

SOME COMMENTS ON EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN RELATION TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN POOR URBAN COMMUNITIES

1 Introduction

The importance of effective community participation in relation to development in poor communities is not an issue for debate. It is a fundamental principle that is essential for the proper allocation of limited resources.

The comments below address some of the important issues that need to be considered when making provision for participation in poor communities.

2 Need for Empowerment

There are many issues that effect empowerment but two of the important ones are ensuring that the participants can actually afford to get involved and making sure that the choices to be made are communicated properly.

In communities where unemployment is often close to 50% it can be very difficult to get the most appropriate people to participate due to the personal cost that has to be carried by the individual member of the committee in order to be able to participate. When you are poor it is very difficult to make yourself available at the risk of missing an important opportunity for an ad hoc "piece-job" that may crop up.

On the communication issue there are many pitfalls including literacy, understanding the options and of course the project co-ordinator's own personal biases which can often distort matters.

3 Limiting the Personal Cost of Participants

There are those who argue that it is essential to budget for payments to be made to the committee for their time involved in the process. Others are vehemently against this and they argue that it is an honour to be selected and that all the financial resources should rather be focused on delivering the best product than on paying participants.

There is, of course, a middle road. The cost of participation needs to be reduced to the point that it does not discourage the best representatives from getting involved. This can be achieved by being sensitive to the time of day that meetings are held, the provision of transport to and from the meeting venue and the provision of refreshments.

A related issue is to have a bigger committee appointed to ensure that there are enough representatives at each meeting to overcome the inevitable problem of absenteeism that is associated with poor people having to change their arrangements at short notice. This must however be supported by a good feedback mechanism so that one does not have to go back over the same ground again at each meeting.

4 Literacy and Language

The problem of literacy is often overcome by the community automatically appointing committee members who are literate from their group. However there are still potential problems to be overcome as far as language and knowledge are concerned.

There are 11 official languages in South Africa. In practice English is often used in committee meetings but translators, provided by the community, are used at mass meetings.

In South Africa there are a growing number of multi-lingual planners as more and more people from the black community enter the planning profession. (One finds that many of these planners speak English, Afrikaans as well four or five black languages).

5 Making Informed Choices

Empowerment isn't simply about being able to understand language. It is also essential to ensure that the full implications of the various options are understood.

In the Winterveld (a predominantly informal dormitory town on the outskirts of Pretoria) it was possible to take the members to a range of sites where they could look at options and make more informed decisions.

A training course for the committee is also a good investment and should be budgeted for.

There are however computer programmes being developed with lots of promise. These simulate the real world but some work will have to be done to see how this tool is received in poor communities.

6 Life Cycle Costing

One of the most difficult issues to deal with is trying to get the community, and the politicians, to accept the need to adopt a "life cycle" costing approach in which the long term sustainability of the product is considered. It can be tempting to put more of the available resources into, say, the house rather than ensuring that the roads are built to last.

7 Conclusions

Despite everyone acknowledging the need for effective community participation we continue to regularly squander scarce resources on unsustainable projects. One of the root causes of this is the lack of empowerment of the community affected by the development leading to a lack of proper guidance from the relevant community.

We need to work on this aspect and limit its adverse impacts. This is not however easy when delivery, as soon as possible, is often the main over-riding focus of the community as well as the politicians.

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