Engaging Communities Effectively in Community-Based Disaster Risk Management

A case study with a special focus on the 'Living with Disaster Risk and Climate Change Impacts in Coastal Area' Project (implemented by NCDM)

May 2019

National Council for Sustainable Development
General Secretariat
Department of Climate Change

Ministry of Environment

Towards Effective Approaches to Participation and Stakeholder Engagement

The project implemented by the National Committee for Disaster Management (NCDM) has built capacities of communities and government structures at sub-national level to cope with the impact of the climate change. Drought and storm were the key hazards identified for the targeted areas in this project. The project aimed at building capacity of the vulnerable communities to be better prepared and able to cope with these risks. The approaches used have been tailored to engage communities as effectively and sustainably as possible.

The benefits of participation in development activities has been long recognized and well summarized, for instance, by Gow and Vansant (1983):

- People organize best around problems they consider most important;
- Local people tend to make better economic decisions and judgments in the context of their own environment and circumstances;
- Voluntary provision of labor, time, money and materials to a project is a necessary condition for breaking patterns of dependency and passivity;
- Local control over the amount, quality and benefits of development activities helps make the process self-sustaining.

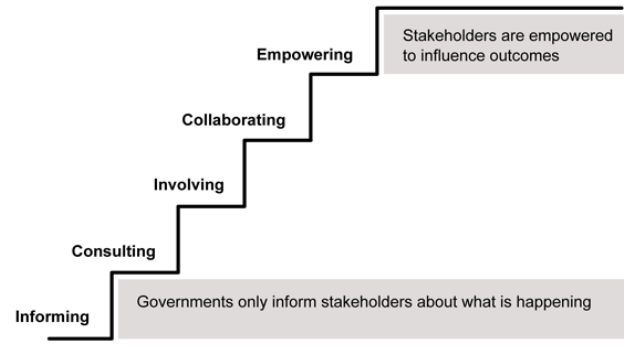

FIGURE 1: PARTICIPATION LADDER DEMONSTRATING DIFFERENT LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION (ADAPTED FROM ARNSTEIN 1969)

In conjunction with these benefits, the participation ladder (see figure 1) has been frequently referred to as a key figurative representation of different levels of participation that ideally aim for the upper steps in the process of planning, designing and implementing a project.

'The Living with Disaster Risk and Climate Change Impacts in Coastal Area' Project aimed at various innovative ways in boosting levels of participation and thereby, sustained impact. This started with a participatory approach to the selection of adaptation activities and related beneficiaries that prioritized women-headed households, the extreme poor and the most vulnerable households. As a result of which, the relevance and appropriateness of selected activities and target groups and locations were assured, or in other words, the project responded well to the needs of the community.

Engaging Poor Local Women as Water Station Staff, Outreach Focal Points and Hygiene Change Agents

At least 25 women change agents from poor households were selected to work at the water stations. The women act as producers, distributors and marketers to sell the purified and safe water to the villagers. This provides the respective women with an opportunity for part-time employment, besides their small farming businesses or care work for their children. The women played a pivotal role in awareness raising and sensitization among their peers at village level on the content of DRR, CCA and hygiene-related trainings provided by the project. Furthermore, the hygiene promotion activities of the project were focused on the training of so-called Hygiene Change Agents (HCAs); women that were selected in the communes where water stations had been installed.

PREPARATION OF WATER BOTTLES AT THE WATER STATION IN BANTEAY MEAS KHANG KHEURT COMMUNE, BANTEAY MEAS

The Concept of Women Climatic Platforms

Despite not being fully implemented, the project featured an innovative approach that put women in the centre of local action on climate change adaptation and mitigation. Historically, women have limited agency and power in local decision-making processes in rural Cambodia.

In order to improve this situation, the project had planned to form so called Women Climatic Platforms (WCPs) at the commune and provincial level to represent women's specific needs and to share women's personal concerns with 'male' decision-makers. The WCP representatives were to receive a series of training on facilitation, communication and advocacy methods to make their voices at commune and provincial level, amongst other objectives, for women-specific activities to be included in the commune development and investment plans. The approach has not yet been fully put into practice, but initial activities have been implemented and the impetus is well felt among women in the project villages. A female counsellor of the commune council, who is simultaneously the chairperson of the WCP, confirmed that climate change has specific effects on women predominantly related to hygiene, child health care, and sanitation. For example, women need more water for their personal hygiene, and they are more often affected by parasite-borne diseases. She also stated that these facts begin to gain attention in local decision-making as a result of the project.

A similar approach was promoted by the Cambodian Development Resource Institute under its UNDEF grant-financed project in four provinces that started in 2017. Women groups were encouraged to submit specific proposals for adaptation-focused actions to commune councils and implement independent small-scale initiatives funded through small grants. Such initiatives are further encouraged to better address gender-differentiated vulnerabilities to climate change.

