Beneficiary participation in development projects and its limitations: a case study of Plan - a child focused organisation

1. INTRODUCTION

"People today have an urge – an impatient urge – to participate in the events and processes that shape their lives. And that impatience brings many dangers and opportunities". (UNDP, 1993:1 in Mohan, 2002:49).

Since the 1970s the notion of participation has become widely acknowledged as a key component of development programming. Participation is defined in a United Nations report (Desai & Potter, 2002:117) to mean 'sharing by people in the benefits of development, active contribution by people to development and involvement of people in decision making at all levels of society'.

The following report investigates the scope, practice and limitations of beneficiary participation, with a particular emphasis on children's participation, within Plan – a large international NGO. Plan was chosen after much discussion and preliminary research because of its apparent focus on and strong commitment to participatory development and its emphasis on children focused participation. It has recently initiated sector wide conferences and research papers on the issue of children's participation and appears to be strongly committed to promoting this issue.

The report will begin with an outline of the methods used to investigate this question and a brief overview of Plan and its activities. This will be followed by the results uncovered and our conclusions.

2. METHODS

In preparing this report, a variety of information sources were used including personal interviews with Plan staff, secondary data sources about the organisation's ethos, work and unique Child Centred Community Development (CCCD) approach, and external reviews of this methodology. Since Plan does not operate in the UK it was impossible to obtain direct first-hand information from beneficiaries.

The scope of this report is necessarily limited by its scale, hence it has been impossible to tackle this complex and difficult issue in detail. In addition, time constraints as well as unforeseen events prevented us from interviewing as many Plan employees as we would have liked and we feel that this has limited our ability to provide a fully comprehensive picture.

Nevertheless, the degree of openness and transparency displayed in Plan's promotional literature was reflected in the frankness of its staff and we were given access to external, independent reviews of Plan's work, which proved most illuminating.
3. RESULTS

3.1. Presentation of Plan

This section will begin with a brief introduction to Plan and its activities followed by a discussion of the scope and limitations of beneficiary participation within the organisation.

Plan was founded in 1937 in response to the plight of children left orphaned and destitute by the Spanish Civil War. It is a humanitarian, child-focused organisation that works with families and their communities to meet the needs of children around the world.

Plan's mission is:
"To achieve lasting improvements in the quality of life of deprived children in developing countries through a process that unites people across cultures and adds meaning and value to their lives by:
- Enabling deprived children, their families and their communities to meet their basic needs and to increase their ability to participate in and benefit from their societies;
- Fostering relationships to increase understanding and unity among people of different cultures and countries; and

Plan works (either directly or in collaboration with local NGOs) in 45 developing countries and has fundraising offices in 15 donor countries. Its principle source of funding is child sponsorship (76.5% for Plan UK)\(^1\) and this is reflected in the importance of building (sponsor/children) relationships which is one of its five domains of work. The remaining domains focus on improving health, education, habitats and familial livelihoods. On average, Plan spends 10-15 years working with each community, allowing it to develop a deep appreciation of the social dynamics, problems and opportunities within the community.

"Because our projects take place over long periods of time, we really get to know the people and communities we work with, and understand the challenges they face. We take steps to ensure that local people - including children, their families and other members of their communities - are directly involved in setting up and developing the projects we carry out." (Plan website 2004).

It is this stated commitment to beneficiary participation that the present paper sets out to examine as discussed below.

3.2. Assessment of Beneficiary Participation strategies within Plan

"As we listen to children we understand their dreams and aspirations; as we value their opinions we see the effectiveness if their contributions; as they participate in development projects right from the start we see children bringing about their own development; sustainable for generations to come." (Plan Annual Report 2002:3)

\(^1\) Source: Plan website – look up ref.
Beneficiary involvement in the development process has been accepted good practice within most organisations for many years now but this has not been applied to children until recently. As a child-focused organisation, Plan has been actively involved in promoting children's participation in recent years, having accepted the flaws inherent to previous trickle down approaches, which assumed that benefits would pass from adults to children, and the inevitable adult-focused consultation process these entailed. (Patricia Ray, Interview). Moreover, Plan supports the view that "children's participation is considered to lead to better decision-making. ….working with children may be the most effective way of bringing out issues of concern within the community as a whole since the young are less inhibited in their discussion of matters otherwise considered 'sensitive'." (Ackermann et al, 2003:8). For example, when parents in a Bangladeshi village were asked why their children don't attend school they cited lack of appropriate facilities as the main reason while consultation with the children yielded an entirely different answer: the teacher was beating them up. (Patricia Ray, Interview).

Plan views the right to participate in society and the right to choose for oneself as a fundamental Human Right and strives to incorporate these into its project cycle process. Children are involved in all stages of the planning and project implementation processes to varying degrees. Country strategic plans are drawn up in consultation with the communities including the children while community strategic plans are devised with the aid of focus groups that always include children. Children's participation is also seen as an end in itself as well as a means for improving project success, and they are often involved in running projects such as children's clubs (Patricia Ray interview).

