

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNITY BASED APPROACHES TO ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Vikas Nath
Inlaks Fellow (2000-1)
London School of Economics, UK
V.Nath-Alumni@lse.ac.uk
<http://www.VikasNath.org>

Community based Approaches and its Genesis

The recognition of community based approaches to management of environment and development was in 1990s, when the focus of the environmental community was on the international development agenda and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was about to set in. This focus culminated into the emergence of the global consensus towards the concept of "Sustainable Development" that should be based on local-level solutions derived from community knowledge and initiatives. Such reasoning finds strong support in the Ecologist's (1972) "Blue Print for Survival", Schumacher's (1973) "Small is Beautiful", and the Brundtland Commission Report. The statements of intent on global environmental problems following the Earth Summit, including Agenda 21 and the Desertification Convention, strongly advocate as solutions a combination of government decentralisation, devolution to local communities of responsibility for natural resources held as commons, and community participation. (Holmberg et al. 1993). The decade set into the process the embedding of spaces for local communities to participate and influence the generally top-down environmental policies laid down by the government.

Community based approaches to development is generally agreed to be some kind of "co-management", or an appropriate sharing of responsibilities for natural resources management between national and local governments, civic organisations, and local communities. This kind of management practices is certainly in contrast to the top-down, state-centred and controlled environment management practices in which people figure as actors that need to be governed rather than involved in the management practices.

The genesis of community-centred development is however not a recent one. For centuries, the earth has witnessed practicing of a management regime through which the local communities have been fulfilling their present needs from the nature and have also been leaving behind optimum amount of natural capital to enable future generations to fulfil their needs. There has always been a close harmony between people and nature in this kind of managerial system, and people formed an integral part of the immediate ecosystem. The changing needs of some sections of the community over time (influenced by changing lifestyles and quality of life of people in urban domain) and their fulfilment of needs through sources other than the immediate ecosystem led to a gradual weakening of the linkages between communities and nature, and which finally manifested in the form of a state-centred management system. Strong linkages between humans and nature are the pre-condition to community based approaches to environment and development.

Defending Community centred Approaches

What the critiques say?

The critiques of community based approaches to environment and development centre their arguments around the absence of community consensus on concrete strategies and action plans, and their failure to translate into expected improvements in the environment. (Leach, Means, Scoones). The IDS environment group research project on *environmental entitlements: the institutional dynamics of environment change*, brings in the notion of conflicts to suggest that it is rather conflicts than consensus which are the key features associated with community based approaches and at the same time dismisses the occurrence of conflicts as a reason to depart from community based management practices. These arguments, in some way, focus upon the weakness of communities to manage their immediate environment in absence of necessary capacity, skills and a common understanding.

While, these arguments may hold true in specific domains where the communities share only weak linkages with the immediate natural capital or have witnessed sudden losses such as wars, famine etc., or have strong influence from the wider-economy domain, but more often than not, the case is not of lack of local capacities and skills but of misinterpretation in the analysis. The emergence of this stream of thinking that community centred approaches fail to deliver is rooted in the fallacies relating to basic assumptions and the choice of criteria indicators for evaluation of these processes. We will first discuss about the fallacies in assumption to be followed by fallacies in evaluation indicators.

Fallacies in Assumption: *existence of homogenous communities*

The most common assumption working to the detriment of community based management practices is the existence of homogenous societies. The existence of such communities is largely a myth as people come together for specific objectives / purposes and then disassociate once that objective is met unless bound by another common objective. The more appropriate term would be the existence of User Groups in a community which are threaded together by a common resource problem and its solution. The User Groups however are heterogeneous in all other attributes viz. social, economic and political orientation.

