



## **The Challenge of the Participatory Approach to Rural Poverty Alleviation: The Example of Olugbena Group of Villages, Ewekoro, Ogun State, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This paper draws from the experiences of a Non-Governmental Organisation, Man and Nature Study/Action Centre (MANASC)—concerning a rural development project being undertaken in Olugbena, a group of six villages in Ewekoro Local Government of Ogun State, Nigeria—to highlight the challenges of participatory rural development in Africa. The project part, funded by the Australian High Commission in Nigeria under its Direct Aid Scheme, comprises a component of a much broader development plan for the area as contained in a pre-feasibility report undertaken in 1995 by MANASC for the National Primary Health Care Development Agency (NPHCDA), a Parastatal of the Federal Ministry of Health. It is observed that one of the challenges for rural development facilitators, policy makers and practitioners, revolves around appropriate strategies for managing unpredictability, especially those that reduce the unknown elements to acceptable levels and impose the minimum of appropriate structures.

### **Résumé**

Cette contribution s'inspire de l'expérience d'une organisation non gouvernementale, Man and Nature Study/Action Centre – MANASC – (Etude de l'Homme et de la Nature/ Centre d'action), concernant un projet de développement rural en cours à Olugbena, un groupe de six villages appartenant au gouvernement local d' Ewekoro, dans l'état d'Ogun, au Nigeria. Elle tente d'identifier les défis au développement rural participatif, en Afrique. La partie «projet», financée par l' «Australian High Commission» (Haut Commissariat Australien), au Nigeria, dans le cadre du «Direct Aid Scheme» (Programme d'aide directe), prévoit une composante appartenant à un programme de

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développement plus large, destiné à cette zone, tel que prévu dans un rapport de pré-faisabilité préparé en 1995 par le MANASC (pour la «National Primary Health Care Development Agency» – Agence Nationale pour le Développement des Soins de Santé de Base – (NPHCDA), une structure semi-publique du Ministère Fédéral de la Santé. Il a été noté que parmi les défis auxquels sont confrontés les facilitateurs, décideurs et praticiens du développement rural, figure la définition de stratégies adaptées à la gestion des imprévus, particulièrement celles qui permettraient de réduire les éléments imprévus à des niveaux acceptables et qui favoriseraient la mise en place de structures appropriées.

### **Introduction**

Development strategies directed at poverty alleviation and the enhancement of the living standards for rural communities on a sustainable basis have undergone fundamental transformations which many countries are striving to adopt. With each passing year, a gathering momentum is shifting the traditional, centrally-based or managed, supply-driven and expert-controlled emphasis towards demand-based participatory approaches that place people, especially the stakeholders, at the heart of the development process. Increasingly, governments and other support (external and internal) agencies, instead of the traditional practice of encouraging communities to contribute to development as seen by the government, now see the wisdom in providing support for community centred initiatives. This, it is believed, will provide a more conducive atmosphere for a collective or joint initiation, identification and prioritization of needs; the investigation and assessment of available resources for the satisfaction of the identified needs; and discussion and agreement on the preferred resources, strategies, and processes of providing the means of satisfying the needs of a democratic, participatory environment.

The argument is that, by involving all stakeholders, especially the eventual users – preferably as a community rather than as individuals – in project identification, analysis, development and implementation, the participatory development strategy will be able to build local confidence and capacity to resolve problems that arise in the course of development. It will also facilitate sound decisions that are in the people's interest. In the final analysis, the chances that facilities will be claimed by users are enhanced. There is also the prospect that the facilities will be used and maintained locally with minimum assistance from outsiders.

However as shown in this paper, even this approach does not solve all the problems, in fact it raises new ones, especially in peri-urban areas where the community spirit has suffered serious regressions. This has been the experience in both the Olugbena and Mokoloki communities in the vicinity of Abeokuta, capital of Ogun state of Nigeria. The case of Mokoloki

community in Owode Local Government area of Ogun State, has been reported elsewhere (Faniran et al. 1985). Here government's well intentioned farmer-based small farm schemes – according to which land was cleared, prepared, sown to crops and then allocated to prospective farmers – failed woefully. Most of the allottees failed to show up to work on the farms but they still appeared to share in the proceeds.

