

Uplifting poor 'island' communities

Participatory planning for poor riverine island communities



Islands (chars) in the braided river channels in Bangladesh are home to some seven million chronically poor people – five percent of the country's population. They are prone to floods and famine and their livelihoods are dominated by conflicts over natural resources. Developing consensus to reduce conflict and improve resource management is seen as an important factor in reducing their vulnerability and improving livelihoods. But how can this be achieved? Does Participatory Action Plan Development (PAPD) – a technique successfully developed for building consensus for resource management among farmers and fishers in floodplain wetlands offer similar opportunities for char dwellers?

The chars

The Jamuna River, which runs for some 250 km through Bangladesh, is a braided river system with unstable sand bars and low-lying islands (chars). Unlike the mainland, the chars are physically volatile and the continuous erosion and flooding shape the lives of the inhabitants – the chouras. They are among the poorest and most vulnerable people in the country and are marginalised from the benefits of the mainland because of their impoverished communication networks. Their access to essential services such as health care and education is poor. Road links do not exist and government support services for agriculture, livestock and fisheries do little to enhance people's income or help them to protect their assets. Even NGOs have little contact with chouras because of the difficulty and risks of working on the chars.

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Livelihoods are dominated by conflicts over the use of natural resources. Fisher groups are in conflict with each other over collective water bodies and with farmers, money lenders, and land 'owners' who control government land rights to common property. Building consensus between interest groups by examining problems, identifying priorities and developing them collectively rather than in isolation is seen as a way of resolving conflict and producing tangible benefits for the whole community – a win-win situation for both rich and poor. But poverty often stands in the way. It is difficult to engage the poor in consensus building. They tend to be too focused on short-term issues and are marginalised from the main stream of decision-making. Participatory Action Plan Development (PAPD) is a consensus building tool that has been designed to overcome these problems.

PAPD is...

PAPD is a planning technique that uses participatory methods to build consensus and commitment to action amongst various social groups whose livelihood strategies depend on commonly owned natural resources but clash at certain points in the seasonal cycle. It helps to represent the views of all stakeholders and not just the most vocal or socio-politically powerful. It actively encourages participation by the poorer members of a community and encourages community participants to respect others' concerns. The end result of a PAPD is a community action plan, with roles, responsibilities and a budget for managing natural resources.

PAPD was developed in Bangladesh in 1997 by the Centre for Natural Resources Studies (CNRS), a national NGO, to build consensus among communities that rely on floodplain resources for their livelihood.

The process, supported by external facilitators, aims at equity through giving different members of a community the opportunity to speak and express their views. Various types of stakeholders in the community meet in separate groups to express their views amongst themselves without those who may tend to

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silence them. Representatives selected by each of the groups then report to plenary sessions to create and prioritise a problem census for the community. These are analysed in detail for causes, effects, solutions and who is affected. An action plan is then prepared and proposals are presented on how it should be implemented. Secondary stakeholders from various local government agencies and NGOs attend the plenary sessions to create linkages with the community in their decision-making processes.

PAPD in practice

Over the past five years, ITDG-Bangladesh, an NGO, has worked with char communities in the northern reaches of the Jamuna River. It focused initially on short-term issues and needs identified by the poor

which centred on a range of production technologies developed in partnership with char communities. ITDG saw PAPD as a complement to this primary focus and so it was piloted in two char villages to see what adaptations, if any, were needed for its use in the charlands. Would it, for example, enabled char communities to debate longer-term and seemingly intractable issues in order to identify actions for resource management that could help to improve their livelihoods in more enduring ways?

Char Nandina is a mature community established some 40 years ago and located on the river bank. A 25 ha water body is central to their future development but its status in the community and issues of access have been a source of conflict for decades. Investigations showed that although the water body was owned by wealthy land owners both rich and poor had something to gain from reaching a consensus on sharing costs and management responsibilities. The poor would have legitimate access to fishing while the rich would benefit from increased fish yields resulting from improved management and reduced poaching.