User groups could be centred around forests, water bodies, common land etc. Further, same people may be in different User groups and all these User groups may function independently or in conflict with each other. In general, the members of land-resource User Groups are often geographically clustered around a watershed - as households in the same micro-watershed face similar kinds of resource problems and have similar socio-economic strata. For example, households located in the upper reaches of a watershed face similar land degradation and soil run-off related problems and therefore could potentially form a User Group centred around land development activities such as Contour Bunding. In the lower reaches, the common problems of households could be water-induced erosion and therefore could potentially form a User Group centred around creation of a check dam or a water harvesting structure or a drainage channel.

Consequently, the whole village or an entire community cannot be a homogenous entity as generally assumed. Further, the watershed boundaries rather than the village boundaries are a technically more appropriate way to deal with community based approaches and to construct the notion of homogenous user groups.

Fallacies in Assumption: *diversified environmental values framework*

It is an underlying fact, that a given natural resource has multifarious values and therefore different individuals rank the value of the same resource differently based on the use they derive from it. Forests could be viewed as potential agricultural land by shifting cultivators; as a source of lumber by the rich households or absentee landlords; as a source of fodder by the pastoral community, and as a source of tuber, medicines etc. by the forest-based communities. In such cases, the differences in environmental value frameworks are an expected outcome and need to be integrated in the community based management programmes. The failure to recognise this in the planning of developmental interventions often creates more problems than it solves.

For example, *Prosopis juliflora* is often considered as a weed by most of the economically well-off communities but it serves as a poor man fuel in absence of any kind of fuelwood and its seeds are sometimes often mixed in preparation of the fodder material for the livestock. *Prosopis* growing on the common land therefore does not evoke much interest of the well-off communities and its use is solely restricted to the economically weaker households. Nevertheless, any development intervention made to enhance the quality of common land by replacing *juliflora* with a high quality fuelwood species, will evoke the attention and interest of other communities and would further marginalize the interest of the disadvantaged communities. Consequently, it is imperative to understand the within-community resource value framework through the sample matrix given below and only then carefully plan those development interventions which enhance the value of a resource to a degree that they bring in other stakeholders with different values.

Resource- Use matrix

Classes → ↓ Resources		WITHIN COMMUNITY VALUE DIFFERENTIATIONS BASED ON EQUITY AND OCCUPATIONS				
Economically Well-Off	Economically Marginalised	Farming Commun.	Landless Labourers	Pastoral Communities	Forest Commun.	
Degraded Forests	No Use	Fuelwood, Food and Fodder	Stones	Tubers, Building Material	Green Fodder	NTFP, Medicine, Religion
Production Forests	Timber	Bamboo, Production Residue, Building Mtrl.	Soil, Water	Employment	Grass in Buffer Area	None
Grassland	None	Fodder	Soil	None	Fodder	Medicine
River/ Rivulet	Irrigation	Drinking water	Irrigation and Well-Rechrg.	Employment	Drinking water for Cattle	Drinking water, Sacred Groves
Mountain Slopes	Soil, Stone Mining	Stones, Farming, Habitation	Stones, Soil	Habitation	Open Grazing	None

Source: Vikas Nath, *Models for Significant Change Monitoring, Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, 1996.*

Fallacies in Evaluation of Approaches: *inappropriate diagnostic indicators*

In evaluation of community centred approaches, there is often an error in separating the symptoms of failure from the underlying causes or what is termed as Proximate and Fundamental causes to failure. To cite the case of Rhino-poaching gangs in Zimbabwe or the hunting down of tigers in Asia - it is often due to the existence of well-organised black markets and high economic stakes which create an environment which fosters the killings and trade in such commodities. The proximate cause to loss of wildlife in such case would be the local criminal gangs or even the local people which operate as pawns of the market agents but the fundamental cause is the presence of international markets for such products existing in Taiwan, Thailand etc. and unless the international community and negotiations like CITES/ TRAFFIC strongly asserts itself on this, the proximate causes would continue to wrongly divert the causes of the problem to be local community-induced.