In the following sections we will assess the limitations of this stated commitment to participation and the extent to which it is realised in practice.

3.3. Limits to beneficiary participation

For clarity, the following section is divided into sections, each focusing on a different set of limitations to beneficiary participation within Plan.

Limitations of the organisational setting

A common theme that emerges from the literature and our discussions with Plan is that institutional commitment to and an understanding of participatory development are crucial elements for the success of such initiatives. Plan's relative financial 'independence' allows it freedom to pursue this approach with little external donor influence and an independent review (Fowler 2003:5) suggests that the necessary institutional support is in place.

In general, the participatory methods used by Plan as part of its CCCD framework rely on an iterative action-reflection cycle (Fowler 2003:3; Patricia Ray, Interview) and there appears to be some scope for flexibility hence country directors have a degree of freedom to determine the extent of local participation. Nevertheless, by virtue of its size, Plan's management structure

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2 Approximately 70% of funding comes from child sponsorship sources, allowing Plan relative freedom to set their own development agendas.

3 Only projects over $500k require head office authorisation while smaller ones are left to the discretion of the country/regional directors.
presents an obstacle for the realisation of a truly bottom-up participatory approach. As our source confirmed, in practice decision-making about programme planning and implementation involves a long process of bottom-up and top-down negotiations.

This limitation does not appear to be unique to Plan and is inherent to most large organisations. An additional interview with the Director of World Jewish Aid, a small development NGO, confirmed that an organisation's size and structure may indeed limit the scope for meaningful participation by reducing the decision-making freedom of field staff (Daniel Casson, interview). In the case of WJA, its small size means that the director has a great degree of freedom to promote and seek participation while in Plan this process must follow the procedures set by the structural hierarchy.

**Difficulties in defining the methodologies and training practitioners**

The difficulties associated with defining universal methodologies and training practitioners on the ground were identified as a key limitation by Plan staff. In order to spread participatory practices to field officers, it is necessary to compile guides and manuals. This in turn may induce the mechanical use of the methods bringing rigidity to the system (Gueye et al in Guijt & Cornwall, 1995). Plan staff confirmed that although manuals are formulated from experience and are not designed as 'how to' guides, their very existence may limit the creativity required for facilitating effective participation by promoting pre-conceived ideas and methodologies.

It was agreed that training facilitators in participatory methods is a difficult task but also that “Learning to use the methods is the easy part. Acquiring the skills of communication and facilitation with which to apply them is far harder” (Shah and Kaul Shah in Guijt & Cornwall, 1995:4). One way in which Plan tries to overcome this problem is by ensuring that all programme unit staff live locally and are familiar with the community. In addition, all community staff are trained in facilitation, negotiation, monitoring & evaluation and programme management techniques and the timescale of Plan's involvement also enhances the likelihood of a successful outcome as project workers remain involved in community affairs over a prolonged period and are able to tackle any problems that may arise following the initial phases. In this respect, they are in a better position to challenge the assertion that “Practitioners often lack the conceptual tools to make sense of the complex social and political contexts in which participatory research and development takes place” (Richards et al in Guijt & Cornwall, 1995:4).

Inevitably however, Plan staff admitted that the quality of the participation depends on the facilitator's skill, knowledge and experience and is thus highly inconsistent.

The qualitative nature of participation was also identified as a limiting factor in the effective monitoring and evaluation processes for participatory programming, which has a negative impact on the ability to devise successful guidelines and training in participatory methodologies.

**Participatory methods are not neutral**

“At a local level participants may play an active role in the collection and analysis of information. But agendas continue to be set elsewhere offering local people limited opportunities
to take part in decision-making and planning for themselves” (Guijt & Cornwall, 1995:3). “Ultimately participation rests on questions about who sets the agenda and controls the process” (Guijt & Cornwall, 1995:5).

Though not explicitly mentioned as a limit by Plan staff, this appears to be an inherent problem of all development efforts initiated by external third parties. Plan's own organisational focus areas and domains pre-determine the nature of their interventions even if the content of specific programmes is influenced by local concerns. Plan's approach of asking the communities for ideas tends to create a 'shopping list' approach from which suitable projects are then selected by Plan. An external criticism of Plan's CCCD framework identified the risk that "in doing its own policy engagement – Plan will pay inadequate attention to the development of community advocacy and voice. In other words, the basic premises of civil society as a claim maker and watchdog will be captured by (I)NGOs at the cost of the citizens themselves." (Fowler 2003:6).

On an individual level, a facilitator's own biases may influence the outcome of participation and “Training needs to enhance practitioners' abilities to reflect on their own personal biases in order to recognise the influence they themselves have on outcomes" (Cornwall et al in Guijt & Cornwall, 1995:4). Plan's literature appears to address this issue in part and to stress the importance of immersion in the community as a means to overcoming some of these problems (Plan Bangladesh CCCD, 2002).

