PSR 29 (1981): 145-152

IRRIGATION ORGANIZATION AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION: THE NIA EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

During the past decades, many "monuments to stupidity" have been erected in the name of development. In a way, many developing countries are littered with various community projects which have turned out to be more important to the planners, technocrats and international money lenders than to the rural poor themselves. By and large, the benefits and services that were supposed to go to the poor have only benefited the better-off rural inhabitants and the local elites who have already something to begin with like money in the bank, connection with local politicians and the like. The bounty which a lot of these so-called development projects promised has not filtered down to the powerless, especially in terms of more income and their collective capacity to participate in decision-making. As Hollnsteiner (1979: 387) states, "The top-down strategy so characteristic of high level technocratic planning remains the hallmark of its approach. Development is still perceived as done for the people, not by them or even with them."

Moreover, many of these projects have pushed the poor to the edge of despair leaving many of them "unorganized, marginalized, oppressed, and exploited; voiceless in decision-making on matters involving their economic and social uplift (Hollnsteiner 1979: 389)." Even the cooperatives movement has lost so much of its sheen and promise in recent years. According to a United Nations (1975) report:

> Rural cooperatives in developing areas today bring little benefit to the masses of poorer inhabitants of those areas and cannot generally be regarded as agents of change and development for such groups. It is the better-off rural inhabitants who mainly take advantage of the cooperative services and facilities such as government supported credit and technical assistance channeled through cooperatives.

Status of many irrigation associations

In the field of irrigation organization, for instance, the situation calls for more improvement. Of the thousands of irrigation associations that were supposed to have been formed in the past, only a fraction can boast of having risen beyond the level of mere paper organizations. Many are unable to cope with the anarchy which prevails over the use of irrigation water, the demands for better maintenance of the system, the resolution of irrigation-related conflicts, payment of dues, and the like.

Reasons behind failure

Four reasons may be advanced for this failure: (1) a "fly-by-night" method of organizing, (2) construction of the physical system before organizing farmers, (3) top-down model of organizing, and (4) the elimination of indigenous organizations in favor of other organizational arrangements patterned after western models.

"Fly-by-night" organizing. One of the key steps in building an organization is the integration of organizers with the community. This is a process through which the people in a community gradually accepts the

community organizers (CO) as one of them. This is achieved when the COs actually live in the community and take part in its day-to-day activities. This degree of integration is hardly accomplished when the organizers live apart from the people they are supposed to organize. Their distance prevents them from having a good grasp of the real issues that confront a community.

Construct first, organize later. The great strides which Philippine agriculture has attained in recent years could no doubt be attributed to the construction of more irrigation systems. At present, the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) estimates that there are a total of 150 national systems irrigating about 500,000 hectares. On the other hand, a total of 5,676 (including pumps) cover about 450,000 hectares. The mandate to construct more irrigation systems is pursued without let-up. And while irrigated areas continue to expand in terms of hectarage, the process of setting-up viable support institutions to manage and maintain these svstems lags behind. It appears that constructing the physical system first before organizing the people is one of the main reasons why it is extremely difficult to organize responsive irrigation organizations. For the construction of the system already preempts the issue of water as a motivating force for farmers to join associations.

Top-down model of organizing. Blondie Po's (1977) study of rural organizations in the Philippines suggests that only a few rural organizations manage to elicit the full participation of their members. For the majority of these organizations which are supposed to be engaged in participation:

> ... form rather than function represents the actual outcome. The top-down technocratic character of new arrangements seems too complex for the average rural persons to comprehend, or perhaps, more important, too alien to his own sense of appropriations of how land and people really inter-relate. They do not assure him the security he desperately seeks before he becomes open to experimentation. Despite much publicity given to "bottom-up" planning, what passes for it tends to be a process in which farmers come to meetings called by extension personnel, listen to their latest instructions, and respond in terms of the prescribed framework. Initiatives which may arise on the part of small farmers but do not fit the pre-ordained format of rural organization find little encouragement. The model of the Filipino farmer that technocrat-planners carry in their heads apparently does not conform to the reality out there (Po 1977:128-9).