### **The myth of a communal African society**

While communalism was a major characteristic feature of the pre-colonial African society, it may be mythical to continue to assume, in the present-day, that all societies in different parts of the continent still live communal lives. The communal spirit of African societies has, since European colonisation of the continent, been subjected to the capitalistic and individualistic ideologies of the western and oriental world. The complete enthronement of this foreign doctrine in African societies, has been fostered in recent times by the forces of globalisation, which carry with them what appear to African societies as superior Western and oriental culture. If elements of communalism exist, it is more as traces rather than a solid pattern that is observable in the socio-political and economic lives of the people. For instance in Nigeria, many experts point to the existence of ubiquitous Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) throughout the country (see Onibokun and Faniran 1995a). But the evidence seems to point in the direction of Nigerians having turned largely capitalistic and basically individualistic, including in the rural areas. Indeed, as shown by Onibokun and Faniran (1995a), among others, the most active CBOs are those with government support or patronage, namely the Co-operatives and Community Development Councils or Associations. This is largely because of the government 'largesse' or 'share of national cake' that many such institutions expect. It is, therefore, not surprising that several die with the withdrawal of government and other external support, meaning they are not intrinsically sustainable. This emphasises the need for a closer look at the institutions if they are to be used under the envisaged new dispensation.

In this connection it is possible, at this initial stage, to think of a few things that need to be done. Among other things, there is the need to galvanise partnerships on equal basis among the people as organised members of communities and government and its agencies, Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs), and the external as well as internal development agencies for the purpose of rekindling or reawakening the erstwhile community spirit. Until this is done i.e the communal living and the

associated community attachment and loyalty are aroused, we shall continue to pay lip service to development at the community level in Africa.

The envisaged or proposed shift, interestingly, has been part and parcel of the spirit, if not the practice, of what is traditionally referred to as 'community development':

...Community development possesses a set of principles which are often applied universally, rather than specifically... while the basic ideas... can remain constant, the practice differs greatly from one area to another. This is because different communities have different needs, the same community may even have different needs at different times... Community development must be viewed as involving the improvement of a community's system of values, its structures, as well as the usage through which this system functions and is maintained.... It involves social change, whose primary purpose is to bring about better living within the community (Onibokun, and Faniran 1995a:196).

Yet the question as to how best to achieve this remains largely unanswered and the vast majority of the citizens of developing countries, close to 70 percent in places, continue to live below the poverty line (Onibokun and Faniran 1995b).

### **The Olugbena Rural Development Project**

Comprising six villages of Olugbena, Baasi, Aroge, Asipa, Daba and Akiode, the project area appears to be one of those impoverished peri-urban areas lacking in the infrastructural base necessary for modern type development. According to a feasibility report (Faniran 1995:iii), 'the area is completely locked up from innovations, whether in the area of the economy or infrastructure. It is best described as a rural-rural-area, if there is any term like that'. However, like many areas in the forest zone in the south of Nigeria, it is blessed with natural resources, including abundant water in form of rainfall, surface water, near-surface and the deep-seated types, which can be tapped for supplementary irrigation, inland fishery and associated agro-allied industries. Other natural resources in the area include abundant fertile soil and well-drained rolling topography, all of which are an asset to small-medium scale agriculture. There are also trees with economic value such as the oil palm and a whole range of timber-producing plants. In short, the area is well suited to both arable and permanent (tree) crops in addition to a wide range of livestock-based agriculture.

The population is rather scanty, ranging between 250 and 500 in each settlement and comprising mostly the young and the old. However, the advent of immigrant farmers and the down-turn in the urban economy which is sending some of the middle aged emigrants back to the area have

started to introduce new elements into the depressed rural economy. But perhaps the greatest asset currently is the leadership being offered by the paramount ruler of the Owu people, of which Olugbena is a part, Oba Olawale Adisa Odeleye Lagbedu I, the Olowu of Owu-Abeokuta.

The original idea of the rural development project as agreed with the leadership of the NPHCDA was to use the area as a test for the actualisation of the National Health Policy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, hinged on the Primary Health Care (PHC) strategy. A major component of this strategy, which is central to the present project, is the involvement of all health related sectors of the economy in planning and management (FMHSS 1994: xii). The overall development of the economy generally and of agriculture in the rural setting are therefore very crucial components or sectors of the health programme.

