



PARTICIPATORY PROJECT PLANNING

Stakeholder Participation

Afghans4tomorrow (A4T) since its creation in 1999, has tried to find sustainable and cost effective measures to implement projects in Afghanistan. From our experience in Afghanistan and the success rate of our projects, we can only deduct that we were able to achieve results because we did not want to impose a model upon the Afghans. Our strategic approach has always been to ask people what their real needs are, include them as part of our projects, have them lead and make decisions, and encourage a sense of ownership. Stakeholder participation ensures that projects are more efficient, effective and sustainable. This style is more efficient because by involving all interested parties, a wider knowledge pool is available that supports better design and implementation. Financial and other costs may also be shared. This approach is more effective because the varied interests of stakeholders are identified, addressed in the design, shared ownership of the project equates to a greater chance of achieving the intended outcome. Projects are more sustainable because people are encouraged to use their knowledge and take initiatives while gaining skills and confidence to maintain the benefits once the projects are initially completed.

A4T's school building project in Wardack can serve as a good model of stakeholder's participation. The idea of the school came from the villagers themselves and at the onset of the project A4T had a community meeting in order to empower the members of the community. After consultation with villagers, A4T proposed plans and designs that were in complete harmony with the environment of Wardack. We have not only introduced thin shell roofing technology to the region but A4T has also trained local carpenters and engineers on how to construct similar buildings themselves in the future.

Stakeholder participation encompasses more than community or beneficiary participation. It is a concept which takes into account the interests and concerns of all the people affected by the project. It also allows the donor agency or NGO to see itself as just one of the stakeholders, with its own interests and perspective- a perspective which can influence and affect the participation of all concerned parties, just as those parties can influence the aid agency.

The degree of participation of the various stakeholders can vary at different stages in the delivery of aid according to their involvement in:

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- the identification of activity to be funded;
- decision-making and planning;
- bearing cost;
 - implementation;
 - receipt of benefits;
 - monitoring and evaluation.

From a technical viewpoint, the appropriate stage and the kind of participation should be decided upon in relation to the local social requirements for the nature of the aid being provided. Decisions about the extent and type of participation are not only technical but also political. Who decides whom should be involved?

In Wardack an initial meeting between all the stakeholders (A4T, community leaders, elders, teachers, and the common souls) was arranged by the community leaders themselves. The villagers discussed who should take what part in the project and A4T proposed its suggestions. There was a possibility of inciting a power conflict between the villagers and we decided to back off when political decisions had to be made but intervened when technical aspect of the projects were discussed.

Stakeholders have varying degrees of power to influence outcomes and also to decide which other stakeholders may be invited to participate and to what extent. From any stakeholder's perspective, participation can be seen as spectrum model with a range of delegation and, ultimately, to being in control. Those with less power tend to want greater participation in management of resources and access to benefits, while those with more power are usually reluctant to cede their power.

Enhancing participation by all stakeholders may, therefore, reveal a conflict of interests. For any project there should be **negotiation** between all stakeholders to find good enough practical outcomes in a situation of possible paradox-one where we want to make decisions based on our own values, while seeking to integrate into the decision making process the potentially different values of other stakeholders. Where poor women and men are involved, priority must be given to ensuring that their participation brings benefits rather than greater disadvantage. If the negotiations are seen as a zero sum game then the less powerful will usually lose. Projects must be implemented so

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that the poor are better off, while ensuring that the rich do not perceive themselves as losers.

Participation is an objective as well as a means when social development is the ultimate goal of any aid activity. In other projects, with economic or sector goals, enhanced participation may be seen as a means to achieving other objectives. In all cases the project framework should make this clear.

Constraints on Enhancing Participation in Project Design

Project stakeholders can be divided into three broad categories:

- one or more funding agencies
- one or more implementing agencies
- ultimate end-users or beneficiaries

Bearing in mind that attitude toward participation is one part of the triadic relationship which will affect the other two; we can identify four principal limiting factors which constrain stakeholders' capacity to participate:

- time;
- power relations;
- professionalism;
- cultural diversity

Time

People will only be interested in participation, either by themselves or by others, if they decide that the outcome is worth the time and energy invested in negotiating with the other stakeholders. The benefits, in other words, must be greater than the costs of participating.

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Funding agencies, donors, and NGO's are stakeholders who are often most concerned about the delays in implementation resulting from the need to consult and negotiate with the other stakeholders. Participation slows down disbursement and hinders necessary short-term management activities. Complete participation can result in complete inertia.

The longer term benefits of participation must be calculated against the short term costs. Organizations may use the time factor as an excuse for non-participatory approaches when they are aware that significant stakeholders, if permitted to be involved in the decision making process, might strongly disagree with the line of action proposed.

Management activities were slow in Wardak because of communication problems, weather related issues, and some times irresponsibility from the workers. The project started in 2003 and finished in 2005. It took two years of painful monitoring, frustration, as well as exceptional moments to complete the project. When participatory projects are implemented the time factor should always be considered and flexibility is key to the success of the project.

Power relations

Participation by those ultimately affected will be limited, and/or the participants will be unrepresentative, if some or all of the affected persons lack the power to organize and arrange fair representation for themselves. Participation of all or some of those affected may not be in the political interests of other stakeholders. There may also be a reluctance for the collective action because it may exacerbate existing conflicts or structural tension within or between households within a community. Participation can challenge existing power structures not only in the local community, but between communities and the bureaucratic machinery of the state. Under donor pressure, the aid recipient implementing agency may establish user groups or village-level committees of project beneficiaries but without making changes overall to its top-down, and hierarchical management structure. There may be no feedback to senior management because the local-level, community-based workers are actively discouraged from being involved in project decisions.

Professionalism

The professional training and culture of some sector specialists mitigates against a participation emphasis. For example, it could be argued in the health sector that beneficiary participation (or lack of it) is due to the fact that health professionals have traditionally tended to adopt a more top-down, authoritarian "expert knows best"

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approach to their clients than have some other technical specialist. But beneficiaries themselves may often decide that many management or planning tasks are best left to professionals, either because they recognize the added value of the professional expertise, or because they wish to save themselves time or energy “opportunity costs” and, in some cases, conflict. In Wardack highly trained US engineers found out that they should adopt some local traditional construction devices rather than be the sole expert not only to respect a participatory approach, but also because the devices were just simply very good.

Cultural Diversity

The extent to which aid recipient countries (and the communities within them) are culturally diverse can affect stakeholders’ capacity to agree on a common purpose and methodology for action. Stakeholders forming a politically dominant culture may ignore the values and knowledge of other stakeholders and effectively prevent them from participating in project decision-making. A key task is to use professional knowledge about cultural diversity to enhance mutual understanding among the various stakeholders engaged in designing the project.

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