change in approach, these problems are likely to be exacerbated under decentralisation. Central government no longer has control over the kinds of levers previously used to command the performance of lower level authorities, even if this was a rather proforma compliance

Making this system workable will of course take time and may depend on many events beyond the ability of communities or governments to influence. But the crucial point is that there is less concern with the inputs that is the procedures adopted, say to prepare a micro plan or budget than in the quality of the outcomes achieved. Also important is that the results of these accountability assessments are immediately translated into incentives and sanctions, in short, the availability of development funds to local governments and community.

Summary

Participation is obviously an essential requirement in improving the quality of rural service delivery. But where quality is understood to imply judgements about technical feasibility, financial viability, assessments of risk and managerial complexity, in addition to social preferences, the focus on direct, intensive community level participation in the planning process is clearly limiting. Competent decisions and accountable performance is required from a range of actors, some of who have been systematically side-lined and often alienated by conventional approaches to participatory planning.

For what is characteristic of successful cases where rural services are provided is not that the planning cycle is slavishly followed, or where technicians finally learned to apply sophisticated techniques of identifying needs. Rather, successful experiences are found where local leaders and people are able to cope with the unpredictable, the unexpected and are able to turn back, review and change what they previously thought to be the 'obvious answer'. This requires skills for a flexible, non-linear and essentially political process, in which, as Vietnamese say, 'fences are broken' and the rules are nudged a bit in the interests of representative local governance.

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