Accordingly, the packaged project prepared for implementation in the project area comprised:

- health care, including immunisation, drug revolving scheme (essential drugs) training and deployment of Village Health Workers (VHWs), Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) and other village based health personnel;
- water improvement schemes;
- economic activities or income-generating projects (fish ponds, poultry, piggery, etc) and agricultural inputs for increased farm yield;
- adult education and functional literacy;
- agro-based (food processing) industry; and
- improvement of access roads in the area, and the provision of electricity.

The purpose of the Olugbena project was the effective, sustainable rural development of a poverty-stricken region, using the participatory approach. Towards this goal, a workplan spanning 33 months from August 1995 was prepared. The plan, was for purposes of this work, divided into three phases or sub-stages, viz: the project concretisation/consultation phase, the fund sourcing phase, and the actualisation or implementation phase. For the last phase we used the example of the fish-pond project, which is the only one that was amenable to the participatory development strategy.

### **Project consultation phase**

The project consultation phase started immediately after the pre-feasibility report was submitted to the NPHCDA, precisely on August 17, 1995. Mid-way into the following month, on September 14, 1995, a meeting

was held at Olugbena village among the major stakeholders in the project, namely:

- NPHCDA; represented by Chief (Mrs.) Iyabo T. Koleoso, the then Project Officer, and Mr. Akinwumi, of the same unit;
- The Olugbena community, represented by the paramount ruler of the community, Oba Olawale Adisa Odeleye I, Olowu of Owu Abeokuta, and the Baale of Olugbena village, (now late),
- and the NGO, which is the Project Facilitator, Man and Nature Study/Action Centre (MANASC), represented by Prof. Adetoye Faniran (the Executive Secretary and Project Manager/Co-ordinator) and Dr. A. T. Adeboyejo, the Assistant Project Manager Dr. O. Ogundeji of the Health and Social Service unit of MANASC was also present. He was then on the staff of NPHCD but later retired.

The meeting and subsequent discussions streamlined the recommendations of the prefeasibility report in some key areas. Among other things, it was agreed that the following projects be pursued in the area in sequence:

- i) Because of the focus on health, a mini-pharmacy was to be sited at Olugbena, with the community providing the space ('a shop') and two adults for training by both NPHCDA and MANASC. The scheme was to be self-financing and managed on semi-commercial basis by the community. It was also agreed that the scheme would be extended to the other villages in the community.
- ii) This was to be followed by institutional reforms that would involve the revitalisation of the existing development-oriented institutions, based on the then reigning Community Development Council system in the state. Each tier, especially at the level of the project area, was to be assisted by MANASC and NPHCDA to among other things:
  - Draw up an appropriate constitution and bye law that would guide their operations;
  - Constitute the various committees; as approved and prescribed by the constitution and byelaws
  - Identify, study, plan, implement, monitor, evaluate and replicate development projects and schemes;
  - Oversee financial matters, especially sourcing, accounting and management; and undertake any other activities at the expressed request of the people in the project area.

### **The fundraising phase**

Unfortunately, by the time the report of the tripartite meeting was submitted to the NPHCDA, staff changes among other developments in the agency led to withdrawal of the body from the development project, in spite of all approaches made by both the community and the facilitators. This was a big set-back and nearly killed the entire programme, but for the resilience of the facilitators.

The withdrawal of NPHCDA did not only mean the complete cut-off of the envisaged source of initial finance for the project, it also sent the facilitators and the community back to the drawing board. Alternative sources of fund had to be sought, and with that, a fresh look at the projects too was necessary, in line with the requirements of the potential funding agencies. The alternative sources of funds explored were the foreign embassies/High Commissions in the country and the multi-lateral development agencies, whose focus was basically socio-economic transformation of the people through the implementation of viable socio-economic development projects. Therefore the emphasis in the area shifted to this sector, especially agricultural development, within which context fishery development was adjudged as having the best prospects of success. It therefore occupied the highest priority among the projects presented to would-be donors for funding. Others, mostly in the livestock group, included piggery, poultry, and goatery projects and associated arable crops. The idea was to integrate all these in such a way that they would support one another and minimise the importation of wares from outside the area. In other words, they were to be mutually self-supporting.

