

NORPREP : reflexions on the design and implementation

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Introduction

This note aims to present some reflections around the experience of NORPREP (Ghana), a project cofinanced by the GoG, IFAD, DA s and communities . NORPREP was designed following some principles of the CDD approach. Compared with other CDD approaches in Ghana, NORPREP had several distinguishing features : an active role was foreseen for the Regional Councils; all components were fully imbedded within the government structures (following a programme-support approach); all activities were to be demand-driven. These intentions did not fully materialize. The note seeks to understand the reasons and suggest some alternatives. Finally the note re-emphasizes the need to focus capacity building activities towards elected members.

Coordination within multi-level multi actor settings

NORPREP had an institutional change agenda. The idea was to make the planning process more bottom-up, by starting with PRAs and community action plans, and working toward Area Council Plans to be fed into DAWPBs, all these to be later harmonized at the Regional council level. The role of coordination of the project was also given to the regional council level. Confirming the results of earlier discussion within and around IFAD (Discussion note 2002 by GvV attached), the experience from the 4th Implementation Support mission suggests that it was probably inappropriate to have entrusted the Regional administration with the responsibility for spearheading institutional change at district level and below. The regional level of the public administration is in itself ill-equipped to spearhead institutional change. Moreover, the regional level is probably the least accountable level of the decentralized public administration because the key officials are appointed by the central government and the region does not have any elected assembly or constituency. Additionally, in the absence of a country representation, IFAD is handicapped in its efforts to engage in policy dialogue at national level on institutional change within the decentralized public administration.

Project versus programme support

For years there has been a fierce critique of project support on the grounds that the processes set in motion by projects tend to be “unsustainable” beyond the end of the project. NORPREP was

designed as programme support, entirely embedded in the public administration at the regional level (for institutional support/capacity building) and at the district level (for sub-projects to respond to community action plans).

NORPREP's aim was to transform a top-down district planning process into a bottom-up one, by building the capacity of communities to identify their needs and articulate their priorities into community action plans, while enhancing the capacity of district assemblies to respond to community priorities. The aim was to change the way that district assemblies and area councils do their business and to create greater accountability to citizens at community level.

NORPREP failed to take off because the regional level programme support team did not have the authority to launch the process sensitization, capacity building and innovation on their own. The day to day responsibility for programme implementation was vested in the Chief Economic Planner or the RPCU, under the authority of the Regional Coordinating Director. The PST could not make their own AWPB, or authorize their own travel to the countryside or select consultants or sign checks. They depended on the RCD and RPCU for everything.

Project versus programme support in CDD design and implementation

When the objective is institutional change, for instance, to transform a top-down district planning process into a bottom-up, community-driven process, it is preferable to adopt a **project mode** for essential activities such as institutional support, sensitization and capacity building, and a **programme support mode** for investments in support of community-identified sub-projects. Even when – as in the case of NORPREP – 70% of total investment is channeled through the district assemblies as programme support, there is still need for a small PMU, attached to - but operationally autonomous from - the regional public administration, to undertake sensitization, capacity building and to experiment with new procedures and to learn from experience. Pure programme support, with no project implementation unit, is only appropriate when the objective is to provide budgetary support for an existing programme without changing existing procedures or resource allocation.

NORPREP and a recurrent question: must all activities in a CDD project be demand driven?

Within NORPREP all activities under the programme, whether capacity building or investment – were to have been demand driven. Moreover, all activities had to be cofinanced by the district assemblies – up to 80% of their cost - and fully integrated in the budgets of the various levels of the decentralized public administration. In NORPREP, all programme support – whether funds for implementing community-identified subprojects or capacity building for district staff – had to be put into the annual Workplans and budgets of the different levels of public administration one year in advance before anything could be implemented. The sister CDD projects differed from NORPREP in that they only put the funds for community-identified sub-projects through the district annual Workplan and budget. The sensitization and capacity building activities that cut across districts are financed directly through the AWPB of the regional or national level project management unit. This led to a vicious circle that paralyzed institutional change. In NORPREP, no programme activities could start unless the districts demanded sensitization and capacity building, but they were unlikely to demand it in the absence of an initial sensitization.

Balance between demand-driven versus project-driven activities

NOPREP experience confirms the need for a proper balance between demand-driven activities and project-led activities in CDD programmes. NORPREP tried to be 100% demand driven even for essential project start-up activities such as information dissemination, sensitization and training in bottom-up procedures. This led to a monologue. The programme failed to take off as planned because no sensitization could take place unless the district assemblies decided to include it in their annual Workplans and budgets. The District Assemblies were naturally more interested in financing “hardware” (infrastructure) than in “software” (capacity building). As Paolo Freire already emphasized many years ago : there is a paradoxal relationship between communities and outside agents, The paradox arises from the fact that “nobody can help a community and no community can evolve without the intervention from others” (Paolo Freire). The only way out of this paradox is to develop the practice of dialogue between sides. And the practice of dialogue entails that each side needs to maintain space for it’s own initiatives. Therefore, it is essential for the project staff to maintain initiative on some very basic activities such as sensitization and capacity building activities that are in many cases a prerequisite for a dialogue to take place.

