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Managing the Learning Process in Rural Development: The Case of the DENR's Upland Development Program

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Since its implementation in the early '80s, the Upland Development Program (UDP) of the DENR has attempted to operationalize the "learning process approach" in rural development planning. Directed to the development of the social forestry program as the principal learning agenda, this approach posits that the key to the program's success is to learn by doing. Thus, the program embarked on two major objectives: (1) to operationalize the participatory approach towards organizing uplanders for the protection and management of upland resources while simultaneously addressing poverty; and (2) to develop the necessary institutional capacities for effective implementation of such approach. Although the UDP can boast of its many accomplishments, there is still much to be done to effectively implement the program in a participatory manner. Moreover, it has to respond to the urgent call of devolution brought about by the new Local Government Code.

Introduction

Achieving "people participation" in rural development projects is easier said than done. Now a fashionable term, "people participation" is used loosely by various groups to describe varying degrees of people's involvement in decisionmaking, implementation, and evaluation of activities meant to encourage economic and social development of marginalized communities. In many cases, the "blueprint approach to development planning" described by D.C. Korten (1980) still underlie so-called "participatory" development project in spite of protestations to the contrary. Consequently, the rural poor continue to be marginalized while the position of traditional local elites continue to be strengthened.

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A learning process approach to rural development planning has been provided as an alternative to the blueprint approach. Examining a number of Asian programs, D.C. Korten (1980), the original proponent of this approach, suggests that more successful programs grow out of village experiences. By developing from the ground, as it were, these programs are able to achieve an unusual degree of fit between beneficiary needs, program outputs, and the competence of the assisting organization. The ability to benefit from inductive learning or to learn by doing is the key behind these program's successes.

The learning process approach is currently recommended for use by development organizations that would like to: (a) embark on a new mode of working with client groups; (b) develop effective methods or strategies of work; and (c) develop the institutional capacities to use these new methods and perform new tasks effectively. It assumes that the agency is willing to accept and learn from its mistakes, to learn with people, and to build new knowledge and institutional capacities through action.

A Learning Agenda for Upland Development

The learning process approach[1] was adopted by the Bureau of Forest Development in the early '80s as its mode of developing its social forestry program. Development of the social forestry program posed a great challenge to the agency: it required the agency to transform itself into a developmental agency from the punitive, regulatory body that it originally was. This further required reorienting foresters, and the entire forestry bureaucracy, towards working with the upland occupants—whom they originally viewed as squatters and criminals—and regarding them as partners in upland development. This meant redefining the role of foresters from being the policemen of the forests to being organizers of upland resource user communities. The Upland Development Program (UDP), a Ford Foundation-supported program, served as the umbrella program for the bureau's program of learning.

Focusing on the development of a social forestry program as its principal learning agenda, the UDP had the following specific objectives: (1) the development of participatory approaches towards organizing uplanders to protect and manage upland resources while also addressing upland poverty; and (2) assisting the agency develop the institutional capabilities to implement such participatory approaches effectively and efficiently.

The UDP's learning program was overtaken by events when, in 1982, Letter of Instruction (LOI) 1260 launched the agency's Integrated Social Forestry (ISF) Program. Because the program embodied the goals and ideals which it thought appropriate for a socially-oriented forestry program, the UDP

made the ISF the focus of its learning agenda. From 1984 onward, then, UDP focused on helping the agency, particularly its Social Forestry Division, to operationalize the goals and strategies of the ISF following a participatory approach, and develop the necessary institutional capacities to effectively implement such approach.

Other events overtaking the UDP included the 1986 reorganization by central government of the forestry agency. Under the Aquino administration, the Bureau of Forest Development, the agency mandated to protect and manage the uplands, became merely a staff bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). Under the new setup, implementation of the Integrated Social Forestry Program became the responsibility of the office of the DENR Undersecretary for Field Operations. Involvement of the BFD, through its social forestry division, was delimited to policy formulation and monitoring. Consequently, leadership of the UDP was transferred directly to the office of the USEC for field operations. However, the social forestry division retained an active role in the day-to-day management of field activities.

Operationalizing the Learning Process Approach

Several features characterized the structures operationalizing the learning program that the UDP embarked on from 1981 to date. These included the following:

Phased Learning

Following Korten's (1980) three-stage framework of learning to be effective, learning to be efficient, and learning to expand, the UDP underwent: from 1981 to 1983 an exploratory research stage; from 1984 to 1988 a field experimentation stage; and from 1989 to date, a limited expansion stage. In the first stage, case studies were undertaken by academe-based research institutions to understand the nature of the upland problem. The second and third stages are the subject of the next key feature.