Of all their bilateral and multi-lateral agencies approached, only the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI), Nigeria, responded positively; it agreed to sponsor the construction of a fish-pond. However, as in the case of the NPHCDA, this was not to be as the time of offer coincided with the closure of the Canadian High commission in Nigeria, occasioned by the political crisis in the country in the mid 1990s. Efforts to resuscitate the project after the crisis was over have so far been unsuccessful. Fortunately, in October 2000, after five years of searching, and countless applications and interviews, the Australian High commission approved a sum of N500,000.00 under its 'Direct Aid Programme' toward the fishery project. The amount requested, based on construction cost estimates, was N790,000.00.

### **The project implementation phase**

With the grant secured, the facilitators immediately mobilised to get the fishery project started. Among other things, a technical crew was engaged

in December 2000 to identify a suitable location for the fish-pond and to undertake the necessary survey and construction works. The site chosen could accommodate three fairly large ponds instead of the one pond quoted for, and the price differential was such that it could easily be met by the community and the facilitators. The design also made adequate provision for the non-impairment of the domestic water supply, particularly for downstream communities.

However, no sooner were the contractors engaged that new problems started to surface. To begin with and contrary to expectation and promises, the local people were not only unfamiliar with the type of work, i.e. pond digging, they were also not too ready to learn. Moreover, the original idea was to apply the much quicker and more efficient mechanised method for pond preparation, but this was not feasible for financial and technological reasons and so was abandoned in favour of the manual method. A couple of reasons accounted for the change of method. First, the machines were not readily available in the vicinity; second, the cost was higher, indeed prohibitive; and third, it was feared that the site might not be firm enough for the heavy equipment. The site was also not very accessible for the needed machinery.

The decision to undertake manual operations faced other problems, which turned out to be so serious as to threaten the project implementation. Among other things, efforts to recruit the needed labour from the locality, including as far away as Ifo and Abeokuta, did not succeed. Eventually, labour, had to be imported from the contractor's base in far away Ilesa, Osun State. This had an unexpected impact on the cost of construction. It also caused a delay in the completion period, which dragged on for close to six months, instead of the envisaged two or three months. Stocking could only therefore begin on 29 June, 2001, and lasted until the middle of the following month.

The problems encountered did not end with the construction phase but extended to the operation and management stage. Among other things, poultry feed had to be brought in from Ibadan and Lagos. Also, communication often broke down between the site and the project manager (based in Ibadan) causing up to two weeks' delay in feed supply on a few occasions, which impacted negatively on the development of the stock. Consequently, harvesting had to be delayed from December 2001 to March 2002, to allow for optimum growth. As at the time of writing, efforts were being intensified to link with an Abeokuta-based fisheries practitioner – O. B. Farms & Fisheries Consultancy Services. An effort was also being made to engage a full-time resident manager to block the various loopholes in the management of the project.



As a result of the myriad of problems encountered during the implementation phase of the fishery project, the harvest was rather disappointing (Table 1).

**Table 1: Fishery performance projections compared with actual production**

Stock	Survival %		Survival (No)		Price/kg in N		Total price in N	
	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A
1,500 x 3	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A
4,500	80	20	3,600	900	200.00	280.00	540,000	201,600

P = Projected;

A = Actual.

Instead of an expected revenue of N540,000.00, only N201,600 or 37.33 percent of that amount was realised. A major reason for this was the marked drop in the yield; just 240kg was harvested per pond, totalling 720kg, instead of the expected 2,700kg.

This loss was traced to three indeterminable sources: at the point of stocking, during operation (poaching and preying), and during the harvesting/sale. The facilitators could not ascertain the actual number of fingerlings seeded by the 'contractor' who stocked the ponds. Second, every assurance was given by the site staff that no poaching took place and that few, indeed a negligible, number of the fish died during operation. There was however no full-proof way of ascertaining these claims, given the fact that the site was not fully secured. All told, it has been a rather harrowing experience. The only encouraging thing is that the ponds are there, and more can be constructed, such that, from the lessons learnt so far, the future looks much brighter.

