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ABSTRACT

The need to involve the rural poor and the role of indigenous knowledge in the planning and management of the development projects that affect their lives is now recognized and accepted by development planners, field workers and researchers.

However, as we work towards the recognition and incorporation of the knowledge and ideas of the rural poor in development projects and as their participation in the development process increases, we should not lose sight of the fact that meaningful participation depends on availability of adequate and timely information.

This paper attempts to describe the approach used by the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) to involve the rural poor in the development process and how information is made available to the poor to enhance the process of decision making. The problems and short-comings of the approach are discussed and an improved approach is suggested.

The thesis of the paper is that to enhance the utility of the participatory approach, the poor must be assisted to access the information they need to make rationale decisions without unduly influencing their decision-making process.

DELIVERING RELEVANT DEVELOPMENT
INFORMATION TO THE RURAL POOR

The need to involve the rural poor in the planning and management of the development projects that affect their lives is now recognized and accepted by development planners, field workers and researchers (Chambers 1983; Cernea 1985; Cohen and Uphoff 1980; Matlon et.al. 1984). Indeed the accumulated evidence showing the negative effects when the beneficiaries of a project are not involved is now more than convincing to convert even the skeptics. Citing a study conducted in an irrigation project in Nepal, Uphoff notes, "Although this project was undertaken for the benefit of the local people they were little involved in the planning. When the time came for implementation, the local people wanted to have it built on a (stronger) foundation ... (which) was not included in its design and estimate, and so the request was not complied with. Even the gabian wire mesh was made by labour imported from India which local people could easily have made or been trained to make. As it turned out, in the last monsoon, the dam gave in at the base, thus confirming the apprehension of villagers who now want a new one built in its place" (Uphoff 1985:366).

However, as we work towards the recognition and incorporation of the knowledge and ideas of the rural poor in development projects and as we increase their participation in the decision-making process we should not lose sight of the fact that meaningful participation depends on availability of adequate and timely information. The rural poor need reliable and timely information (especially in more complex technical areas) to make rational decisions in project planning, implementation and evaluation. As Perret and Lethem (1980:6) have pointed out, "Appraisal of implementation of recently financed Bank projects suggest that the feasibility of local participation should not be taken for granted by project designers; interest may be low and labor may be scarce when needed for construction work; there may be no truly representative grassroot structures which link up with those of government; or people may not have enough information or experience to make sound investment decision."

In other words as we embrace the participatory approach to rural development and thereby encourage the rural poor to take control of their own destiny by participating in the planning, implementation and evaluation of their development projects we should be congnizant of the fact that all the information needed for rational decision do not reside in the poor. As Uphoff and Esman (1974:6) succinctly note "The populist fallacy that the rural majority has sufficient knowledge, skills and dedication to bring about development by itself is as misplaced as the paternalist fallacy that the bureaucracy (or the expert) knows and can do all that is needed to accomplish development tasks."

Our task then is to assist the rural poor to bring together their own sources of information and those of the outsiders for a critical appraisal of the issues involved and arrive at a rational decision. This perhaps is what Sands (1986:65) has in mind when she calls for the union of the knowledge and expertise of small-scale farmers and those of agricultural scientists and project designers. "The union of these two systems of knowledge and experience provides a more adequate context in which to develop and transfer technology which will be liable and beneficial within the small-farm system."

The diffusion of innovation studies, despite their short-comings reveal some important lessons in the role of information in the process of transfer of technology.

1. "A variety of information sources are involved in the adoption process.

2. There are differences in the extent to which farmers use different information sources.

3. The role of information sources varies at different stages in the adoption process. Mass communication is used as information source to develop and/or increase an awareness of an innovation while interpersonal sources of information are regarded as crucial in the trial and adoption of the innovation.

4. The use of information sources is related to socio-economic status." (Monu, 1982:81-82)

In the light of the discussion above, it is important to identify the appropriate channels of communication and the relevant development information required by the rural poor and to ascertain the process by which such information can be made accessible to them. The emphasis is placed on the poor since from IIRR's experience it is this group that most lacks the information they need.

According to Hall (1980:63), Culture is "both the means and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationshps through which they handle and respond to conditions of existence; and as the lived traditions and practices through which those understandings are expressed and in which they are embodied". The implication of this is that in a heterogenous community each of the social groups and classes are likely to develop their own communication channels. The channels and information found useful by one social group or class therefore, may not necessarily be useful to the other.