Po's observation is hardly surprising considering that many government programs espousing participation seem saddled with a very limited understanding of what participation actually means. For these programs, participation is understood as people's participation in something already defined for them. All that the people have to do is to react to such plans. For instance, before an irrigation system is constructed, the engineers conduct a survey of the area, draw-up the design of the system including the canal networks and their locations. Once done, a meeting is arranged between the planners and the prospective water users. Participants in these types of meetings usually have pre-determined roles: the engineers lay out the plan before the people while the people select from among pre-defined alternatives. If they demand a major change in the plan, such a demand is courteously ruled out as something not technically or economically feasible. If the farmers insist on their demands, they are usually reminded that when it comes to technical things, like construction of irrigation facilities, the engineers know best.

This blatant act of ignoring the indigenous technical knowledge of rural communities has led to several catasthropic consequences, among them: floods which wash out dams before they are used, measuring devices that do not

accurately measure water, turnout structures that do not actually turn out water, and farm ditches that flood rather than irrigate the farmer's field.

Moreover, the process where technicians decide for the people is usually repeated in drawing up plans of repayment of irrigation fees, schedules of water distribution and allocation, and the like. Since the water users' participation is usually confined to the implementation stage, and since users are generally excluded from the process of conceptualizing the plans, the people are indifferent to the success or failure of the project.

Elimination of indigenous organizations. One of the questionable things that has occurred in the pursuit of development projects has been the elimination of many traditional or indigenous organizations existing in many barrios in favor of different organizational arrangements which are sometimes patterned after some foreign models. This approach seems to ignore the fact that an organization, which is a creation of the people themselves, stands a far better chance of succeeding than an organization that is imposed on a given community.

Government assistance to communals

As far back as the 1900s, the government already started assisting farmers in constructing the physical facilities of gravity irrigation systems. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, assistance to small gravity systems was dominated by "pork barrel," wherein aid to communals was provided on a gift basis by politicians who were more motivated in building a strong political base than in constructing reliable and enduring irrigation structures. As expected, no serious attention was given to issues of technical feasibility like water adequacy at the source, proper locations of major structures, right materials to use, and so on.

In 1974, a Presidential Decree (PD 552) added an important dimension to the issue of government assistance to communals. Communals could receive government assistance on condition that associations pay back the cost of construction. This decree implied that unless a communal association represented a viable group with a capability to collect fees from its members to repay loans, it would be impossible to implement the new policy. The NIA was also aware that the majority of communals did not have the capacity to operate and maintain the system. The NIA also recognized that it did not have the capacity to organize strong associations to a point where they could cope with the demands of managing and operating the systems.

In 1975 and 1976, the NIA took two moves. One was the signing of a memorandum of agreement between the NIA and the Farm System Development Corporation (FSDC) which stipulated, among other things, that the FSDC would do the institutional work in developing communal associations for which the NIA would do the engineering and construction work. The assumption implicit in this agreement was that the technical and the institutional work were separate and distinct tasks which call for different skills and appropriately handled by two different government agencies.

In 1976, the NIA and the Ford Foundation started a pilot project in Laur, Nueva Ecija where *both* the technical and the institutional work will be done by the NIA. Three years later, a similar exercise was underway in Camarines Sur, south of the island of Luzon. In this integrated approach, the capacity of the water user association would be developed through active involvement in the planning and construction activities, participation in surveys, obtaining right of ways, acquisition of water permit, organization of voluntary labor and control over project expenditures.

The key features of this approach are as

follows:

1. Skilled community organizers live in the barrio for as long as necessary. Implicit here is the belief that one cannot effectively mobilize people for organization and certain task-oriented activities from a distance.

2. The policy of "no strong organization, no construction" is religiously adhered. When one of the associations in Laur failed to solve its own internal conflict to form a strong participative association, NIA abandoned its plan to construct the system until the association reorganized itself some two years later.

3. The "bottom-up" approach is used in the building of strong associations. Farmer members are heavily involved in both institutional and technical activities. On the institutional side, they have their hands full in working out their own by-laws, conducting a man-power inventory of all the members of the association in preparation for organizing labor, negotiating for rights of way with landowners, negotiating with NWRC in Manila for the water permit, and participating in surveys and design of their systems. On the technical side (construction phase), the members contributed daily free labor, including hauling of locally available materials in the area, canvassing materials independent from the ones done by the NIA, monitoring the use of oil and heavy equipment, instituting effective cost control measures in order to reduce construction expenditures, and many others.

4. In order to achieve a fit between the demands of social participation and government procedures, the NIA has already started modifying certain requirements. It has allowed farmer organizations to conduct an independent canvass of construction materials, to participate in bidding, to hold joint and regular planning sessions between the community organizers and the engineers involved in the project, to purchase construction materials after the association president has noted the purchase order, and to render regular reports to the association concerning the construction and to report on the financial status of the project.