Further, a significant overlook which happens in the evaluation of community based approaches is the absence of process indicators. The focus is entirely on outcome indicators which are fairly easy to quantify and measure, such as increase in forest cover and quality, increase in soil fertility, increase in water-levels etc. Nevertheless, a significant change also occurs in this entire process of community based management, which is reflected in terms of bonding of the community (or certain sections of it), raise in levels of empowerment, greater political awareness etc. It is equally important to measure significant changes in these processes as they impact on the sustainability of outcome indicators long after the external support is withdrawn. In the case of Community-based Watershed Management in India, the tribal leader could resist the pressure of mine owner, only because of more awareness and support from the community. (Ahluwalia, 1999)

Needless to say, significant changes in process indicators happen over a much longer time but these changes are also more irreversible in nature such as increase in the levels of education and understanding of issues among the community. A balance therefore needs to be made between high levels of improvement in outcome indicators vis-à-vis significant improvement in the process indicators and both these indicators need to be taken into account before judging the outcome of community centred approaches. High levels of improvements in process indicators often lay the foundation for high levels of outcome indicators for future projects. For example, providing

environmental education to school children at the primary level could ensure better management of natural resources in future.

Approaches to Better Community Managed Projects

Community based approaches can yield better results through the creation of a conducive environment, appropriate incentives, focusing on Win-Win situations and next best alternatives, and through better understanding of the local dynamics.

Conducive Environment for Participation

Participation in any project is a time-intensive activity and therefore it is essential to create conditions where the benefits of participation are greater than the costs of seclusion. Conducting of village level meetings in or late-night meetings may well enough be the reason to increase the costs of participation for farmers staying in far-off fields and for women respectively. Further, holding frequent meetings often leads to participants suffering from law of diminishing interest syndrome and results in low attendance and hence inadequate representation of the community in decision-making. Common, interest-based activities therefore need to be identified to serve as an incentive for participation for regular meetings. For example, initiation of regular savings and credit activity, adult literacy classes, or income generating activities etc. as a part of the regular meetings. In Madhya Pradesh, India, rope-making is an important activity carried out by the women during participation in the meetings.

Better Targeting of Incentives

It is a well known fact that incentives and subsidies provided by government and aid agencies are often skewed in nature to benefit only a privileged few. For example, in private-land based subsidies aimed at decreasing the pressure on common land, it is often the rich farmers who benefit the maximum as they have large areas of land- some of which could be left fallow for land improvement activities. Even in the case of construction of check dams and water harvesting structures to foster in-situ conservation of water, it is the rich farmers who possess wells on their land, who stand to benefit most from these interventions. Mechanisms therefore need to be built into the incentive regime to elicit equal participation from all- especially the landless households who are most likely to be secluded from any benefits except for secondary employment benefits. Stressing on labour contribution rather than monetary contribution from the households are more likely to benefit economically weaker households. Focusing on public land based subsidies vs. private land based subsidies may also provide equitable benefits in certain situations where the resource is scarce and it is more advantageous to convert it in a public good rather than a private good. For example – subsidies on lift irrigation schemes than private irrigation schemes.

Focusing on Win-Win Situations and Next Best Alternative

As we have earlier seen, the same resource may have a different use value for a different section of the community. Hence conflicts arising in terms of what value to conserve and manage is natural. In such cases, it becomes important to focus on creating win-win situations rather than win-lose situations. For example, in the case of reforestation of common land with trees, it may be strategic to develop a part of it as pasture land too, to enable the herding community to take immediate benefits from it as they stand to lose the maximum on total barricading of the land for forestry programme. The *Sukhomajri* model in Haryana, India, is based on these differentiated benefits to elicit involvement of all sections of the society. Selection of next-best alternative could also be a strategic option to ensure that the spreads of benefits are more equitable. For example- construction of water harvesting structures in a community but not allowing direct irrigation to provide recharge benefits to far-off fields too is a better solution compared to allowing direct irrigation benefits which will only benefit surrounding farmers.