Recognizing the primary role that information and communication play in the development process, development agencies /organizations have sought to devise and use a variety of communication channels to bring information to their beneficiaries. However in many cases the communication channels, the content of the message and the timing of the delivery of the information are solely determined by the development agencies with the beneficiaries as passive recievers. In most cases, very little attempt is made to explore the usefulness of indigenous communication channels which may exist within the beneficiary group.

In the rest of this paper an attempt is made to describe the approach used by the IIRR to involve the rural poor in the development process and how information is made available to the poor to enhance the process of decision-making. The problems and short-comings of this approach are discussed. The paper ends with a proposed set of activities to improve the existing approach in providing relevant information to the rural poor in a participatory way.

THE IIRR APPROACH

In working with the rural poor IIRR is guided by what it refers to as the Operational Research Framework. Included in the Operational Research Framework are three groups: the rural poor, the service/support systems and development agencies/organizations. According to this framework, in most third world societies the rural poor are unorganized for collective action. Even in cases where people's organizations exist, only in small areas are the interests of the majority of the population served by such groups.

At the same time because of the rigid bureaucratic structures within which the support/service systems work, they have been unable to respond to the needs of the rural poor.

In such a situation, the framework suggests that the development agency/organization act as a catalyst. "In whatever form the catalyst may take its main function are: a) to facilitate the establishment of functioning people's organization with adequate capabilities in problem solving, including resource mobilization; and b) to stimulate the development and modification of the support system which is willing and able to work with and respond to the people's organization" (de Jesus, 1982:).

In order to stimulate and convince the service/support system, the catalyst may have to assume surrogate functions even if on short term basis. These surrogate functions may include responding directly to credit needs of the peasants in assisting in setting up a health delivery system.

It is hoped that through the intervention of the catalyst the rural poor could develop their own organizations through which they can make their needs known to the support/service systems and that the service/support systems will become more responsive to the needs of the rural poor.

The Operational Research Framework derives its strength from the principle "Outsiders can help but insiders must do the job". Thus, the catalyst's role is merely to assist both the support/service systems and the rural poor to develop the capabilities to articulate and address their own problems through working together. The Operational Research Framework assumes that the information which may be unavailable to rural poor will be gathered with the assistance of the catalyst in order for the people's organizations to make rational decisions.

In operationalizing the formation of people's organizations, IIRR has used a variety of strategies (see Monu, 1988). What follows is a description of the major elements common to all the strategies.

On entry into a village, the IIRR field worker, referred to as the Rural Reconstruction Facilitator (RRF) makes a courtesy call on the village captain and council to explain to them the project objectives. This is followed by a dialogue with the community members either at a general meeting called by the village captain or in small groups. While the RRF establishes rapport with members of the community he/she at the same time collects information on the physical and socio-economic characteristics of the community. Through the data collected the RRF identifies the poorer villagers who become the focus of the organizing process.

Through a further dialogue with the poorer members of the community, the problems facing this groups are identified. The method used at this stage consists of:

1. "Posing questions to assist the villagers in thinking through the simple problems and issues;

2. Sharing relevant information on the problems and issues and encouraging the village folk to share their points of views; and

3. Asking explanatory questions on previous action taken on possible future options for action toward the resolution of the problems and issues" (Labayen et. al., 1983:64).

A tool often used to aid this process is referred to as "SWOT". SWOT stands for STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES and THREATS (see Olsen, 1982). By using this tool in a participatory manner the villagers are able to share and discuss the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of their communities.

From the above discussions, the villagers identify certain problems which they would like to solve. The relatively simple and uncomplicated problems are selected for analysis and action. It is hoped that by solving the simpler problems first, the villagers' confidence and faith in themselves would grow, thus, building up their capabilities to tackle the more complex issues and problems confronting them.

Once a project has been identified and the objectives agreed upon another tool called TASK ANALYSIS is introduced. Task analysis breaks down the planning into four categories, namely:

1. What is to be done?

2. By whom?

3. When?

4. How to measure the result of accomplishment (see Olson, 1982).

All the villagers who participate in the above process and the implementation of the identified project become the initial members of the organization.