Focus on Elected Members of Citizens’ Representative Councils versus Civil Servants employed by District Assemblies and Area Councils

Earlier VIP review missions (Preparation MTR 2001, MTR 2002, MTR 2004), attracted the attention to the need of work with elected members of the DA and AC’s rather than to work only with the designated ones or with the civil servants employed by DAs. . During this mission it was found that NORPREP still emphasizes the building of the capacity of district planners and other staff who work for the District Assemblies and for the Area Councils. To date, the elected representatives of DAs and ACs have received less emphasis. The implementation support mission of NORPREP thus entirely confirms that the elected representatives deserve more emphasis. During our field visits, the elected representatives have demonstrated a stronger commitment to producing quick results at grassroots level than the planners and related technical staff of the DAs and ACs. The deconcentrated technical staff seems to have limited incentive to make an extra effort to implement sub-projects quickly. The deconcentrated technical staff members are less accountable to the local communities than the elected DA and AC members.

It is repeatedly said by Government that most Area Councils are not mature to become procurement entities in their own right because they have no technical staff. They cannot generate enough revenue to pay for a full complement of technical staff. The experience of the Rapid Results Initiative (below) suggests, on the contrary, that lack of technical staff at Area Council level should not be seen as an obstacle. Even in the absence of technical staff, the elected members of the Area Councils demonstrated their capacity to procure simple goods and services and to implement community sub-projects.

The need to focus on elected council members

The accountability of elected DA and AC members to their constituencies is potentially greater than that of technical staff attached to DAs and ACs. It is possible to implement CDD initiatives successfully through the elected members of Area Councils even if the AC does not have and cannot yet afford a full complement of employees.

Reducing transaction costs

A programme support approach often means working at a different pace and under heavier procedures as compared to a project approach. Indeed, working through the DA annual planning cycle and the government tender process forces the community to wait and wait for their sub-project to be approved and for the contract to be awarded. They have little feedback from ACs and DAs on the fate of their sub-project requests and the progress of implementation. Following the standard procedures may discourage local initiative, especially in the less endowed communities.

The Rapid Results Initiative piloted by the World Bank-financed CBRDP shows that standard procedures are there to be renewed. It works successfully because it involves a wide range of community members in sub-project implementation, each with a particular contribution to make: the school headmaster and a teacher as the sub-project sponsors, the elected head and members of the area council to oversee the process and to negotiate with contractors and the outside world, the AC secretary as record keeper, local builders to supervise construction and the traditional chiefs to mobilize local citizens. The designated team members procure construction materials and skilled artisans' services and oversee school construction. This involvement of a broad spectrum of community members gets rid of passive dependency on the district for all action. It also gets around the bottleneck of having all responsibilities fall on the shoulders of the already overworked district planner. RRI results in lower cost for comparable quality of works. Communities acquire skills that they can apply to other sub-projects. Above all, they can quickly see the results of their own actions.

NORPREP Capacity building strategy

Capacity building should focus on building capacity at community level to undertake the whole sub-project cycle, including implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The NORPREP design document puts heavy emphasis on PRAs and bottom up planning but is nearly silent on what happens after a set of community-identified sub-projects has been approved for financing. The TORs for the PST did not even mention or assign responsibility for management of the Community Development Fund.

Need for a better match between Target Group Definition and Programme Focus

Although NORPREP's main focus of the programme has been the financing of public infrastructure and services that benefit the whole community, NORPREP appraisal report defines target groups quite narrowly as the poorest of the poor:

- Small farm households with no income sources outside agriculture
- Women headed households
- Migrant workers without land rights
- Unemployed youths
- The elderly with no means of support
- Persons living with disability / physically challenged persons
- Persons living with HIV/AIDS
- Women ostracized from their communities on charges of witchcraft

The NORPREP HRD specialist has found it difficult to ensure that the priorities of the poorest of the poor are adequately reflected in the CAPs and AWPBs. Such frustration is understandable, because the means available to the project – financing of small public infrastructure – do not lend themselves to such fine targeting. Although the social categories listed above are likely to benefit from improvement of primary schools, feeder roads, drinking water and primary health care facilities, so does everyone else in the community including the less poor. The poorest of the poor are asking for grants for social assistance or grants of private goods or support for income generating activities, but the project has done little to date to promote private goods.

Need to ensure consistency between target group definition and the means of project intervention

When the sociologist defines the target group, he/she should pay attention to project contents, especially the types of investment proposed. When investment is in public infrastructure and services that benefit the entire community, it is inappropriate to insist that the project should only target the bottom 20% of the population or the poorest of the poor. The target group definition needs to be realistic and appropriate for the type of people likely to benefit from the activities offered by the project.