> Women have not been equally able to raise their issues when external support was discussed and planned for, because women are not allowed to attend meetings (e.g. when outsiders arrive in the village). Men did not bring up female issues, everything is usually dominated by men. The participation in the commune council is just one example. We want to show women's capacity in running a business.
>
> - Chairperson of the Women Climatic Platform, Banteay Meas Khang Kheurt commune

Empowering Communities to Manage Their Own Drinking Water Business

The project funded two water stations aiming to provide safe and clean water to the community members for a reasonable price, in particular school children. While the hardware installations for the water station were subsidised by the grant project funds, the operations were managed by a committee appointed by the Commune Council. Selected members were trained to be the technical operators, water distributors or managers of this community-owned business.

A capacity assessment was carried out to measure the level of self-confidence in managing and operating the station after the end of the project. Five capacities were assessed: technical aspects of O&M, financial management (including sales and fee collection), documentation management, business planning and marketing, and group leadership (see figure 2).

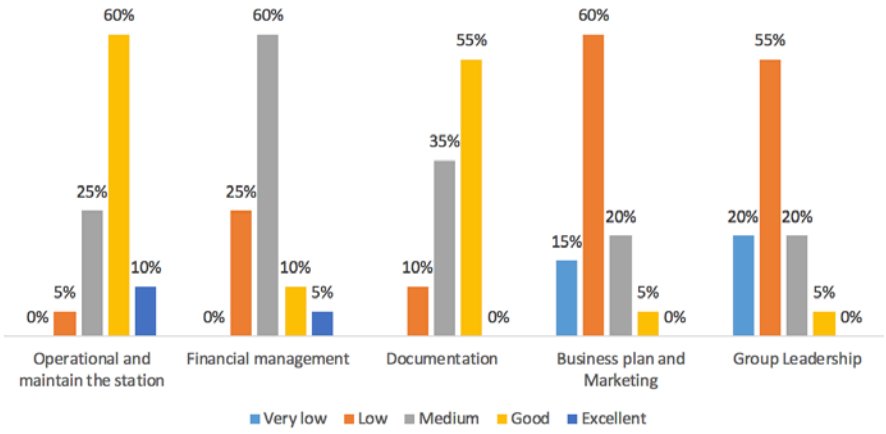

FIGURE 2: CAPACITY ASSESSMENT RESULTS OF THE WATER STATION COMMITTEE (SOURCE: PROJECT EVALUATION REPORT)

Consequently, there are various lessons to draw from the approach taken. Firstly, the technical aspects of O&M as well as the documentation appear to be well manageable for the respective persons in charge. Secondly, committees at both stations have medium capacity in managing the income and expenses as well as reporting regularly to the relevant stakeholders including CCDM, DCDM and PCDM. There were indications that there is more capacity building required in this field as operations expand to ensure the continuous transparency and accountability. Thirdly, business planning and marketing appears to be a significant challenge. 60% of the respondents, for instance, were lacking ideas about the marketing vision, product placement and competitive strategies in the market besides offering discount prices as compared to competitors. Lastly, staff management stays an additional challenge. The revenues are hardly sufficient to provide adequate salaries to the staff involved. Consequently, some members dropped out from the operational staff of the water station in order to pursue their own business. In addition to this, there were some complaints from customers about unclarity related to working and service delivery hours.

Overall, the water stations have sold an average of 4470 bottles per year and generated almost 7 million Riel or around 1700 USD a year. The price per bottle is 1500 riel or 0.375 USD, of which 500 Riel is paid as a commission to the respective salesperson. There is less demand in the rainy season because most villagers store rain water for their household consumption.

Beyond the Business Case - Sustained Impact through Institutional Strengthening at Community Level

All project activities were well coordinated by and with the Commune Committee for Disaster Management (CCDM) (meetings, appointments, direct supervision, proposed target beneficiaries, awareness raising and information sharing etc.), which built the institutional link to the grassroots level. This was one the reasons for the smooth implementation of the project. Building the institutional capacity of the CCDM was a key vehicle to boost sustainability beyond the life of the project. Through the CCDM, DRR and CCA-related projects are mainstreamed into the Commune Investment Plan. Due to the fact that CCDM composition only partly overlaps with commune council composition, awareness-raising and capacity building activities targeting the commune council should be repeated whenever new council members are elected.

The project has generated considerable impact beyond the business case for the water station by having provided access to safe and clean water below commercial prices for about 6000 drought-vulnerable rural people. In addition, 1200 school students benefitted from the service free of charge. Additionally, there are signs of positive health outcomes. The chief of communes observed reduced rates of vector-borne and water borne diseases (down to none in some villages) like diarrhoea, dengue fever and similar diseases after the installation of the water station.

What Can Be Improved?

The project funded and implemented many training sessions on DRR and CCA. While the learning outcome of participants have been evaluated as being moderate, there are indications that training content has not been adapted to the capacity level of trainees. In the future, it may be worthwhile to better monitor and assure that the DRR and CCA training content and learning methods are location-, target group, actor- and context-specific.

The reliance on local capacity to run a water station is commendable, but all aspects of sustainability should be considered before repeating such interventions. The calculations of the business case may need more scrutiny, and a long-term capacity support is required to engage people in running a business who have no previous experience in doing so.

Furthermore, barriers for the implementation of Women Climatic Platforms should be overcome in order to reap the full benefit of such innovative approach.

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Supported by:

CAMBODIA CLIMATE CHANGE ALLIANCE

Implemented by: Ministry of Environment

Supported by: European Union, UNDP, SWEDEN