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Participatory planning by the book: lessons from the region of Mopti, Mali

SPECIAL ISSUE

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Introduction

In this article I will describe the process by which Rural Councils in Mali, a land-locked country in the Sahel (West Africa), establish local development plans in a participatory manner in order to qualify for a grant from a central Capital Development Fund. Gaining access to funds from this grant is critical because most Rural Councils in Mali are unable to fund their local development activities from the taxes they raise locally. Mali is a poor country, but it is also a country with very little experience of local government. It was only three years ago in 1999 that Malian citizens elected the first generation of government officials in rural areas, the Mayors of Rural Councils, and the majority of local people are still highly sceptical of the whole process and are unwilling to part with their money.

The success of the decentralisation process hinges on Rural Councils being able to deliver appropriate, cost-effective and affordable services to their constituents. Local people are less interested, in the short term, with the ideals of participating in the affairs of local government. They want to see tangible problems such as poor health and education facilities, inadequate water supplies, lack of marketing opportunities, impassable roads, etc. being addressed, and addressed quickly. The Government of Mali is well aware of this and as such they have established the l'Agence National

d'Investissement des Collectivités Territoriales (ANICT). This is a government body responsible for delivering grants to fund local development activities. Various bilateral and multi-lateral donors provide the money, which the ANICT disburses, and they have made their financial contributions conditional on local government bodies applying participatory approaches throughout the planning process.

Participatory planning in the region of Mopti

The United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) has taken responsibility for supporting the decentralisation process in the Mopti region of Mali, and in 2000 it established the *Projet d'Appui aux Communes Rurales de Mopti* (PACRP). This project provides funds to pay for the Rural Councils members (the Mayor and his or her councillors) to receive training in how to design a local development plan in a participatory manner, and thereby be eligible to bid for money from the ANICT. The training is subcontracted out through a competitive tendering process to non-governmental organisations and/or private consulting firms. These organisations sign a contract with the project in which they agree to train the Rural Council members in how to design a detailed one-year, and more general three-year, development plan and budget in a participatory manner with local people.

The contracted organisations are expected to follow a standard process, which is outlined in a manual provided by the project. This manual is in effect based on a generic planning process designed by a consulting firm in Bamako (the capital city) at the request of the central government to ensure that the whole country broadly followed a similar planning procedure.

The theory as explained in the manual

There are six distinct steps to the planning process:

1. Awareness-raising

The councillors, after having being trained, start the planning process with an information campaign within their jurisdictions, to explain to their constituents what a local development plan is, why it is important, how it is going to be done and why it is critical that everyone in the Rural Council participates in the process. The information is disseminated by whatever means possible including local radio, Friday prayers, weekly market days and personal visits by the councillors to the villages. A rota for visiting each village in turn in order to start the planning process proper is also established at this time.

2. Village-level meetings to identify local problems

A meeting is held in each and every village of the Rural Council to identify the problems facing the communities, and the sorts of resources they have in the village (e.g. a well, a communal market garden, a small dam, etc.) The manual recommends that these meetings last no more than three hours, but that they include everyone who lives in the village. Councillors are expected to ensure that everyone participates.

3. Inter-village meeting

After each village has had a visit from the councillors to identify their problems, an inter-village meeting is held at the Rural Council level at which each village sends four representatives. These are usually the village chief (or his representative), one woman representing the interests of the women, one youth representing the interests of the youth and the village secretary responsible for taking notes. The inter-village meeting lasts between three and four days, during which time every village takes turns to describe its problems and how they might be resolved. All this information is written down on flip chart paper or blackboards. Once every village has had the chance to describe its situation, the meeting classifies the problems according to whether they are the responsibility of the village, the Rural

Council, the District, the Region or the State. The laws explaining the roles and responsibilities of the decentralised government bodies are referred to in order to guide the discussion.

Once this exercise has been done, the meeting focuses on those problems specific to the Rural Council. These are written down on a separate sheet of paper or blackboard, and are systematically discussed, one by one, to establish the origins of the problems and how they might be solved. Finally, the meeting prioritises these problems according to their degree of urgency.

4. Planning workshop

Following the inter-village meeting, a planning workshop is held between the councillors and the government technical services (e.g. the local forestry department, the veterinary office, etc.) Together they look at each problem to see whether or not it is correctly stated, and reformulate it if necessary. The problems are then classified by sector (e.g. health, agriculture, education, etc.) mirroring the composition of the government technical departments. Each problem is then analysed to establish its cause, and a technical solution and its cost are proposed. On the basis of this analysis, the councillors decide which problems they can afford to address within the context of their overall budget. At this stage in the process there is often a lot of debate as the councillors are conscious of the need to respond to as many of the populations' problems as they can and to ensure a degree of equity between villages within the Rural Council. Political as well as economic considerations are at play.

However, once a final choice is made, the implementation of the activities are planned over a three year period and a conventional programme document is prepared: overall objectives, specific outcomes, a plan of activities, a budget, and criteria for monitoring progress are established, etc. This is the local development plan of the Rural Council.