**Difficulties in involving beneficiaries in the participatory process**

In accordance with current thinking, Plan strives to work with the poorest people but this may present additional problems. Often those most in need are least able to participate in the development process as a result of the time and cost-sharing burdens this may entail (Fowler 2003:6). Plan staff admitted that the poorest children are often reluctant to appear in public gatherings due to their appearance and may thus be excluded from the process. In addition, their labour power is often essential for the maintenance of the household and they are not able to spare the time required to participate. This is particularly true for both adults and children during seasonal periods of intensive agricultural activities.

It was also pointed out that sometimes the village setting in itself poses a problem as it can be very difficult to conduct effective focus group without the entire population joining in uninvited (Patricia Ray, interview).

However, using participatory methods such as wealth ranking and map drawing with children has proved very useful in identifying the very poorest in each community and provided new insights into indigenous definitions of poverty. This in turn helps to identify those most in need and allows Plan staff to focus their efforts more effectively.

**Participation may lead to conflicts**

Participation and children's participation in particular may lead to situations of conflict and the need to protect children was repeatedly stressed both in Plan literature and by its staff. Children's participation may take them away from essential duties at home and if parents are not properly

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informed and involved this may pose a serious threat to the child's ability to participate. Participation should be conducted in such a way as to avoid interfering with children's school or work commitments and extreme care should be taken in compensating for any loss of earnings as this may cause internal disputes among children. (Padmavathi, 2003 in Ackermann et al, 2003:13).

Plan staff admitted that issues of jealousy do arise and are often difficult to solve. However, the constant presence of Plan staff and the emphasis on a high ratio of indirect beneficiaries helps to alleviate some of these problems.

**Outcomes may generate expectations which the organisation may not be able to meet**

A common criticism of participatory development is that it raises false expectations; "Local people may invest hours and days in a process that can leave them with high expectations. If this is not followed up, it can lead to disillusionment and anger. Yet often, the time and energy that people expend on PRA activities are taken for granted and the costs they incur underestimated" and “concerns have been raised about the use of villagers as guinea pigs to change the attitudes of bureaucrats” (Guijt & Cornwall, 1995:5).

This is not a problem unique to Plan but the involvement of children in the process increases the dangers associated with this. It has been suggested that "some children may suffer from stress and depression following interaction with adult evaluators. Negative feelings can also result from creating unrealistic expectations or from leaving participants with a sense that their efforts have not been fruitful or worthwhile." (Blagbrough, 1998 in Ackermann et al, 2003:29).

Plan staff asserted that communities were being encouraged to develop their own facilitators to help alleviate such problems and that the on-going presence of Plan staff throughout the life cycle of a project was often sufficient to mitigate any adverse effects.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Our objective in writing this report has been to analyse the limitations to front end beneficiary participation within the work of Plan – a large, child-focused INGO. We set out to investigate the extent to which participation is achieved and its effectiveness. The information was obtained directly from Plan staff as well as from additional secondary sources.

Plan is a large organisation which is mainly funded from child sponsorship programmes and thus has a relatively high degree of institutional freedom to pursue its own development agenda. Beneficiary participation and children's participation in particular appear to be high on Plan's agenda and it has been actively involved in developing new approaches to community developments that feature a high level of (particularly children's) participation in the decision-making process across the entire project life span.

Despite this commitment, it became clear during our investigation that achieving effective and meaningful participation is a very difficult task for a number of reasons. Training field staff in appropriate facilitation skills, structural constraints within the organisation, personal and organisational agendas and biases were cited as limiting factors in facilitating effective
participation. The difficulties associated with reaching those most in need for both practical and cultural reasons were mentioned as a major obstacle but it was pointed out that participation by others may help identify these groups more effectively. Another issue raised was that participation sometimes generates conflict and/or disenchantment and these issues must be tackled carefully to ensure that all participants and especially children are not harmed by the process.

The limited nature of this study has necessarily resulted in a rather generalised report without reference to specific case-studies. Additional studies involving interviews with direct beneficiaries, consultations with external sources such as development anthropologists as well as a comparison with similar organisations would have to be conducted to do full justice to this complex topic. Nevertheless, based on the information gathered thus far, it seems that despite the aforementioned limitations, pursuing a participatory approach both in conducting development project and as a development end in itself is beneficial must be conducted with due care and skill to ensure a positive outcome.

5. REFERENCES


Further questions for out interviews/sources of information

Which problems have been identify in the current system?
Ask field people about problems encountered with beneficiary participation within specific projects
In which cases shouldn’t the beneficiaries (children) participate in the projects
Ask other organisations to criticise Plan’s approach
Contact Irene Gujt or Andrea Cornwall,

Seminar on New Tyranny?
Participation - The New Tyranny was the title of a one day conference held at IDPM Manchester in Nov 98.
Papers presented included
• David Mosse on the Making & Marketing of Participatory Development;
• A critique of participatory approaches by Frances Cleaver entitled Paradoxes of Participation;
• John Hailey on Beyond the PRA formula: process and Practice in Indian NGOs and
• Learning from Stakeholder Burnout by Irene Guijt.

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