A PAPD process was successful in bringing the various stakeholders together to collectively participate in making crucial planning decisions on fish seed management, the organisation of community funds, individual financial contributions, common access and equitable sharing of benefits. A total of 256 households now equally share the costs of managing the water body with 153 coming from the poor and daily labour groups. The poor obtain credit from an NGO to pay their share and repay the loans from the income they receive. District level officials reviewed and endorsed the community's plan for improvement. There is evidence that the PAPD process is now being absorbed into the community structure as they begin to organise their own interest groups and plenary meetings without the need for outside facilitation.

In contrast, Char Nadagari is a relatively new settlement, less than 10 years old, and has few established community structures. It is 7 km from the nearest town, there is no road and access is by foot along rough tracks and through shallow water, and by ferry boat. The island is predominantly sandy and not very fertile. Most people grow rice, millet, potatoes and groundnuts, while chilli production is the dominant cash crop. A lack of credit services has meant that farmers depend on local money lenders and so are subjected to high interest rate payments that affect contractual agreements between producers and market middlemen.

Nadagari is a more impoverished community than Nandina and although the community was lifted by the successful adoption of ITDG's technical interventions, progress with PAPD has been much slower. Difficulties in organising groups and discussions, and conflicts and resignations among those organising events have meant that the consensus process has all but broken down. Although the reasons for this are still being investigated, the isolation and the lack of social structures in the village are likely contributing factors. Cultural differences between the different clans in the village also appear to be more important sources of conflict than the differences between rich and poor.

Some lessons

The water body at Char Nandina was a long standing source of conflict and it was unlikely that a short, intensive PAPD would be effective or provide a lasting solution. For this reason the community went through the various stages of PAPD at its own pace. Sustained support over at least two seasons on micro-level livelihood improvement is considered necessary to draw in the landless farming and fishing groups into a village-wide planning process. Treating poor women as a separate interest group also proved effective in enabling women leaders to emerge and articulate their issues in community meetings.

At Char Nadagari ITDG staff consider that PAPD still has a role to play but much more time is needed for the process to be accepted. An added problem to resolving conflicts among char dwellers is that most natural resources are 'private' rather than common property. The influential classes exercise power through informal channels to capture resources, making asset accumulation by the poor almost impossible. This is a particular problem on isolated chars where land grabbing is a common practice.

Although investigations are underway to understand more fully the reasons for the breakdown in Char Nadagari, PAPD has met with substantial success in Char Nandina and demonstrated the value of this method for char communities. The experience strengthened the view that NGOs must facilitate the emergence of community-based organisations that can interact directly with local and meso-level government institutions and private service providers. It can lead to more concrete expressions of demand from char villages and provide a channel for charland development and the allocation of resources. NGOs and local institutions also need to find ways for communities to wholly internalise the PAPD process so as to remove the need for outside facilitation.



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The challenges ahead

The challenges for PAPD in the charlands are threefold. The first is to bring the hidden informal power-holders into the local consensus building process. The second is to influence the local network of organisations that support char dwellers with short-term seasonal aid to become involved in planning activities for the medium and long term. Finally, the major bilateral donors who are supporting char interventions need to use their linkages with national government to facilitate this emergence of local economic development rather than continue supporting a traditional top-down approach.

One of the most positive outcomes of the research is that ITDG-Bangladesh has become a champion for PAPD. From an initial position of scepticism towards the value of researching new participatory models, ITDG-Bangladesh is now in the forefront of promoting the use of consensus building by local partner NGOs in Bangladesh. Under the umbrella of ITDG-Bangladesh's European Commission funded programmes, PAPD is giving a new lease of life to the work of local NGOs in deprived rural areas as they branch out from routine micro-credit operations into natural resource management.

ITDG-Bangladesh is now pilot testing a training manual entitled Training for NGOs on consensus building and improved natural resource management in char areas. This is an eight-day course with modules specifically aimed at char dwellers. It includes technologies and extension methods, processing and marketing, and consensus building leading to the creation of village level development plans.

R8103 Consensus for a holistic approach to rural livelihoods in riverine islands of Bangladesh

This project builds on

R7562 Methods for consensus building for management of common property resources

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