5. Endorsement of the local development plan

A two to three day workshop is subsequently held at the Rural Council to endorse the local development plan. The four representatives from each village that attended the inter-village meeting return to attend this meeting. The councillors present the plan and their arguments for retaining certain problems and rejecting others, and for deciding to start in certain villages or with certain activities but not others. These meetings are tumultuous affairs. However, once a broad consensus has been reached the plan is amended as necessary and submitted to the government

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representative (the Préfet) who is responsible for ensuring that the proposed activities are in conformity with the laws of the land.

6. Implementation of the local development plan

Once the Préfet has approved the plan, the councillors return to all the villages in the Rural Council to discuss in detail how the plan is going to be implemented over the coming three years, and in what way the villages in question are going to contribute. In those villages where the first year's activities are to take place a detailed work plan is established.

After these village meetings the councillors hold a meeting formally to adopt the plan.

Participatory planning in practice: the Rural Council of Ondougou

The Rural Council of Ondougou is located in the heart of the Dogon Plateau, a rocky, inaccessible area with only one tarmac road and very little fertile land. The Rural Council is composed of ten villages with a total population of 4,800 people. The resident population are all Dogon farmers who cultivate rain-fed millet during the rainy season, but who rely on hand-irrigated market gardening (mainly onions) to supplement their diets and their incomes. Seasonal migration of young men and women to larger urban centres, where they earn cash as daily labourers and/or domestic workers, is an important source of revenue, and many people also invest in livestock.

In 2001, I helped the Rural Council of Ondougou to design its local development plan in a participatory manner, and the whole procedure took about two months from start to finish. I followed the guidelines as laid down in the UBCDF manual, and although the latter has been useful in certain respects it also has a number of conceptual and practical flaws.

The first difficulty I had was in training the ten councillors on how to facilitate a participatory planning process. The councillors are illiterate and do not speak any French, whereas I do not speak Dogon, and the UNCDF manual is in French. All the work had to be done through interpreters,

which not only slowed down the process, but also introduced the problem of misinterpretation. The manual has many words and concepts, which do not have their equivalent in the Dogon language and so have to be fully explained. Since I do not understand Dogon I had no way of knowing whether or not the interpreters were explaining the terms properly.

The second problem we encountered was at the level of the village. After the training period, the councillors went off in pairs to carry out the village-level meetings. As explained above, these meetings are supposed to last three hours, during which the whole community is expected to list all their problems and describe what resources they have to solve them. The manual insists on the fact that the meetings must be participatory and that everyone (women, youth, etc.) attend and speak out, and that it is the job of the councillors to ensure this happens. I accompanied the councillors at two village meetings, both of which took much longer than three hours, and although women did physically attend, little was done to help women or men to present a gender-differentiated vision of the village's problems. The main problem is that the planning process does not provide any appropriate tools to help illiterate and highly differentiated communities analyse their situation. There are, for example, no visual PRA or PLA tools such as community resource mapping or institutional mapping. The process consists of the councillors asking questions, the village chief and his elders replying and the village secretary taking notes.

A similar problem was encountered when we held the inter-village meetings at the level of the Rural Council in the village Oudougou Dah. Here the spokesperson for each village stood up and listed his village's specific problems and proposed solutions. This information was laboriously translated into French and noted on large sheets of paper, which the majority of the people couldn't read. By the time each village had had their turn many people couldn't remember what had been said earlier, which greatly hampered the process of participatory analysis that subsequently took place. In reality relatively few people actually participated in the process of identifying and analysing those problems that are the responsibility of the Rural Council.

The next stage involving the Government's technical services was also problematic. Here the problem was not so much to do with language but different perceptions and interests. For example, one of the problems listed by one of the villages was the fact that they did not have a public square in which to hold public meetings. As a cheap solution, they proposed that they be allowed to use the schoolyard for such purposes

when the school was closed in the rainy season. The school director, backed by the other technical staff, rejected this on the grounds that the schoolyard should not be used for any other purpose. Yet the real reason, as the discussions finally revealed, was the fact that the school director planted crops in the schoolyard over the rainy season when the school was closed!

The councillors and the Mayor did in the end come up with a plan that was subsequently discussed, amended and approved by the community. This plan is now being implemented thanks to the Rural Council successfully receiving a grant from ANICT.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, elected local government bodies are a relatively new phenomena in Mali and that it will take time before local people fully understand what is expected of them, and decide to seize the initiative in ensuring that their elected representatives account for their actions. There are also enormous challenges to overcome in a country where the majority of the population are illiterate and where communications are extremely difficult and costly.

One of the major issues is that of participation versus quality participation. It is not enough just to associate local people with a process, which is largely driven from outside, and according to a pre-established set of steps, and then say they have participated. Genuine participation demands a

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certain number of pre-conditions. For example, local people need to improve their own capacities to be able to participate. This includes a better understanding of the issues at stake, an ability to carry out their own analysis and planning prior to participating in the Rural Council level exercise, and an ability to create the time and space to ensure that all members of their community are involved, etc. This requires that more attention be paid to the preparatory phase at the village level. One three hour meeting without any visual aides is clearly inadequate for the community to prepare for the higher-level meeting at the Rural Council level. We found that many village representatives were unable to argue their case effectively, particularly at the moment when the Mayor and his councillors presented the draft planning document. Even though the Government has made the Rural Council the focal point of the decentralisation process in Mali, more time needs to be spent equipping local people to participate in the process.

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