During each of the stages described above the RRF has the responsibility to provide additional information that the villagers might need to make rational decisions, either by tapping the technical staff of IIRR or in linking the group with other sources of information. Over time the RRF has a major role in assisting the organization to link up with other organizations and support/service systems. The hope therefore, is that as the organization matures it will be able to access the information it needs on its own.

PROBLEMS AND SHORTCOMINGS

A review of IIRR projects undertaken by the people's organizations indicates the following:

1. IIRR has failed to provide adequate, reliable and timely information to the people's organizations to aid them in making rational decisions.

2. There are very few technological packages, (written for non-technical experts) available to the villagers.

3. IIRR has not developed a systematic method for the packaging of available information (both technical and service) and mechanisms of providing this to the people's organizations.

4. There is no evidence available, either in support of or against, the fact that the channels of communication through which IIRR disseminates development information to the people's organizations are the relevant channels.

The resultant effect of all these is that the choice of projects to be undertaken and the implementation strategies selected by the people's organizations are limited by their knowledge and experience.

THE REVISED STRATEGY

1. LEGITIMATION

2. RAPPORT BUILDING

3. IDENTIFICATION and PACKAGING of INFORMATION

4. PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION & PRIORITIZATION

5. ADDITIONAL DATA/INFORMATION COLLECTION

6. FORMAL EVALUATION

7. SELECTION of ACTION PATHWAYS

8. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

9. MENTATION

10. EVALUATION
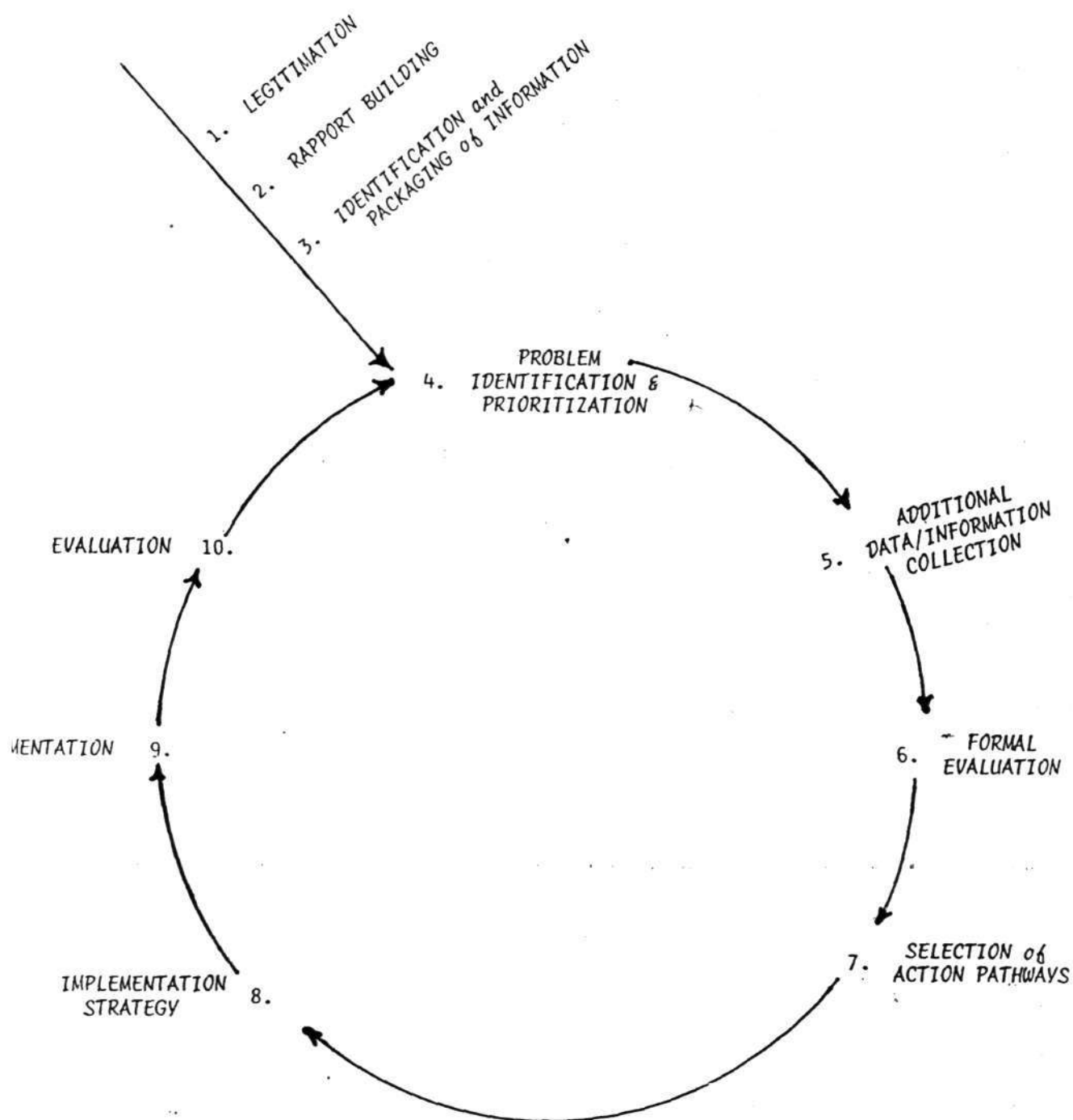
FIGURE 1. A SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF PROJECT IDENTIFICATION, PLANNING, IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

