



Strategies for participation and empowerment in WSS projects

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THIS ARTICLE EXPOSES some of the practical difficulties encountered when executing strategies for participation and empowerment in water and sanitation (watsan) projects, focusing mainly on the role of the implementing staff. During seven months in Bangladesh I have been following two different watsan-projects using strategies of participation and empowerment. Actors at village level, implementing level and at administrative level of the projects have been interviewed and observed. The purpose of the study, which is part of a PhD-project in Sociology, is to find, investigate and understand issues that affect the realisation of such strategies.

Today watsan-projects in Bangladesh include the concept 'participation', demarcating a change in approach from a focus on technology to a focus on people. Through changing strategy development planners believe they will be able to solve various problems connected to previous watsan-projects, apart from deficient impacts on health also inadequate cost-efficiency and sustainability. Strategies for people's participation are believed to be the appropriate way to go to make best use of local resources, through creating willingness to pay and encouraging notions of responsibility and ownership of the change induced through project activities. Another important motive for participation, which goes beyond the goals of solving watsan problems, can also be discerned; empowerment, created through increased awareness, confidence in ability to change, and independence. Empowerment should be seen as a step towards improved self-help capacity and a creation of organisations at community level ruled by democratic decision-making processes, which is envisaged to make a change towards advancement and development in general at grassroots level.

Water and sanitation in village daily life

Experience show that access to safe water and sanitary latrines does not automatically lead to increased knowledge and change of practices related to sanitation and hygiene. Focus on change of hygiene behaviour is increasing in watsan-projects in order to tackle this. However, it is not just a matter of learning new things, but also of being able to adapt new knowledge to daily life, and of negotiating new knowledge with previous perceptions and priorities. Interviews with women in villages where watsan-projects have been undertaken, show knowledge of 'correct behaviour' when asked about household chores related to use of water and practice of hygiene behaviour. However, observations tell that there is a clear discrepancy between

people's actual practices in relation to their knowledge. To show knowledge during interviews does not imply that the person is convinced about the importance to also act according to that knowledge. Reasons for this could be that convenience is more appreciated than acting in a way that might prevent your family from getting ill, implying that illness is not perceived as a major problem. Lack of resources combined with other priorities also appear to affect the way villagers adapt to new knowledge. Furthermore, answers to questions about causes and prevention of diseases displayed a mixture of traditional ideas, new knowledge, and lack of interest in understanding why you get ill. Some of the respondents revealed a rather passive attitude towards possibilities to prevent illness, and possibilities to improve the family's health through change of behaviour.

In what way is this information important to consider when analysing participatory strategies in watsan-projects? From villagers' perspective this approach expresses an invitation for them to participate and contribute with money and labour as well as with ideas and opinions about how to proceed to reach envisioned improvements. However, prerequisites for this participation must be some degree of shared understanding of what the project is trying to achieve - installation of hardware, change of behaviour, improved health, and empowerment - and an attitude that it is possible to change through participation. This demands preparation. Unless an agreement between villagers and project staff of the purpose of the project activities has been established, the empowerment-goals of participation may not be fulfilled. Nevertheless, goals such as increased access to latrines might be accomplished. The study shows that the mobilisation behind making people buy latrines does not necessarily incorporate an overall process of empowerment, building capacity for self-management and independence. One example of this is how village development committees, started by the projects, in some cases have succeeded in convincing people to buy latrines, but failed in creating a new forum for discussion and management of problems in general faced by the villagers. Motives for buying latrines could be results of increased awareness, self-help capacity and willingness to change behaviour, but also of strivings for social status or of social pressure.

Concepts and activities

The staff at implementing level defined concepts used to describe the character of the project strategy (participation, empowerment, community management, self-help capacity etc). Two different categories of answers can be ob-

served. The first I call textbook explanations exemplified by the following answer: *'Cost-sharing of tubewells is good because if they pay they will be very careful about it and look after it well.'* The respondents gave an impression of knowing the concept from how it is being described in e.g. reports, without recognising the challenges the concept constitutes for both staff and the context it is aimed at changing. Within this group of respondents it is uncertain whether the concepts have been transformed from rhetoric to practice. The staff within this group seem to be conducting their tasks as implementers in a rather mechanical way, carrying out the activities according to plan but not showing much flexibility in relation to problems or to the participants involved in the activities. There seems to be a notion of 'we do this and then they are empowered' without recognising that empowerment is a process which contains many challenges. In other words there is not much weight given to the content of the activities, but rather seeing them as steps towards fulfilling the goals of increased access to safe water and sanitary latrines.

The second category of answers defines the concept through relating it to activities: *'Participation is when we all made plans together, we and the villagers. Participation is increasing all the time - people using soap is one way of participating.'*, and further on explaining what it actually takes to realise these concepts: *'Sustainability, it means long duration. The community people have to like the project from the start. We have to work slowly to create proper contact with the villagers, to convince all to listen first, and then to convince them to follow. It means self-reliant. It comes from their own, we only give them the advice.'* The answers in this category display a more complex understanding of the activities' meaning and in what way they are challenging for both staff and villagers. Some respondents also explained how they could achieve goals of qualitative value through these activities apart from reaching goals related to hardware.