Understanding of Local Dynamics

This is perhaps the most important condition to successful community based management projects. A community may be fragmented by a number of attributes- such as caste system, class system, occupations, political orientation etc. In such cases, it is easy for any idea/ external intervention to be

labelled as a privy of certain fragmented group. Focus should be therefore on involvement of all sections of the society right from the planning to the execution stage. Further, it is also important to involve key resource people such as teachers, village institutional members, women etc. in a single or separate groups to minimise the default seclusions in the community- which are impossible to fully eliminate. Political orientation and power equations too need to be assessed in planning of community centred tasks. Understanding of local customs, religions and norms too become important as it is often possible to use them for building community partnership. Planting of sacred tree species for example in common land would automatically create a religious fencing around the land for its protection.

CASE STUDY

Providing Drinking Water – Community Approach vs. External Approach

The World Bank mega-scheme on providing drinking water through piped scheme in coastal area of Gujarat failed miserably as they did not take people's opinion in project formulation. Fresh water is a scarce resource in coastal Gujarat because of the problem of salinity ingress. The World Bank scheme focused on distributing fresh water from a large reservoir in that area to far-off villages by laying pipelines. The scheme was not only expensive but even pompous as it was based on transferring of a scarce resource from one area to the other without taking people's opinion into consideration. As a result not only was there an opposition to the scheme from the villages surrounding the reservoir but the villages through which the pipelines passed through without offering them any benefits- cut up the pipelines in their village. Now all that remains are depilated structures in villages which were to benefit from the pipeline scheme.

The alternate solution to it was not only cost-effective but also more environmental friendly and based on people's participation. Meetings were conducted by a local NGO- Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, in the affected villages and people were invited to give their opinion about the problem with an assurance of some form of support to the initiative decided upon by the people. During one such meeting, it was suggested to construct Percolation cum Drinking Water wells in the village to tap the flow of all the rainwater falling in the village towards a well to recharge it fully and then use its water during the lean months. The selection of well was done through people's participation based on their contextual knowledge. They collectively identified a place in the village which witnessed the maximum rainwater discharge and therefore was an ideal place for the percolation well. Since the well in such cases are always in the low-lying areas- they do not need to be dug up very deep. The cost is minimal and people agreed to pay 10%-30% of the cost of the well depending on the economic potential of the communities. They further agreed to pay some yearly contribution for the maintenance and upkeep of the well.

This scheme was not only successful and replicated in over 30 villages in the area but it also involved a better management of resources as it was based on in-situ conservation and harnessing of a scarce resource. More importantly, it brought up a feeling of collective management unlike in the case of piped-water schemes which would have converted water into a private good with no cost of appropriation.

Source : Field Notes, Vikas Nath, AKRSP-India.

The Way Forward

As in any area of human endeavour, community management can take place in blissful ignorance of the top-down management practices provided that the policy, social and economic conditions are favourable. Some community management systems have existed for centuries, and may continue to operate with no external intervention of any sort. The way ahead is a development model which is based upon local level solutions that are firmly based on the specific needs of the local communities and are shaped by the knowledge that communities have incubated over time while living in close

harmony with the nature. External solutions would be successfully implemented by local communities only if they fully assimilate with its local dynamics and thought process.

The focus should be on formation of different User Groups, preferably on watershed basis, with adequate attention paid to the societal dynamics. Conflicts arising in resources management should be seen as an indicator of vibrant practices and can never be completely done away with. They enhance the value of resource in question. Further, any one particular group cannot be expected to take over all the functions of community based management and it is not even necessary that the sustenance of this group lies in its vertical and horizontal expansion. For example - a user group formed around repair and maintenance of a check dam is best suited for the same task without working on its expansion to take over other higher-order roles. Shortcomings are certainly there, as community based approaches are complex phenomena and they may yield different results in different situations. Nevertheless, game-theory modelling may be used to pre-empt the moves of different stakeholders and provide a win-win situation.

In simple terms, there is to shift over from the traditional management practise adopted by the government and other agencies that is based on "We know everything, people do not know anything".

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