

# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GRASSROOTS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Rural development projects are important for improving the quality of life for people in communities isolated from the flow of resources and services in urban hubs. To be successful, rural development projects must be aligned with the needs, aspirations and capacities of beneficiaries to promote local ownership and empowerment.<sup>1</sup> This requirement must be considered in the initial planning and collection of data and the type of approaches used (such as bottom-up versus top-down approaches). Local ownership and empowerment can only be achieved in rural development projects by integrating both bottom-up and top-down approaches with grassroots data planning and collection, based on a good understanding of local context, needs and capacities.

For rural development projects, the initial planning and collection of grassroots data to support project design, implementation and monitoring, must include local culture, aspirations, perceptions and capacities.<sup>2</sup> The initial planning defines the desired objectives of a project and sets the scope for what data is needed to achieve those goals.<sup>3</sup> During the planning stages, baseline information is collected to understand the local context and inform decision-making throughout the lifecycle of a project.

Participatory research methods embrace local culture, aspirations, perceptions and capacities and approaches such as community driven development emphasise local community engagement, in discussion, knowledge sharing and decision-making. This is important for fostering ownership and empowerment so local communities can have greater control over their own development. This enhances support and enthusiasm for projects, reduces the risk of tension and improves the collection and quality of data.<sup>4</sup>

One positive example of this is the Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Program (RFLP) in Timor-Leste. The project effectively used community participation approaches to incorporate knowledge and traditions of the local fishermen and their marine management. The RFLP used community-based data to “ensure a more comprehensive

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<sup>1</sup> Commission on Sustainable Development, United Nations, 2009, Decisions by Topic: Rural Development, <<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/ruraldevelopment/decisions>>

<sup>2</sup> Donnelly, J, 2013, Narrowing the Gap between grassroots rhetoric and top down practice in community development, *Challenges for Participatory development in contemporary practice, development Bulletin, No.75*, pages 106-109

<sup>3</sup> Conyers, D, 1993, Guidelines on social analysis for rural development planning, FAO <[http://www.fao.org/docrep/t1660e/t1660e03.htm#P996\\_135146](http://www.fao.org/docrep/t1660e/t1660e03.htm#P996_135146)>

<sup>4</sup> Dalal-Clayton, B *et. al*, 2000, Rural Planning in the Developing World with a Special Focus on Natural Resources: Lessons Learned and Potential Contributions to Sustainable Livelihoods, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), *Environmental Planning Issues No. 20*; Ahmad, M S, Abu Talib, N B, 2015, Empowering local communities: decentralization, empowerment and community driven development, *Qual Quant*, 49: 827-838

and inclusive approach to the management of resources.”<sup>5</sup> Specifically, the program recognized the importance of the Indigenous practice of *Tara Bandu*, the traditional laws in Timor-Leste relating to people and the environment, which was incorporated into national policies and laws as a consequence of the program. This bottom-up approach was successful as it included a deep understanding of the local context, and avoiding a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to facilitate ownership and empowerment.

Many projects do not adopt these bottom-up approaches and instead rely on the exclusive use of top-down approaches, as they are often incorrectly considered to have lower costs and smaller timeframes. Top-down approaches favour the expertise of the government and external industry professionals instead of local knowledge generally have a limited element of local engagement and participation and are often regarded as ‘culturally inept’.<sup>6</sup> This can neglect data on local culture, aspirations, perceptions and capacities and therefore the sole use of top-down approaches is unsuitable.<sup>7</sup>

Examples of how top-down approaches can be unsuitable can be seen in past water supply projects in Timor-Leste. Some of these projects did not include a sustainable and comprehensive community-based management model and as a result, facilities such as wells and bores have degraded and are unable to provide a sufficient water supply.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, projects that focus purely on bottom-up approaches can also be limited in their effectiveness due to constraints on resources, and the potential for approaches to be ‘undermined by national or international policies’.<sup>9</sup> Project designs must therefore combine both bottom-up and top-down approaches to deliver long-term sustainable impacts.

An example that achieves this balance is the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Program in Timor-Leste, participatory approaches, such as the formation of a water management group, to enhance the engagement with the community’s and represent their needs and capacities in the program.<sup>10</sup> The program combines bottom-up and top-down models, such as national policies and expert-led advice, to create efficient program delivery and community management for more sustainable and empowering results.

In the next Ideas in Brief, this discussion will look at the environmental limitations to donor-beneficiary relations and how these can affect rural development projects.

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<sup>5</sup> Needham, S, *et. al*, 2013, Community- based data gathering and co-management of marine resources in Timor-Leste. Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia (GCP/RAS/237/SPA). Field Project Document 2013/1.

<sup>6</sup> International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 2009, Sustainability of rural development projects: Best practice and lessons learned by IFAD in Asia

<sup>7</sup> Shucksmith, M, 2013, Future Directions in Rural Development, Carnegie Trust UK, <<http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=545a7523-4da8-4ff7-95e6-dd912abc6373>>

<sup>8</sup> WaterAid, 2010, Sustainability of rural water supply in Timor-Leste: How big is the challenge and how are we going to tackle it?, Discussion paper, Available at:

<<http://www.wateraid.org/au/audience/publications?filter4B9D806BA5D241F7811BB7AB549E7065=6E8C2A590FAD480E94C4D9C4F0BD94D9>>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Government of Timor-Leste (GoRDTL), 2010, Timor Leste Rural Water Supply Guidelines: Section 2 Project Cycle and community management process, <[http://www.besiktimor.org/Portals/0/Documents/WSGuidelines/Section%201%20english%20final%202\\_96dpi.pdf](http://www.besiktimor.org/Portals/0/Documents/WSGuidelines/Section%201%20english%20final%202_96dpi.pdf)>