The figure above shows the steps proposed in the revised strategy of helping to build people's organizations and project identification, planning, implementation and evaluation. The various steps are described below:

STEP 1.   The first step is referred to as the LEGITIMATION stage. During this period the RRF introduces himself and IIRR to the village captain and council and seeks the acceptance of the village leadership to work in the community. Prior to his entry into the village, the RRF should acquaint himself/herself with all the available information/data on the village and the surrounding area. These data should cover the physical, social and economic characteristics of the village.

STEP 2.   RAPPORT BUILDING: Armed with the available information and the legimitation of the village leadership the RRF proceeds to dialogue with the community members to develop the basis for mutual cooperation. The RRF at this tage, also collects preliminary information on the physical, social and economic characteristics of the village, mainly through observation and dialogue with the villagers. The information collected at this stage could serve several important functions. First, it could serve as a basis for validating some of the information the RRF was exposed to prior to entering the village. Secondly, the data will assist the RRF in identifying the poorer segment of the villagers, who are the mandated beneficiary group. Thirdly, from these data together with the secondary data collected prior to entering the village the RRF and the technical staff of IIRR may identify selected technical or service information that may be useful to the villagers in identifying and finding solutions to their problems.

At this stage an attempt will be made to study the communication channels serving the families in the village. In addition to the information that will be collected by the RRF through dialogue with the villagers a survey will be conducted to determine the following:

1)   The different communication channels existing in the village

2)   Users of the channels

3)   Types and nature of information conveyed by the channels

4)   Credibility rating of each channel

5)   Effectiveness of each channel

6)   Existing knowledge on issues related to the problems facing the community

STEP 3. PACKAGING OF INFORMATION: This stage could be regarded as a sub-function within step 2. It is hoped that with the secondary data and the preliminary data collected by the RRF, the technical staff of IIRR could identify the possible relevant information/ data that the villagers may need as inputs into their deliberations of the problems they face and the possible solutions to these problems. It is hoped that the information will be packaged in a manner that will be understood by the villagers.

The following activities are suggested in packaging the information:

1) Based on the available information on the beneficiary groups and its environment an interdisciplinary committee of IIRR will develop a list of technologies and services appropriate to the needs of the villagers. This group will also identify the possible sources of information on the technologies and services.

2) Using different information sources, the information on the selected technologies and services will be collected and compiled.

3) The compiled information will then be reviewed and screened by the interdisciplinary committee to finalize the inventory of options.

4) The list of services and technologies is then validated with the village leaders and grass root organization leaders.

5) The interdisciplinary group then assists in developing simplified packages of the technologies and services for use in village level discussions.

STEP 4. PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION AND PRIORITIZATION: Through the data collection process in step 2, the RRF is able to identify the poorer segment of the villagers. Through a further dialogue with the identified poorer segment of the village the problems facing this group are then identified. The management tool "SWOT" discussed earlier could be useful at this stage. The group involved at this stage becomes the nucleus of the people's organization.

STEP 5. DATA/INFORMATION COLLECTION: For the beneficiary group to make a rational decision, accurate and reliable information is needed. At this stage the RRF assists the beneficiary group to

collect the data/information they require. The RRF could link the beneficiary group to other information sources that may be relevant to them. At the same time, the RRF could provide the beneficiary group with the relevant technical/service information already assembled by IIRR technical staff as an input into their decision making.

