INSTITUTIONAL LINKAGES FOR EFFECTIVE COORDINATION AND COOPERATION IN PARTICIPATIVE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

A problem seriously limiting the potential impact of development organizations in participative rural development is the lack of effective coordination and cooperation. The problem is outlined, the conditions for its solution discussed and an organizational model suggested that provides an enduring linkage structure between the local community and various development agents. It offers a functional alternative to well-intended but usually only temporarily successful efforts that rely on fortuitous and unstable personal relationships. The basic assumption of the model is that effective coordination and cooperation is only possible when planned on a long-term basis through and with the community.

The Problem

Major players in rural development are local communities and numerous development organizations or agencies functioning as development agents. Problems limiting the potential impact of most development organizations operating within a community are an uninvolved community and the lack of coordination and cooperation, often resulting in a great deal of duplication and, eventually, a largely reduced development impact.

The notion of participation and involvement of the community has gained widespread support in recent years, to the extent that there are indications of a general paradigm shift (Chambers, 1983; Oakley & Marsden, 1990; Röling, 1994). The reason for the growing acceptance of this new paradigm of development can be attributed to its significant advantages over other approaches such as, for example, the technology-transfer model. Advantages include self-reliance and sustainability, wider coverage, and higher efficiency and effectiveness (Cernea, 1987; Oakley, 1991).

Many traditional communities find themselves confused by unplanned, uncoordinated and duplicated efforts of a multitude of development organizations eager to become involved in development in their regions. Very often the focus of their involvement is the same. In rural areas of South Africa, for example, it is not uncommon for three or four development organizations to promote vegetable gardens within the same community without knowledge of the existence and programs of one another. The result is confusion or, at least, a diluted development impact. In commercial and more accessible situations the problem is similar, often with more role players involved and, consequently, an even bigger potential for uncoordinated and wasteful efforts.

One explanation for this unnecessary waste of resources is that the preconditions and possibilities for proper coordination and cooperation are lacking and/or not appreciated by all role players. Some of these preconditions and possibilities are discussed briefly, followed by the outline of
an organizational structure through which effective coordination and cooperation can be institutionalized and thus placed on a sounder and more formalized basis.

**Preconditions and Possibilities**

**Need for Cooperation and Coordination**

The concepts of cooperation and coordination are not totally exclusive. Cooperation usually refers to collaborating in a joint effort or a specific endeavor, while coordination has to do with the proper relation and delimitation of efforts, in such a way as to minimize duplication and maximize complementarity.

The problem of uncoordinated development inputs can be partly attributed to the fact that the scope of this problem is not sufficiently appreciated. This can be ascribed to a sectoral rather than a holistic approach to development and, consequently, to an incomplete understanding of development needs. In addition, self-centered motives can prevail in the field of rural development. A realization of the shortfall of aid compared to the tremendous need should create more commitment to end waste and ineffectiveness due to a lack of coordination and cooperation (Düvel, 1985).

**Mutual recognition and acceptance of motives**

Different development organizations become involved in development for different reasons. These differences are associated with the type and goals of an organization. The diagram in Figure 1, an adaptation of Albrecht and Züfle’s view (1964), illustrates the basic differences between the primary goals or interests of different types of development organizations, or the degree to which they serve the interests of the client.

Figure 1
Types of development organizations by primary goals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)</th>
<th>Government Organizations (GOs)</th>
<th>Commercial Organizations (Serious)</th>
<th>Organizations (Fly-by-Night)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest and well-being of client</td>
<td>Interest and well-being of client</td>
<td>Interest of Organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General or public interest</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Contact Editor for Graphic)

The above comparison of different types of organizations is based on the criterion as to whether or not and to what extent the interests of the client are served. In the case of non-government organizations, government organizations and serious commercial organizations the interests of the client feature very strongly, but only with NGOs is the client interest likely to be the primary objective. Government organizations will usually promote the interests of the client only if they are not in conflict with public or general interests. As for serious commercial organizations, the client’s interest is obviously of secondary or intermediary importance. Beyond this variation in clients’ interests, organizations may also differ in the degree to which they pursue other interests, and in particular self-interest. Similarly, there are likely to be different reasons or motives for participating in activities of coordination or cooperation.
A common goal

All players involved in a collaborative development effort should share an interest in at least one common goal. Without a common goal, organizations or individuals will not have a reason to become involved in a collaborative effort. For example, mutual interest in development can be a common goal, and the stronger the interest, the greater the chance of successful cooperation and coordination.