Implementation of Pilot Projects

After ascertaining the key elements that needed to go into social forestry projects, the UDP implemented pilot projects. The elements identified as key to project implementation that were tried out in these projects were: (1) promotion of agroforestry and soil and water conservation technologies to address the problems of upland degradation and low productivity; (2) the

securing of forest occupants' access rights to the areas they cultivated and occupied through the granting of 25-year stewardship certificates; and (3) the formation or strengthening of community organizations to support local development efforts.

From 1984 to 1988, three pilot projects were chosen in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. The project sites were chosen on the basis of the ethnic composition of the communities they encompassed, degree of ecological degradation, and accessibility.[2] After developing a participatory implementation framework (Bacalla, Borlagdan, *et al.* 1989) on the basis of lessons from the UDP and other project experiences, 13 additional pilot projects were opened in 1989.

Working Group

The Upland Development Working Group was created to function as manager of the learning program. From 1981 to 1983, in addition to the Ford Foundation and the BFD, the group included the research institutions that undertook case studies on socially oriented projects of the agency.

From 1984 onwards, the Working Group included nongovernment organizations involved in organizing rural communities for development work. It also included academe-based foresters and agricultural technicians whose role was to help develop methods for promoting agroforestry and ecologically appropriate natural resource management systems.

At the moment, the Working Group is composed of representatives from the agency, the Ford Foundation, and "resource institutions" such as the College of Forestry of the University of the Philippines (CF-UPLB), the Research Center (RC) of De La Salle University, the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC) of the Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP), and the Center for Social Research (CSR) of the Visayas State College of Agriculture.[3] The member institutions provide specific services to the program: CF-UPLB oversees the training in agroforestry promotion of UDP fieldworkers and provides technical assistance to projects on a needs basis; IPC, RC, and CSR undertake process documentation research and other research studies; while PBSP conducts trainings and supervises fieldworkers in their community organizing activities.

Because of the specific activities that the different resource institutions are contracted to do in the project site, they are actively involved in problem solving activities related to developments in the field. Consequently, discussions at the working group level deal with field issues and problems and the lessons and implications they have for the larger social forestry program. Discussions lead to new tasks and roles for the resource institutions. Such

new tasks can involve the development of training curricula; organizing of regional meetings, trainings or workshops; fieldtrips to project sites; drafting of guidelines, circulars, or manuals; testing of field methodologies; and planning meetings or tactics sessions.

Process Documentation Research

Social science researchers are able to give feedback to the agency on actual activities, issues, and problems in the pilot projects through process documentation research. The research makes use of anthropological methods of data gathering to capture activities, events, and interactions between project participants and agency personnel as they unfold in the field. Providing detailed feedback on project developments through documentation reports on a regular basis,[4] the process documentation activity enables researchers and fieldworkers to cull lessons objectively from field experiences, and to realize their implications for other projects. These lessons are fed to the working group by the resource institutions undertaking the research for inputting into guidelines, training curricula, field operations manuals, and the like.

Major Accomplishments of the UDP

In assessing the accomplishments of the UDP, an important point needs to be raised, and that is: the learning agenda for the UDP demands that the program be evaluated not on the basis of performance in the pilot projects alone but, most especially, in the degree to which experiences in these pilot projects have helped bring about or reinforce changes and new ideas in the bureaucracy. This is not to say, however, that performance in the pilot project is not given importance in the program. On the contrary, performance serves as indicator of whether "right" or "wrong," "effective" or "faulty" approaches are being carried out. Such signals often send working group members to the field to find explanations for variations in performance. Both successes and failures, therefore, serve as rich sources of learning and are equally valued in the UDP.

Another point that needs to be raised is that given its understanding of the empowerment and social development goals of upland development, the UDP feels that present evaluation measures of the DENR—which are largely target—i.e., numbers-oriented—are inappropriate for the people-oriented nature of social forestry implementation in the UDP projects. The UDP believes that more appropriate indicators for use in summative evaluation still need to be developed. However, the task of creating such indicators has been put off in view of the other pressing tasks of the program. The UDP Limited Expansion Stage which began in 1989 is expected to continue up to 1994

at which time its 13 "new" pilot projects (i.e., those implemented in 1989) are expected to wind up following the recommended 5-year project cycle. Certainly, by 1994, summative evaluation measures for assessing the pilot projects must already be available.

The key accomplishments of the UDP on the program level include the following:

Clarification of ISF Implementation Framework

A key observation from process documentation research in the first three UDP pilot projects was that guidelines provided by LOI 1260 and other documents did not adequately guide fieldworkers in their work. The concepts of social forestry, forest stewardship, people participation, community organization, and even agroforestry were not clearly worked out in these guidelines. Consequently, project implementation proceeded in a random fashion and tended to focus on the activities that fieldworkers were more familiar with, namely, the conduct of parcellary surveys of occupied lands and issuing of stewardship certificate sans people participation.