5. Whenever there are existing organizations or irrigation associations in the projects to be rehabilitated or expanded, the NIA does not replace them with new ones. Instead, with the help of community organizers, the association members engage themselves in fairly regular reflection sessions to spot the weaknesses of their associations in order to propose appropriate remedies.

6. The NIA pilot projects are considered "learning laboratories" in which teams of NIA personnel a) spell out ways to integrate the social and technical aspects of system construction through full involvement of farmers in planning and construction, b) build an understanding of the special problems posed by these methods and of the capacities NIA would require to use them effectively, c) organize a group of engineers, organizers and managers to facilitate dissemination of lessons learned to the rest of the NIA organization, d) identify conflicts between the new methods and the broader policies and procedures of the NIA.

7. A working committee coordinates the learning process. The membership of this committee is composed of NIA officials, an FSDC representative, social scientists, management people from the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) and agricultural engineers from the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and the University of the Philippines at Los Baños (UPLB).

8. Process-oriented documentation based on non-evaluative narrative feedback on key process events is sent to operating personnel, provincial and regional managers and members of the Communal Irrigation Committee.

9. Management experts from the AIM a) assess the fit between requirements of the new

method for assisting communals and existing NIA policies, b) suggest new management roles and procedures, and c) coordinate workshops for NIA managers and engineers on the new methods.

10. Two agricultural engineers from IRRI and UPLB are engaged in developing a) simplified methods of diagnosis and correction of common water management problem to be used by farmers and NIA engineers, and b) simplified water management system suited to the needs of small water users association.

Obstacles to participation

In spite of its limited experience in the use of a community organization approach to elicit participation, the NIA has already gained valuable insights on problems or obstacles that make participation difficult to attain. Some of these are the following:

Politics. One difficulty is that community organizers are prone to be accused by some sectors of the community as being subversives or plain agitators. The NIA's community organizers assigned in Laur experienced this when the local executives threatened to detain them for allegedly agitating the people. This tendency to be misunderstood is not surprising since there is only a thin line which separates the COs agitational tactics from those used by persons who are bent on a more radical change of the social system. But the moment the COs espouse a political color in their pronouncements, there is likely to be a backlash which could invariably result in the loss of support from the sponsoring agencies.

Two ways by which the NIA deals with this problem are: 1) the use of rigid screening procedure in accepting applicants for COs; community organizers with records with the military are not hired; 2) the COs are under instruction to avoid politization of the people by concentrating on immediate and day to day irrigation-related issues rather than on long term and abstract issues. For example, one of the reasons why the CO approach has been accepted by government agencies like the NIA in its drive towards institutional rehabilitation of moribund irrigation association is because community organizers concentrate more such immediate issues as water distribution, rights-of-way problems, acquisition of water permit by the association and relocation of terminal facilities rather than on more clearly political issues such as the expulsion of corrupt local officials who exploit farmers and hinder the association from managing its own affairs.

Bureaucratic procedures. Bureaucratic procedures and centralized control over resources also militate against participation. In the NIA's program a lot of effort towards decentralization is being exerted in order to give associations greater control of its affairs. For instance, in training programs sponsored by the NIA, the choice of dates, venue, and participants are all decided by the association. Construction plans involving locations of irrigation structures and distribution channels are subject to the approval of the association before construction. On matters of repaying NIA the cost of construction, the association determines its own payment schedule. On matters concerning the recruitment of laborers who would work during construction, the association's choice of who gets to work during construction usually prevails over NIA's choice.

Lack of appropriate local organizations. Frances Korten (n.d.: 15) said that "in many situations, a local organization is needed as a channel through which local people can participate in the development and implementation of a program." While one would hardly find reason to disagree with that, the situation of some communal systems appears to be actually the opposite. For oftentimes, although there are already existing indigenous organizations in communal systems which could serve as a channel through which participation can be realized, these organizations are sometimes ignored in favor of other institutional arrangements.

The NIA's program on the participatory approach to the development of communal systems usually starts from what the people have as their existing organizations. Through these local organizations, the community organizers relate themselves not only with all the members but with the rest of the community as well.