Problems encountered by staff

While describing their jobs, the implementing staff gave examples of problems encountered. Some of the problems are expected and addressed in the project itself, directly related to water and sanitation issues. Further on there are problems defined as obstacles to development, independence and empowerment in general. These problems could be termed structural, such as social and religious bindings. Structural problems also refer to challenges found within the context in which the project is embedded. In a narrow context, projects encounter obstacles such as power relations within the village community, and obstacles found within the organisation. In a broad context, projects face a history of a certain manner of working of the NGOs which has created expectations of benefits or service they will provide, a bureaucratic culture within donor organisations, and relations between civil society and governmental institutions. These structural circumstances, experienced

as problems, are not the most obvious targets of watsan projects. Activities addressing these problems could be said to be a kind of preparatory work which is necessary for participation to take place and an empowerment process to start. The aim of this work is to create the best circumstances possible for people to be able to improve on their own, without being dependent on outsiders or on powerful people within the community. The strategy clearly involves conflicts of different kinds since it is introducing contesting knowledge and provoking existing power structures. By some of the staff the problems are being described as part of the job. They are being considered as the actual tasks and challenges of the job. Others present them as hindrances in their job. The strategies of the two projects studied here aim at creating empowerment processes leading to social equity and independence, also of the poorest. To accomplish this, a relatively open power structure at village level is required, allowing all to participate. A contradiction within the strategy can be discerned here; what is perceived to be the goal is also to some extent a prerequisite for the strategy to work. The process of creating self-help capacity, awareness, and independence, must be allowed time to develop both from the project itself and from implementing staff, in order to deal with these obstacles and contradiction. If the hardware goals are too much in focus, there is a risk of surpassing obstacles related to empowerment processes instead of facing them during implementation.

Evaluation

Issues that are being put in focus during evaluation signal what is perceived as priorities among various goals. It reveals whether the project is focused on hardware achievements or social processes, on reaching goals or dealing with challenges. According to project plans, increased coverage of hardware should be possible to interpret as a result of activities which ideally are participatory and empowering. Consequently one way of measuring the effect of participation is to count latrines and tubewells installed since the start of the project. However, this remains a measurement of *results*, and does not answer questions about *social impact*, such as e.g. empowerment, increased self-management capacity, and independence. In other words, increased coverage cannot be taken as sign of success from participatory and empowerment aspects.

What is being expressed in words is not always what is being practised, this became clear during the study at village level where inconsistencies between knowledge and practice were found. Evaluation based on either increased access to safe water and latrines, or on asking villagers in a random way about their knowledge of hygiene behaviour, does not help in clarifying whether there is connection between the strategy's rhetoric, its implementation and its impacts in terms of empowerment. It is becoming more and more clear that strategies for participation and empowerment do not only affect the people they are aimed at, but also to a great extent affect the organisations involved in

these projects. Traditional ways of measuring success must be traded for other ways of assessment procedures, allowing achievements of qualitative value to be in focus.

Conclusion

The field study shows that some of the staff conduct their tasks in a rather mechanical way, and choose to describe problems as hindrances in their work. Another group looks upon its work and contact with villagers as a complex way of building relationships, interpreting problems as challenges that should be confronted. One group is primarily focused on reaching hardware goals, while another group sees the processes leading up to this goal as the core of the project. Since the project activities are not inherently 'participatory' or 'empowering' it is not difficult to understand which one of these two groups is more likely to reach the envisaged impact of empowerment. Why then do these groups differ from each other? To some degree reasons might be related to qualification of staff, and to ability to learn new ways of conducting development work. However, I believe more fruitful suggestions on how to understand these differences will appear if we turn to the organisational environment in which the staff is working.

Many community-based NGOs in Bangladesh are working with several projects of different character at the same time. Most of their staff are motivated not only by a sense of solidarity and willingness to do voluntary work, as we tend to believe. They also rely on this work for income. Hence, solidarity and income are both driving forces behind the NGOs' work. Another driving force is the striving for success and recognition by headquarters, donor organisations and other NGOs. For this reason the mode of evaluation plays a very important role when it comes to how NGOs prioritise their work. In circumstances with lack of time and staff, activities linked directly to goals which are being measured and appreciated in evaluations tend to be prioritised. Further on the character of the organisation plays an important role. Strategies of participation and empowerment are challenging both ruling power-structures in communities, and the individual household in demanding change of behaviour and old habits.

Throughout the process of implementing these projects the staff is bound to run into problems that demand time and innovative ways of working. The organisation must strive towards creating relationships between staff at all levels based on confidence and trust. One staff of the organisations at headquarter level expressed it in this way: '*Actually we are not facing any problems at village level now. It is within the organisation that most challenges are found. We think that trust and honour is the main thing that we are trying to develop among our staff. Initially we had competition among our staff, among our partners*'. An organisation where failure and problems are seen as positive and contributing experiences is crucial for strategies focusing on participation and empowerment. Success stories based on evaluation that do not welcome reports of problems and failure, and organisations that are not open for changes of perceptions of reality, will jeopardise further development of these strategies.

When practising participation, the difference between using it as a means to reach goals and perceiving it as an end in itself, is not clear cut. In other words, rhetoric and practice are not always close companions, although this is sometimes hard to detect. To further complicate things, and as has already been mentioned, the strategy of empowerment holds contradictory ideas, since prerequisites for successful implementation and goals of the strategy to some extent are the same. In this article the work of the implementing staff has been stressed as important in making the rhetoric of the strategy also valid in practice. The coming tasks within this PhD-project will be to focus further on rhetoric used by the two organisations, donors and development theories, and to follow the practice of the two projects from the aspects of villagers and organisations.

The research has been funded by SIDA/SAREC, Sweden and Crafoord, Sweden.

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