The publication of the *Implementation Manual for Participatory ISF Projects* in 1989 by the UDP provided clearer directions needed for more systematic project implementation.[5] For the UDP, the manual serves as the "bible" for the implementation of the 13 new pilot projects in the Limited Expansion Stage. For the DENR, it serves as the basic reference for its "Model Sites" development program, a nationwide, large-scale foreign-funded program tied up with implementation of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). In the absence of other comprehensive reference materials on community organizing in the uplands, the manual conceivably influences as well implementors of other people-oriented forestry projects of the DENR such as the contract reforestation program and the community forestry program.

Rationalization of Project Structure

Together with developing a systematic scheme for implementing social forestry projects, the UDP also devised a rational structure for implementing and supporting social forestry projects. This structure is characterized by the assignment of one full-time fieldworker in a project site that is, preferably, about 300-350 hectares in area and encompassing 100-150 households. It also is characterized by a rational process of site selection whereby community profiling is first undertaken to determine whether or not candidate sites meet certain desired criteria.

This setup departed from the "project cluster" setup prior to 1989 whereby each social forestry technician was put in charge of ISSF implementation in five or six municipalities. Under this setup, too, project sites were seemingly randomly opened on the basis of whether or not stewardship certificates could be awarded to occupants. As a result, such "project sites" could have anywhere from two to a hundred or so of participants spread out over one or more municipalities. This setup made implementation and monitoring of projects extremely difficult to manage.

Starting around 1989, the concept of the full-time fieldworker was institutionalized by the DENR in its "model site" projects as well as its regular ISF projects. Efforts were also made to define project areas more clearly, and the conduct of perimeter surveys of project areas became standard procedure. Rather than continuing the practice of opening new sites willy-nilly, DENR began to focus on areas touched by ISF technicians with the intention of defining these "projects" more clearly.

Team Approach

Under the UDP, the fieldworker, who is expected to be more skilled in either the area of community organizing or in the technical aspects of agroforestry, is to be assisted on a needs basis by a support team from the Community Environment and Natural Resources Office (CENRO), his mother unit. The support team is to consist of the Community Development Assistant (CDA) who, like the fieldworker, is also assigned to a social forestry project nearby, and the Community Development Officer (CDO) who serves as the supervisor of the social forestry unit in the CENRO.[6]

Further assistance from the provincial and regional offices of the DENR are to be provided also by a regional support committee headed by the regional executive director and the regional technical directors for research and forest resource management. The committee is further composed of the regional social forestry chief, the Provincial Environmental Resource Officer (PENRO), as well as the Community Environmental Resource Officer (CENRO). The committee are expected to help facilitate logistical and administrative support for the fieldworker and the support team, and to help define or refine policies impinging on field implementation.

In the model site projects, the fieldworker is also supported by other members of the social forestry unit of the CENRO. Activities such as the conduct of regular review meetings or the conduct of jointly-organized trainings

for farmers' organizations serve the purpose of strengthening teamwork among social forestry technicians.

Development of Training Methodologies

Following the participatory implementation framework it espouses, the UDP has developed a system whereby fieldworkers receive training in stages depending on the activities they are expected to undertake at a particular phase of the implementation process.[7] Training curricula have also been developed for such support activities as community profiling, monitoring and evaluation, agroforestry farm appraisal and farm planning, and community organizing. Members of the working group who have developed expertise in these particular support areas are routinely requested to serve as resource persons for training programs of other people-oriented forestry projects of the agency.

Production of Manuals on Field Methodologies

In addition to the *Implementation Manual for Participatory ISF Projects*, the UDP has also produced other manuals that are circulated widely in the DENR. These are the *Handbook on Community Profiling for People-Oriented Forestry Projects* (1991), the *Handbook on Community Training Programs* (November 1991), and the *Monitoring and Evaluation Handbook* (1991). Training programs on community profiling and monitoring and evaluation following these handbooks are ongoing following the DENR's desire to institutionalize their use in the implementation of social forestry projects by local government units under the Local Government Code of 1991 (RA 7160).

Revision of ISF Implementing Guidelines

DENR based its revision of Ministry Administrative Order (MAO) 48, s. of 1988 which governed the implementation of the ISF for a few years, on draft revisions made by the Upland Development Working Group. The resulting document, Department Administrative Order (DAO) 4, s. of 1991, provided several important ramifications on the concept of stewardship, its transferability, and the participation of women in ISF projects.

