



Participation and Indigenous Peoples

The characteristics of indigenous groups make participatory approaches especially critical to safeguarding their interests in the development process. Such approaches, recognizing the right of indigenous peoples to participate actively in planning their own futures, are supported by major donors and international organizations, including the World Bank, but have proved very difficult to implement. They call for changes in attitudes, policies and legislation to address the key issues: recognizing rights to land and natural resources; ensuring culturally appropriate procedures for consultation and communication; and building on the strengths of traditional lifestyles and institutions.

Why Support Participation?

Indigenous or tribal people, numbering at least 250 million throughout 70 different countries, have often been on the losing end of the development process. In many cases, their resources have been exploited for the benefit of other groups in society and, in many countries, they are the poorest of the poor. Often they experience political and economic discrimination and are perceived as backward or primitive.

Even when development policies and programs have been designed specifically to improve the welfare of indigenous peoples, the approach has usually been paternalistic, seeking their cultural assimilation and ignoring the strengths of indigenous institutions and knowledge (including environmental knowledge). This, in turn, can contribute to worsening poverty, social marginalization and ethnic resistance.

The characteristics which distinguish indigenous peoples include their strong attachment to the land, their dependence on renewable natural resources, subsistence practices, distinct languages and cultures, their historical identities as distinct peoples, and often mistrust of outsiders. For development institutions and planners, the challenge is how to incorporate such diversity of culture, language, ecological adaptation and history into development planning. Cultural barriers make

it especially difficult for the outsider to communicate with indigenous groups, understand their institutions, or discern their needs.

In these circumstances, the participation of indigenous people in planning and managing their own development is a means of safeguarding their interests in the development process. The past decade has seen growing recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples, supported by international legal instruments, to decide their own priorities for the development or use of their lands and other resources, and to exercise control over their own economic, social and cultural development.

At the same time, from a practical point of view, a participatory approach to indigenous development is a means of improving the quality of projects. In communities whose institutions, leadership patterns and lifestyles are not well understood by outsiders, participation can ensure that projects and services are relevant to perceived needs, and that they are sustainable through indigenous institutions. To be effective, programs must be undertaken in partnership with indigenous peoples, rather than planned for them or carried out among them.

Key Elements in a Participatory Approach

Although the need for a participatory approach is now widely accepted by international

development agencies it is difficult to implement. Obstacles include existing national policy and legislative frameworks, widespread prejudices, a tendency on the part of outside NGOs to control rather than facilitate, and a lack of development planning and management skills on the part of indigenous peoples themselves.

In Bank operations, the challenge is typically confronted in two contexts. The first is in mandatory Environmental Assessments or Indigenous Peoples Development Plans, intended to identify and mitigate potentially adverse effects of Bank supported projects on the livelihoods of indigenous peoples. The second is in a new generation of Bank-funded projects where indigenous peoples are the primary beneficiaries. Critical issues for the task manager on these new projects are outlined here.

The Legal and Policy Framework

Government willingness to devolve some degree of autonomy in decision making to indigenous communities is a precondition of successful projects. Judgements must then be made on whether legislative or policy reforms are needed to support such participation in the decisionmaking process. Many of the line agencies or ministries responsible for relationships with indigenous people are weak. They lack professionally trained staff and often take a paternalistic approach. In these cases, reforms are needed before a participatory project can succeed. Local and regional elites may also be an impediment to authentic indigenous participation, even where an adequate legislative and policy framework exists (Box 1).

Colombia is one of the countries to have set an example in establishing a legal and policy framework which supports indigenous participation. Although Colombia maintains a special office within its Ministry of Government to deal with indigenous matters, its constitution recognizes the rights of indigenous communities to control their lands and natural resources and their internal political affairs. Each recognized indigenous community has its own council, with the power to decide on the use of the community's land and resources, to resolve internal disputes, and to negotiate health, education and other programs with regional development corporations and the national government. Recent Colombian legislation also provides for the direct transfer of government resources to these councils for projects which they design and execute.

Rights to Land and Natural Resources

Despite some recent progress, legal recognition of the customary rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands is often lacking, and many development programs have to deal with the question of indigenous land tenure security and natural resource rights.