## Discussion

Experience with the Olugbena community development project has provided number of valuable lessons both for scholars, policy makers, practitioners in the field and donor agencies. Among these are the limitations of blue-prints and models; the crucial role of accurate/adequate knowledge of local situations as against generalised statements and beliefs; the significance of patience and forbearance in the execution of community development schemes; and the need to further explore the full implications and rudiments of the participatory approaches to community development.

### ***Limitations of Blue-prints/Designs***

One major lesson learnt at virtually every stage of the implementation of the Olugbena village project was the near-unpredictability of the situation on the ground, leading to the need to modify the programme on several occasions. First, it was the sudden withdrawal of the NPHCDA, which dictated the review of the entire project make-up. Also, in the process of fund sourcing, the emphasis shifted from one project to another, to meet the conditions of different prospective donors and partners. Thus, although fishery was a constant, the ancillary project changed between livestock and arable crops, depending on the client. An example, not stated in the body of this paper, was the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (UNAB), which promised assistance in the area of citrus fruits and banana/plantain cultivation. In virtually every case, except fishery, however, all hopes were dashed. Third and finally, the design for the fish-pond was modified and continued to be modified, based on experience in the field. Apart from the change from a mechanised to a manual operation, the number and mix of fingerlings per pond as well as the feeding method was changed as occasion demanded. In other words, blue-prints, designs, plans etc, are not more than working papers which will need to be modified or adjusted to suit the local situation. There is no limit to the number of such changes, particularly in areas where local knowledge is limited as in many parts of this country.

### ***Role of indigenous knowledge***

The pre-feasibility study made for the project tried to cover as much ground as was necessary to provide as complete information as possible about the study area and the envisaged development project. The study, however, proved to be inadequate in a number of key areas, which surfaced at the implementation phase. First, the assurances of the people as to their contributions to the project were not met. Among other things, there were no ready hands to employ as labour, notwithstanding promises of paying for work done. It took the intervention of the Oba to convince the people not to insist on receiving cash compensation for the economic trees (kolanut trees) affected by the site clearing. However, perhaps the worst areas were in the technical details. No proper soil tests were done; the assumptions about using machines were therefore way off target; so too were the project cost estimates. Whereas the study showed that just about N300,000 only would be sufficient for the fishery project, the sum of well over N1 million was actually expended. Inflation accounted for much of the increase. The initial estimates were made in 1995 while the project actually took off more than five years later, in year 2000.

One other major aspect, which did not surface during the survey but came to the fore during implementation was the farming practice in peri-urban forest-based agriculture. Among other things, this culture does not incorporate much manual work such as was required for the manual preparation of the fish-ponds. The people in the village live a dual life, partly in the village and partly in the neighbouring towns, especially Abeokuta and Lagos. It thus happened that the site caretaker was absent from the site, sometimes for up to two weeks, during which management, especially feeding, was disrupted. This affected the growth of the fish and largely accounted for the almost three months' extension of the harvest period.

### ***Patience and forbearance***

The frustration that attends most community-based efforts calls for a lot of commitment on the part of the stakeholders, particularly the facilitators. Apart from a waiting period of more than five years spent on fund raising for the project and the 'helplessness' shown by the community after the initial survey, the constantly changing scenarios were also enough to kill the enthusiasm of an outsider. The coincidence that the Oba was also the Chairman of MANASC as well as a long-time friend of the MANASC Executive Secretary kept the project going and to achieve the minimum result recorded so far.

The participatory strategy: the genuinely participatory approach to development, according to Odeleye-Lagbedu (1997) and MANASC (1997) is that which, among other things, teaches and encourages a marked shift from the traditional dependence and reliance on elaborate and detailed blue-prints, which also provide a basis for control and prediction of outcomes, on the basis of which the project is monitored and evaluated, usually by an external expert. This is because of the experience which shows beyond doubt that elaborate, detailed and 'finished' blue-prints are rarely feasible at the onset nor at any stage for that matter. Instead, decisions throughout the project life are best made jointly by all stakeholders, particularly the target community or ultimate owners/users of the facilities being provided. Moreover, rather than serving the needs of the external development agencies, the monitoring and evaluation processes are worked into the others in a learning process, with a view to building local capacity for decision making and community-oriented (participatory) development. The greatest challenge for community development project managers or facilitators, therefore, revolves around best strategies for managing unpredictability, especially those that reduce the unknown elements to acceptable levels and impose the minimum of appropriate structures.