The revised guidelines clarified who qualified as stewards, delimiting stewardship to actual tillers of upland areas and instituting a system of evaluating fulfillment of obligations by awardees of stewardship certificates.

It also legitimized the transfer of stewarded holdings from members of the steward's household to other community members who met qualifications of stewardship. It further legitimized the participation of women in ISF projects[8] by requiring names of both spouses to appear in stewardship certificates and by having projects reckon households rather than individuals as the projects' participant units.

Structural Impediments and Facilitating Factors

It is to be noted that to date, the UDP has already spanned a total of about 12 years. The twelve years of implementation may be roughly divided into seven years of hit-and-miss implementation characterized by innumerable organizational difficulties (1981 to 1987), a year of consolidation of field lessons (1988), another year for take-off (1989), and gradual institutionalization of UDP lessons into the bureaucracy.

Impediments

The slow progress of the UDP in the first seven years of its life can be attributed to several things:

Development of Teamwork in the Working Group. First was the fact that the working group itself had to learn to work together as a team, to develop a clear vision of its development goals, and to develop consensus on its role in shaping this vision together with the forestry bureaucracy. Up to about 1986, resource institutions tended to delimit their involvement in the learning process to the activities demanded by their contracts with the Bureau of Forest Development. This work pattern was broken only in 1988 with the success of the multi-institution committee in drafting and incorporating an interdisciplinary perspective into the UDP implementation manual. Subsequently, the working group went into a collaborative mode of operation characterized by the mobilization of *ad hoc* committees and task forces that were composed of representatives from the different resource institutions.

Constant Reorganization of the Bureaucracy. Another factor that slowed down the UDP's progress during this period was the instability of the forestry organization. From 1984 to 1987, reorganization of the bureaucracy took place at least four times, with the appointment of four different secretaries and the corresponding number of changes in the bureau directors. Instead of concentrating on field issues and problems, the working group found itself constantly having to brief new directors to its new program.

In the later years of the UDP, the following factors also served as impediments to the implementation of the participatory framework in the pilot projects (Borlagdan 1990).

Periodic Turnover of Managers. The practice of periodically reshuffling middle-level managers for various reasons created frustration among fieldworkers who found themselves constantly having to brief new CENROs or PENROs on the UDP framework, pretty much in the same way that the Working Group had to brief each new director or high-ranking official after each reorganization. The departure and arrival of managers often resulted in delays in project implementation.

Unwieldy Planning Cycle. Although the UDP was a special project, part of its funding, particularly for infrastructures, was provided by the national government through the CARP. Because all government budgets had to be negotiated with the Department of Budget Management prior to its approval by Congress, support funds for the implementation of ISF projects took a long time to come. Generally, funds for first quarter activities become available only at the end of the second quarter or, worse, in the third quarter of the fiscal year. In the absence of funds, project implementation tend to slow down and lose momentum during the first and second quarter of the year. The third and last quarters, in contrast, are characterized by frenzied activity aimed at meeting the targets to be accomplished within the year. This pattern of fund availability and field activity influenced project implementation in ways inimical to the participatory approach.

Target Orientation. Because the UDP pilot projects also accessed funds from the CARP, fieldworkers' performance also tended to be evaluated along the same lines as the other ISF projects, namely, on the basis of accomplishment of physical targets (e.g., number of trees planted, stewardship certificates awarded, infrastructures constructed, and so on). This evaluation practice directly contradicted the principles of participation since it encouraged fieldworkers to hasten the accomplishment of physical targets at the expense of process and the accomplishment of the ISF's social development goals.

Facilitating Factors

In spite of these impediments, the UDP was able to accomplish what it had accomplished because of several facilitating factors:

Keeping a Low Profile. In order to proceed with the learning process at a manageable pace, the UDP had to shun publicity and resist pressure to expand activities more rapidly than it was ready to do. It selected those issues that were immediately relevant to its development goals and limited the kind of involvement it was ready to give to other projects of DENR. By

focusing their energies on the UDP learning program, Working Group members were able to address various program needs at the time when these needed to be addressed.

Strong, Committed Leadership. The UDP took off in 1989 when a sympathetic Undersecretary for Field Operations took over the chairmanship of the Working Group. The official appreciated the goals of the UDP and the kind of service it could render the DENR. The official subsequently diligently presided over monthly working group meetings, providing efficient and clear directions for immediate actions. The official also threw his full support behind the program by mobilizing his office to facilitate administrative matters concerning the participation of lower officials—from regional directors to CENROs—in UDP activities. Thus, seeing the Undersecretary committed to the UDP, the regional executive directors and regional technical directors readily followed suit. Such support from the Undersecretary and the top regional officials greatly enhanced the credibility of Working Group members and the UDP as a whole.