Bank legal staff, and lawyers within client countries, can help task managers through the complexities of national land, resource and environmental legislation as it relates to indigenous peoples. In the Laos Forest Management and Conservation Project, for example, one of the Bank's lawyers reviewed national forestry and land legislation relating to the customary rights of ethnic minorities in

Box 1

The Politics of Indigenous Participation

Projects which incorporate indigenous consultation and participation need to take into account ongoing and complex political situations. Without a good understanding of these dynamics, even the most well designed projects can lead to unforeseen turmoil and frustration. An example is the Indigenous Peoples Component of the Bank-funded Eastern Lowlands Natural Resource Management and Agricultural Development Project in Bolivia.

The purpose of the Indigenous Peoples Component is to provide land tenure security and other services to several Ayoreo and Chiquitano Indian communities in the Eastern Lowlands. Originally prepared in a highly participatory manner by a regional Indian federation in collaboration with a non-Indian technical assistance NGO, the component encountered political obstacles immediately following project effectiveness.

The precipitating event for these problems was a protest march by the Indian federation, calling for more indigenous control over forest resources. This soon escalated into a major confrontation between the federation and the regional development corporation (the project implementing agency) over who should have control of the component. The Bank found itself in the unenviable position of trying to negotiate their differences, many of which pre-dated the protest march. Unable to find a solution after long meetings, the Bank accepted the redesign of the component, which regrettably reduced the power of the indigenous federation and put more power into the hands of an implementing unit within the regional corporation.

Box 2

Community Participation in Bilingual Education

Although ethnic Vietnamese constitute the bulk of Vietnam's population, there are 53 ethnic minorities living mostly in the mountain areas. The Bank funded Primary Education Project contains a special Ethnic Minorities Education Component which will finance a comprehensive package of educational inputs to minority children. This package, premised on the importance of the vernacular language and of community participation, consists of policy measures, pedagogical activities, provision of physical facilities and institution building. To implement the component, existing provincial and local level committees will be involved in teacher training, textbook production and maintenance of local schools.

Similarly, in the Second Primary Education Project in Mexico, the use of bilingual school teachers and pedagogical materials in the vernacular languages is combined with a strong element of community participation. Such participation is linked to the country's overall poverty alleviation program, and includes the involvement of community committees, municipal education councils, parents' associations and school councils.

upland villages. This review provided the Bank with the necessary information to raise the subject with the government and to include provisions in the project for recognizing and regularizing customary land rights.

The Bank has also had experience, in the Philippines and Brazil for example, in improving the institutional capacity of the government agencies responsible for the titling of indigenous lands. This experience has demonstrated the benefits to be gained from indigenous participation in physical mapping and land demarcation.

Culturally Appropriate Communication

In designing consultation and communication procedures with indigenous peoples, several special aspects need to be taken into account: their distinct languages; their traditional means of transmitting knowledge and values; and their mistrust of outsiders.

The language issue is central, since few indigenous people—especially women or elders—speak the national language fluently. Hence consultations need to be held in the vernacular language with the help of skilled interpreters. Development strategies for indigenous education (Box 2) also need to take into account the traditional importance of

legends, folk tales and proverbs for the oral transmission of knowledge and culture. Modern schooling of indigenous children has proved more effective when it includes instruction in both vernacular and national languages and when it is bicultural or multicultural in content.

Effective communication depends heavily on the element of trust. Through historical experience, indigenous people have learned to be cautious of "benevolent" outsiders, be they missionaries, government officials, teachers or anthropologists. Those individuals or organizations which have been able to gain their trust have usually done so through long years of contact, learning and respecting their languages and cultures. If such individuals or organizations can be brought into the project preparation process, there is a much better chance of introducing culturally acceptable mechanisms for consultation and participation.