There is no doubt that efforts made to discover and apply these strategies to the project at hand proved largely abortive. The government at all levels (Local, State and Federal) could not be persuaded to play its traditional role of mentors and encouragers of rural development. As if to make a bad case worse, the initial enthusiasm of the local people did not translate into action. Those who showed interest did so either (reluctantly) out of respect for the Oba, or for the financial benefit that accrued to them from the project. There was not a single member of the local community that appeared to be convinced about the long-term benefits of the project and so become committed altruistically to it. In the final analysis, the project turned out to be virtually one run by the Facilitators. And if we add on the experience of the Mokoloki project (see above) the prospects of participatory development for poverty-stricken rural communities in Ogun State would appear bleak indeed.

Another relevant experience is provided by the failure of MANASC to interest local government and their agencies in Nigeria in short-term training programmes on the theme of participatory development strategies. A programme organized in Oyo State in 1997 saw only five participants in each of two centres, out of the over 200 expected at 5 different centres. The experience was worse in other states where there was no positive response at all.

One possible explanation of the negative attitude of the people to participatory development is the apparent breakdown of the communal spirit and tradition under the combined onslaught of 'modernisation' and capitalism. Individualism and personal gain have replaced communalism and community interest respectively in the urbanised forest communities.

### **Conclusion**

The projects described in this paper provide valuable lessons for community development agencies. First, although every state and local government (as in other parts of the country) has units/departments or Ministries responsible for activities related to Co-operatives and community development, the full import of this arrangement has yet to be realised, as the communal spirit, particularly of the selfless type, is declining by the day. The people embrace the system for what they stand to gain rather than contribute to it. The authors' disappointing experience in the field can therefore be understood. The interest among the people is how much money they can obtain quickly from it; any project that will not provide it, is not relevant to the people's life.

Second, the government's approach to community development needs drastic review. It seems that the emphasis is on what the government intends

to do for the people rather than the other way round. Participatory development emphasises both sides of the development spectrum, and so cannot succeed in an environment such as we have presently in Nigeria and many communities in Africa. With respect to government, the issue of who occupies which position or exercises what power is still very crucial. Thus the retirement of the executive director of NPCDA and the deployment of the project officer in charge of the Olugbena project resulted in the complete withdrawal of the agency from participation in the project.

Third, the ability to secure fund for community development projects cannot be taken for granted. One might expect that the community would be able to harness the money needed for the take off of the project. But in a society where the communal spirit is ailing or dead, this was not the case. The people were only eager to alleviate their poverty and so looked on the facilitators for virtually all their financial requirements. Given that the people resident in the village were poor, the same can however not be said of their kith and kin outside, who could easily have come to the aid of the village people. So far this kind of help is not forthcoming.

Another possible source of project funding are the bilateral and multi-lateral agencies. However, there are too many NGOs on the ground, which flood these agencies with applications for funds. Apart from the fraud which features in the process, the precariousness of the rural development process and the attendant high rate of failure are not too encouraging. Thus the Nigerian rural and urban settings alike are littered by failed projects, some of them highly capitalised. The loss of enthusiasm on the part of the donor agencies is therefore to be expected. It is from this perspective that one should view the Australian Government grant, without which the project would not have taken off.

Fourth and finally, it is gratifying that with the right attitude, no matter the weight of the problems, commitment on the part of any one of the stakeholders will likely see a project through. In the case of the Olugbena project, the facilitators and the Paramount Ruler showed this type of commitment which saw the development of three fairly large fish ponds (18m x 20m x 1m each) at the site and the prospects of adding more. The results achieved so far are not too encouraging, but hopes are high that by the time all loopholes are filled, the project will pay off tremendously. At that time, the people, who are probably yet to be convinced, will rally round and a truly participatory spirit which marked the beginning of the project will be renewed and rekindled.

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