Continuity of Involvement of Working Group Members. The presence of members of the Working Group who had been in the UDP since its early years helped provide a sense of history and continuity necessary for the accumulation of learnings to take place. Such members played a key role in transmitting to new members the development principles and values behind the learning program. They also played a key role in developing a sense of community among the different actors in the program.

Responsive Funding Agency. The flexibility of the Ford Foundation as regards allocation and management of the UDP grant money allowed the program enough elbow room to reprogram UDP funds as the need arose. The setting up of local trust funds through which money from the central office was channeled to the pilot projects allowed project staff immediate access to financial resources. Though UDP funds were much smaller in comparison to those of other special projects (₱72,000 per project per year as of 1990), the opportunity to manage project funds directly also helped fieldworkers develop a more responsible attitude towards project spending.

Concluding Notes

While much has already been accomplished by the UDP, much is still needed to be done to fully accomplish its goals of helping the DENR implement the ISF effectively in a participatory manner. In the area of agroforestry promotion alone, weaknesses in the training of fieldworkers need to be ironed out. Moreover, the various tasks associated with implementing agroforestry activities need to be clarified and the corresponding implementation tools

on community planning, and the revision of the *Implementation Manual for Participatory ISF Projects.*

Even as the UDP attempts to accomplish these tasks before 1994, it also has to respond to the more immediate need of assisting the DENR in devolving its ISF implementation functions to the local government units (LGUs). The devolution introduces a new player in the field of ISF implementation—the LGU. How the program could influence LGUs into embracing the participatory approach poses a challenge to the UDP. Further, how the program could help DENR support LGU attempts at participatory ISF program implementation poses even a larger challenge.

Endnotes

[1]In the Philippines, the National Irrigation Administration is recognized to have pioneered in the use of this learning process approach. See F.F. Korten and R.Y. Siy, Jr. *Transforming a Bureaucracy: The Experience of the Philippine National Irrigation Administration.* Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1989.

[2]The Luzon project was located in Malan-og, Mansalay, Mindoro. Inhabited by a largely homogenous community of Mangyans, the site was well-vegetated but had few remaining natural forests; it was the least accessible of the three sites. The Visayas project was located in Cebu; the most accessible of the three sites, it was also the most severely denuded. The Mindanao project was originally located in Basilan, in a logged-over area that enjoy the most abundant forest vegetation of the three sites. Because of the peace and order situation in the area, however, the project was transferred to a more accessible site in Zamboanga City that, like the Basilan site, was inhabited by a mix of Christians and several Muslim groups.

[3]Other resource institutions were also involved at various points in the past. These included the Institute of Environmental Science and Management of the UPLB, the Philippine Association for Intercultural Development, and the Research Institute on Mindanao Culture of Xavier University.

[4]Process documentation research was undertaken in the Mindoro pilot project by the Research Center of De La Salle University from 1984 to 1986 (See Ellen Chiong-Javier. *Building People Into Forestry,* DLSU, 1986). In the Cebu project, this was undertaken from 1984 to 1987 by IPC (See S.B. Borlagdan. *Working with People in the Uplands.* Ateneo de Manila University, 1987). IPC continues to undertake a less intensive form of documentation called "process monitoring research" of the Cebu project. Less intensive means that, instead of producing monthly reports as it did from 1984 to about 1988, IPC now produces quarterly "monitoring reports" in the form of updates instead (See C.M. Magno, M.C. Raymundo, and S.B. Borlagdan's *Bulolakaw Update.* PM Reports 1-3.)

[5]About 3,000 copies were initially produced by the DENR. In addition to the UDP, fund sources for publication included a UNDP-FAO "institutional-strengthening" project also working on the ISF.

[6]There is usually an average of 7 CDAS under one CDO in a CENRO.

[7]Thus, in the Phase I or Indicative Planning Phase (of roughly 6 months' duration), fieldworkers are provided training in basic community organizing skills. In Phase II or Model Farm Development Stage, they are trained on more complex organizational management concerns including community planning.

[8]Some of the structural impediments to women's participation in the Cebu project of the UDP are discussed by S.B. Borlagdan, *et al.* in "The Cebu Integrated Social Forestry Project." In J.F.I. Illo (ed.). *Gender Issues in Rural Development.* Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University, 1988. The same article can be found in FAO's *Women's Role in Forest Resource Management: A Reader.* Bangkok, 1989 and in *ODI Social Forestry Network Paper,* London, Summer 1990.

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