Building on Traditional Strengths

The traditional lifestyles of indigenous peoples involve subsistence strategies which use locally available natural resources to satisfy their basic needs, while maintaining a balance with their environment. There are many unfortunate examples of programs for indigenous development which have undermined these traditional subsistence strategies without providing socially and ecologically viable alternatives. The most successful programs with indigenous peoples, such as the West Bengal Forestry Management Program (Box 3), are those which take traditional environmental knowledge and livelihood systems as the given basis upon which to build new knowledge, technologies and economic activities.

Similarly, the most successful projects are building on existing institutions, instead of creating new ones to deal with specific development tasks. In the Matruh Natural Resource Management Project, for example, among the Bedouin of Western Egypt, using the *bayt*—the Bedouin local lineage group—as the basis for project activities has inspired the confidence of the Bedouin population, including Bedouin women. As a result, it has avoided many of the pitfalls of earlier projects which attempted to introduce Western style cooperatives.

Social assessments, in which community members participate as partners rather than mere informants, are used to improve understanding

Box 3
Tribal Women and Forestry

The West Bengal Joint Forestry Management Program is considered to be a model of participatory forest management. One of its most important aspects is the way in which tribal women, their traditional environmental knowledge and their livelihood strategies have been incorporated into the program. In most areas, the recognition of the rights of tribal women to collect and market leaves of *Sal* and *Kendu* trees has been the major incentive which has led to the program's economic and institutional success.

In the village of Pukuria, women gather the leaves for six months of each year for the purpose of making plates, some 700,000 of which are exported monthly by the village. Minor forest products represent the primary occupation and most important source of income for Pukuria's tribal women. Given the low investment costs for re-establishing sal forest productivity, combined with the benefits of protecting the upper ridge tracts where forests are located, this system seems to have considerable potential for increasing employment and income earning opportunities, while reducing soil erosion levels.

of the indigenous social structure and institutions on which to base development strategies, and to assist the communities in determining how best to adapt their institutions to new purposes. Social assessment techniques can also reveal the existence of conflicts with implications for participation, for example between traditional and modern institutions or sources of authority.

As in any other social groups, strengthening the capacities of indigenous peoples (Box 4) to evaluate options and implement their own development programs requires training in basic skills, and technical assistance in areas such as management, topography, forestry, agriculture, marketing and community health care. However, it also involves promoting and strengthening traditional systems, for example of natural resource management and

medicine. Some of the best experiences with capacity strengthening have come from exchanges among indigenous peoples themselves. For example, in Latin American countries, NGOs have facilitated workshops in which indigenous peoples from different tribes and linguistic groups exchange experiences about land protection, mapping and natural resource management.

Direct Funding

Many of the first generation Bank projects with indigenous peoples allocated funds to the national government agencies responsible for indigenous development. The typical result was expansion of the government agency concerned, with little direct benefit to the indigenous communities. In Brazil, for example, where the Bank promoted large investments in increasing the staff and infrastructure of the National Indian Foundation, the impact was minimal in such important areas as natural resource protection, indigenous health and community economic development.

In more recent projects, therefore, the goal is for funds to be controlled and managed by indigenous people themselves, preceded by the necessary capacity building. Group-based lending schemes, where groups rather than individuals are responsible for protection against default in repayments, have proved adaptable to the finance needs of poor indigenous populations, as the principle of joint liability is often an important element in traditional systems of social control. These lending schemes increase the self-confidence of their members and demonstrate the capacity of indigenous populations to participate in the development process.

Box 4
Investing in Capacity Strengthening

Promoting training and capacity strengthening may be one of the best investments for the economic development of indigenous communities. The Bank's Latin American and Caribbean Region's Environment Unit (LATEN), for example, has launched a program to assist indigenous organizations in the following activities: defining their own development strategies and proposals; strengthening their institutional structures in areas such as personnel management, training programs, budgeting and finance; and improving their negotiating skills to finance their own development proposals.

The program is financed through grants to government agencies and/or indigenous organizations from the Bank's Institutional Development Fund. Thus far, programs have been designed or are under preparation in 10 countries. Each training program contains a consulting seminar, a series of workshops, a monitoring and evaluation system, and an evaluation seminar. Many of the seminars take place in the regions where indigenous people live, and all of them focus on indigenous values, cultures and philosophies, as well as modern management and development planning skills.