Classroom-oriented training. Formal trainings are usually resorted to in developing the organizational capacity of an association so that it could easily reach consensus, manage funds, mobilize members for certain specific tasks. While the need for such formal interventions cannot be denied, great care should be taken to ensure that such trainings do not occasion a further widening gap between the leaders and their members. It is not a rare practice of associations that only the leaders get sent to formal trainings while the members end up as victims of echo seminars conducted by oftentimes ill-trained leaders. Korten (n.d.: 19) stresses that one of the problems in this kind of training intervention is that "it segregates the people chosen for training from the rest of the community, making the later development of a broader leadership base more difficult. Second, it divorces learning from doing."

By employing skilled community organizers in the building of irrigation associations, the NIA makes sure that, skill-building takes place more informally. For example, the irrigation association through its various committees acquires a water permit, negotiates for rights-of-way, mobilizes labor for construction, drafts their own by-laws and the like. These responsibilities are evenly distributed among the officers and members of the association to make sure that everybody develops his own capacity to cope with the various demands of setting up an irrigation system.

Poor communication facilities. Many rural areas which suffer from a lack of infrastructures like roads and bridges render simple tasks as gathering people for meetings – an extremely difficult one. In one of NIA's pilot sites, for instance, the members' houses are so far apart from each other, making the act of gathering majority of members on a regular basis difficult. The association solves this problem (and thereby improves the communication lines among all members) by dividing the entire command area into irrigation districts. The districts are further subdivided into sectors. Regular meetings take place at the district or sectoral levels.

Factionalism. Irrigation systems service people whose interests conflict depending on the location of their farms in relation to the source of water. These groups are the "upstream farmers" oftentimes referred to as "problem farmers" and the "downstream farmers" who are sometimes called "farmers with problems." Uniting these two groups into an association is not an easy task. One of NIA's approaches in solving this problem is that whenever formal trainings like group dynamics are held, efforts are exerted in seeing to it that participants are composed of upstream, midstream and downstream farmers. By giving them a chance to talk as a group, greater appreciation of each other's problem is generated and factionalism is minimized.

Corruption. It is a fact that corruption among leaders and among sponsoring agencies often deals a mortal blow on people's desire to participate. One way to curb this pernicious practice is to develop strong and militant members who are not afraid to denounce publicly the excesses of their leaders.

In the NIA's pilot projects, irrigation associations have the power to conduct an independent canvass of construction materials. Also, no purchase order may be executed by the NIA without prior authorization from the president of the association. Furthermore, before construction materials are finally accepted by the association, they are first examined by a committee composed of farmers. In like manner, all heavy equipments

not being used for the night shift are impounded by the association so that unauthorized usage may be prevented. Regular financial and construction status reports are discussed by the NIA technical staff during meetings of the association. So far, this approach has been proven to be an effective check on the use of funds.

Attitudes and values. The NIA experience on participatory approach shows that initially, the attitudes and values of technical people are the biggest stumbling block to eliciting participation among farmers. Hollnsteiner (1976:8) attributes all these to the elitist education people have received: "In his (i.e., elite specialist) view, a professional education and degree entitle him to make decisions. It is only a small step from 'knowing best' to 'knowing what is best for them' especially when 'them' represents barely literate people who cannot tell a building blueprint from a flow chart."

The NIA's program has shown that farmers have not been participative because they were never given a chance before. As Hollnsteiner (1976:8) again observes: "years, indeed centuries in some cases, of being planned have rendered them apathetic about taking a hand in matters beyond their immediate family domain." Moreover, because farmers were reared in the idea that participation means being mere spectators, not actors, in their own development, the social inertia to participate becomes great at the start. But once this inertia is overcome, the desire to participate knows no bounds.

Conclusion

The NIA's experience with the participatory approach to irrigation development is still limited. The efforts done along this line are focused more on urban centers which are suffering from the problems of lack of housing, exploitation of labor, and the like.

The above observations on how participation is operationalized in the context of irrigation and the obstacles to it prove that this approach is indeed difficult. And it is perhaps because of these difficulties that people's input are oftentimes ignored in program design and management. Hence, many efforts to elicit participation do not work. And in order to succeed, major transformations are needed not only the way an agency performs its task and in the way the community relates to the agency, but also in the way the society views the poor and their rights.

The experience of a good number of community organizers presently employed with the government shows that on many occasions, the difficulty encountered in encouraging people to be more participative does not stem from the farmer's "laziness or backwardness" but to the inability of government machineries to make a radical shift in their procedures in order to make participation a living reality. Such a transformation is undoubtedly slow and filled with setbacks. But if government agencies hope to elicit participation, it seems that the first thing these agencies should do is to examine their own organizational structures and procedures and find out whether or not such structures are conducive to participation.

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