

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PROJECTS IN IRAN

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Abstract: This article analyses the effectiveness and outcomes of people's participation (PP) in natural resource management projects in Iran. Two projects were selected as case studies on the subjects of watershed management and range management.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied to collect necessary data. The participants in the studied projects, as respondents in both cases, stated their economic and social well-being have not improved because of their participation in the projects as much as they expected. Their participation could not substantially benefit them and increase their income because of certain environmental problems and lack of management capacity among the directors.

In conclusion, participation had given some opportunity to rural people to decide who should be involved in the project, and provided shared influence in making ongoing decisions about what activities should be implemented; and what each individual had to contribute. However, decision-making power is still concentrated on the directors or local leaders. Furthermore, both projects are experiencing financial difficulties and suffering from some managerial weaknesses which undermined PP and have reduced its outcomes. It could be stated that PP is a necessary approach but not sufficient for promoting sustained rural development. Adequate attention should be paid to both the managerial and the technical dimension of projects.

Keywords: Rural development, participation, people's participation, natural resource projects

INTRODUCTION

Many factors may affect the level of success of any rural development (RD) project, PP in the project, and its outcomes and results. Not only the characteristics of the project may promote PP and influence the effectiveness of the project but also the characteristics of the environment in relation to the project can affect the success of the

project in meeting its goals. This study does not attempt to identify factors that might affect the effectiveness of the selected projects but as an evaluation aiming at the identification of the effectiveness of PP in these projects and its outcomes. The study analyses the findings obtained from the study area related to the issue of 'advantage of PP' in the selected projects. Case studies could help gain a deeper identification of the process of PP and allow clarification of the appropriate information on the results of PP as well. In this research, a case study is a detailed description and analysis of a single project and it was thought to be a suitable strategy to evaluate the selected projects.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the study is to identify the effectiveness of PP in the RD projects in Iran. This paper analyses the findings obtained from the study area related to the issue of 'advantages of PP' in the selected projects. As Oakley *et al.* (1991) believe where there is a direct link between participation and the achieving tangible project objectives, people (members of the project becomes beneficiaries. In this respect, the outcomes of PP are fairly similar to the outcomes of the project. On the other words, participation is seen as an end and/or both as a means and end in the project.

THE STUDY AREA AND SELECTED CASE STUDIES

Paveh district which is located in the west of Kermanshah province in Iran was selected as the area of the study. The district comprises 3 sub districts, 4 cities, and 107 villages. Map 1 shows the position of Kermanshah province in Iran. Several participatory projects have been carried out under local government organizations support, during the past decade in this area. For the purpose of this study, from several conducted participatory projects in the district, two projects were selected as case studies. The selected projects were: Mazidi range management project and Taze-Abad watershed management project.

It appears that the project has been faced with difficulties which have affected its success and socio-economic outcomes. Shortage of rainfall for several years in Paveh district has clearly affected the level of agricultural production and economic outcomes of the project. The arguments in the PRA discussions exposed another problem which has strongly affected the project's success and has undermined the people's spirit of collective decision-making and cooperation. Their discussions reflect that there has been a resurgence of natural resource conflicts in the project area. Differential access and control, changes in access patterns and especially inequitable access frequently caused conflict among the members particularly with the managers of the project.

Existing conflicts have mainly risen due to some shortcomings of the management system of the project and their insufficient management capacity. Although most of the managers were local leaders and have had the experience of working with people, they have still no specific knowledge of NRM and conflict management. Furthermore, the participants also believed in a form of discrimination and inequity in the manager's behaviour, though the managers strongly rejected this in the interviews. Ownership and property right issues also appear to be another concern in conflict over NR.

Similar to the Mazidi case, lack of monitoring and documenting project activities is obvious. The outcomes of the project itself fail to provide tangible demonstrations of the effects and benefits. Rural people usually have short-term aspirations and expectations and they would not continue to take part in participatory activities eagerly as the outputs of these activities are intangible for them. These problems and difficulties, together with the accompanying limitations of NRM, explain why the project has had less successful outcomes than hoped.

CONCLUSION

An overall conclusion of all two cases is presented based on the main research question which is what are the outcomes of people's participation?