STEP 6. FORMAL EVALUATION: Armed with all the information cited above the RRF will then facilitate the identification of the problems to be tackled, the possible solutions and the ranking of the alternatives. The criteria used to rank the problems and possible solutions should be determined by the beneficiary group.

STEP 7. SELECTION OF ACTION PATHWAYS: Once all the problems and possible solutions have been prioritized, decisions would have to be made as to what actions should be taken. "Each alternative activity would have to be assigned to one of five categories: (i) to be recommended for speedy implementation due to assumptions about acceptability, feasibility, capability and utility that override any need for further explanation; (ii) to be included in a program of experimentation wherein the acceptability, feasibility or utility could be tackled prior to making a decision to implement, shelve or reject; (iii) to be sent back for further research prior to decision making; (iv) to be shelved as currently unfeasible with plans for revival at a later data; and (v) to be rejected as unfeasible (Finnigan III, 1974:32).

STEP 8. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY DESIGN: Once an activity has been recommended for speedy action, an implementation strategy will be required. The tool "Task Analysis" could be useful at this stage. In addition, the RRF could link the beneficiary group to organizations which have undertaken similar projects or the written information available (if this was not done in step 5).

STEP 9. IMPLEMENTATION: Included in this stage is the design of a project information system. The procedure to accomplish this will include:

1) Identifying the project information users

2) Clarifying project purposes, inputs and outputs

3) Identifying key implementation questions

4) Identifying key indicators and administrative data to answer the "key questions"

5) Procedures and frequency of data collection

6) The group responsible and procedures for feedback of information/data to the beneficiary group.

The project information system will be designed to capture data/ information related to activities directed at solving the problems of the beneficiary group as well as data/information on the information dissemination related activities.

STEP 10. MONITORING AND EVALUATION: Throughout the project, careful monitoring and process documentation of all activities will be undertaken. The process documentation will describe and analyze what, how and why of the activities undertaken.

The monitoring and the process documentation will utilize the follwing techniques:

1) Field Notes - The RRFs and the Research Assistants will record what they observe in the field daily.

2) Reflection Sessions - At least once every six months, the field staff, the project leader and all other staff involved in the project will hold a group discussion to review what had taken place in the previous six months.

3) Key Informant Interviews - At least every six months selected individuals of the beneficiary group will be interviewed to determine the extent to which their expectations of the project are being fulfilled.

4) Focus Group Interviews - Every three months members of the people's organization will meet to discuss the project with respect to their experiences, expectations, problems, benefits and insights.

The summative evaluation will concentrate on determining the impact of the project. The suggested indicators for assessment are:

1) Percentage of the poorer segment of the village reached by the information.

2) The extent to which the villagers who are the end-users participate in the decision-making.

3) An extent to which the information made available is actually used during the identification of issues, project planning and implementation stages.

4) Any tangible or intangible development change following the use of information in the village projects.

Although the steps described above are presented in discrete forms, it should be noted that the various steps are interdependent. Indeed, some of the steps may be carried out simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

The desire to involve the poor in the decision-making process especially in decisions relating to projects that affect their lives has increased over the years. At the same time, the need to recognize and value indigenous knowledge has gained credibility among development experts and practitioners. However, it should be remembered that the rural poor do not have all the information they need to make rational decisions in their possession. The challenge therefore is, how to assist them to access the needed information without unduly influencing their decision-making process.

It is hoped that the method described above will contribute to our knowledge of identifying, packaging and disseminating the relevant information required by the rural poor to aid them in the identification of isues, project planning, implementation and evaluation.

It is agreed that the reason why project planners and managers have an interest in greater participation of the beneficiary group include:

1. Optimum resource allocation

2. Improved technical design

3. Resource mobilization

4. Maintenance of facilities and services

5. Political benefits to government

It is our contention that the maximum benefit of participation in the above areas can not be realized unless the beneficiaries have available to them adequate and reliable information on the important aspects of the project.

We are aware that the role of information in the development process must be understood within the context of other factors (political, technical, etc.) which influence the development process (McAnany, 1980). Neither are we putting forth a thesis that the provision of relevant, timely and adequate information will solve all the development problems of the poor. Our plea is that we recognize the fact that even within a participatory development process, there is a need to provide and/or link the rural poor with relevant information sources so that they could make rational decisions.

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