(a) Participants, in both cases, stated their economic and social well-being has not improved as much because of their participation in the projects as they expected. It was understood that their participation in the projects could not substantially increase their household incomes because of some environmental problems and incapable management capacity of the projects. The participants, generally, believed that they did not get the maximum benefit from their labour, especially in women's case.

(b) From the point of employment opportunities, both cases have contributed to improve the current jobs of their members. The members of cases, on the whole,

believed that it was not effective as they expected. Both cases like many other participatory initiatives suffer from some administrative weaknesses and problems which have undermined PP. These cases are also experiencing financial and managerial difficulties so that conducted activities have not been at a high level. Certain physical and environmental, economic, political, social, cultural, and historical factors in the projects area might, directly or indirectly, affect the level of the outcomes of participation. Local physical and environmental characteristics, history and background of participation in the area, socio-economic system in which the projects have functioned, and cultural and religious beliefs might have a great influence on the way and pattern of PP. Possibility of making profits (benefits), sensibility of benefits and results, immediacy of outcomes, the way of offering services, methods of the distribution the benefits, ability and availability of the management of the project, the amount of government support (both technical and financial), and environmental conditions (e.g. rainfall) are perhaps some most important factors which might affect the outcomes of participation.

(c) Regarding the effect of the income from the project in the respondents' lives, the low impact on "saving" and "attention to education" is clear. This may indicate that the people had wants that had never been met before, and have therefore attempted to fulfil their wants and basic needs rather than save for the future. Concerning the influence of the 'meetings' of the projects in changing people's abilities, it appears that roughly at least 50 percent of the participants in the study believed that their skills and abilities had improved as a result of the project (scored from medium up to very high). Improvement in specific skills and abilities in two cases, the effect has been mainly on resource management and resource mobilisation. The findings showed that while the physical condition of the project area in the two NRM projects appears to have improved, there is not yet a substantial flow of benefits from the project to the community members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Adult education: adult education and training is a high priority issue which leads to better achievements to real goals of RD. This is an effective way of overcoming some of the difficulties that inhibit rural participation in the study area. Moreover, local resources can never be managed well unless the users are well-educated and involved in NRM. Training in resource management and marketing must be undertaken particularly to improve people's abilities and confidence. There has to be an improvement in creative management on the part of project managers

so that the project's outcomes would be increased and can be 'scaled up' and continued effectively.

Increasing external funds and support: it should not be ignored that government as the central power is still the moving motor of PP in countries like Iran. It means local participation may not occur easily without government's support considering the dominant economic and cultural situation in rural communities. Evidences show that both cases are suffering from the lack of both financial and managerial sources. Developing rural areas through conducting participatory projects depends on economic and technical support beyond the control of the decisions of the projects.

Realistic expectations and accessible goals and objectives: participatory initiatives often suffer from some weaknesses that undermine the process and reduce their impact. Unrealistic expectations and long-term outcomes may be two important problems particularly in NRM projects that can create or increase disappointment among the members. Rural people usually have short-term aspiration and expectations so that they would take part in public activities which their output are visible for them shortly. The practitioners of participation must be aware not only to create real expectation among local people from their participation, but also to persuade them to accept and expect long-term outcomes.

Attention to monitoring and evaluation: the absence of monitoring and evaluation of participatory activities is obvious in the three cases. This has led to difficulties both in assessing the cost-effectiveness of operations and in improving plans and correcting mistakes. The project managers and beneficiaries had to be persuaded of the importance of monitoring and evaluation.

Sustainable RD through participation: Sustainability would be increased in NRM projects where a high degree of both co-management and self-management is achieved through participation, organisation, education, and making visible the achievements, accompanied with the continued supports from government. More attention should be paid to both the managerial and the technical dimension of the lands. Participatory approach to NRM is necessary but not sufficient for promoting the sustained development of NR. Promoting both co-management and self-management are necessary. Finally, in summary, the following conclusions and recommendations are made for the achievement of sustainable RD: (a) PP is a necessary approach but not sufficient for promoting the sustained RD. Adequate attention should be paid to capacity-building and the managerial and technical dimensions of projects. (b) The management of NR to obtain

maximum benefit will require more willingness, intensive, and cooperation of all people.

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