Purposeful planning

Agreement to cooperate and to join in coordinated action should ultimately result in a concrete action plan. The development of such a plan demands transparency of goals to be pursued and the role and function of every involved player. The plan should also include detailed actions and activities to be undertaken.

Mutual understanding

For cooperation to be effective, all involved players must have a clear understanding of one another’s goals, functions, and development approaches. While it is important to appreciate the pros and cons of collaborating with specific players, it is equally important to realize that each player is capable of rendering its designated contribution within the framework of the mutually accepted plan. Prescribing to others is likely to hamper the process because of resistance resulting from suspicion and fear of losing independence and identity in the coordination process.

Coordination at operational level

In order to be effective, coordination should be decided upon, planned and implemented at the operational (community) level and not just, as many fruitless attempts have shown, at managerial, regional or national levels (Düvel, 1985). The latter levels are useful to legitimize and create a suitable atmosphere, but by themselves do not ensure proper implementation of coordination and cooperation at the operational level.

It is at the operational level that cooperation and coordination really matters and should take place. In practice, this is usually arranged informally between individuals and is dependent on good personal relationships between them. This kind of arrangement is fortuitous and unstable since change in interpersonal relationships can end a good cooperative and effectively coordinated working relationship. It is therefore important to provide a more stable and permanent institutional arrangement. A model to operationalize this idea is introduced and discussed.
Figure 2. An institutional linkage structure for facilitating coordination and cooperation in participative rural development.
An Organizational Framework for Cooperation and Coordination

The institutional framework proposed to facilitate and formalize the process of coordination and cooperation is shown in Figure 2. This structure is not intended to be an alternative institutional framework for development organizations focused on the implementation of development programs or projects, which, according to Cusworth and Franks (1993) usually consists of top management, middle management, support staff and field or site staff. It is visualized as a linkage structure or system with the purpose of linking development organizations with the community in an effective partnership. The level of involvement, and linkage, of the development organization will largely dictate whether the extension worker or agent will be a member of the organization’s middle management or field staff, and this will also determine the nature of support services that he or she can draw upon.

The linkage system consists of two major parts: (a) an over-arching body representing the target community, serving as its representative body and coordinating all development activities, and (b) a series of action committees (program or development) at the operational level responsible for implementation of various development activities and programs.

The over-arching, central coordinating body -- Central Development Council (CDC) -- has the following characteristics:

1. The CDC is representative of the whole community, particularly various interest groups and local institutions. As a coordinating, controlling and advisory rather than operative body, its size is inconsequential. However, what is important is for the community to view the CDC as representing the community and its interests.

2. The CDC accepts the responsibility for the development of the community as a whole. This can refer to development in general, or, if restricted to agriculture, a link-up with a more over-arching development body.

3. The CDC’s main function is to identify, initiate, negotiate, commission, control and coordinate all development priorities and actions (programs).

The actual design and implementation of development programs and projects takes place at the operational level. Implementation should, in the spirit of participative development, occur in a cooperative manner between development agents and a representative group (nominated or elected) from the community, both of which will need to take responsibility and ownership of the program. Such involvement is commissioned by the CDC, with the program or project committees required to report to the CDC on a regular basis. Ensuring that this happens combined with transparent, documented programs will enable the proper coordination of all development programs.

Various development activities or programs in which different development agents or organizations are willing or prepared to become involved have to be coordinated. The initiative for such programs may come from the CDC or from the development agents, but in all cases the program and its implementation are subject to the council’s guidelines or approval. This is a distinct departure from traditional approaches, where the target community is often the passive receiver of programs or action plans decided and developed unilaterally by the development agency. For the development agency this may appear, and in fact is, a restriction or infringement on its decision making and development activities which can cause delays and make the process more cumbersome. However, the empowerment of the community to take ownership of the development process which results from participation as provided in the model outweighs these considerations.

The coordination envisaged between development organizations is not so much a result of direct negotiation and liaison with one
another but occurs rather from interaction and cooperation with the local community’s CDC. Coordination takes place through the CDC, which, in a sense, performs a mediating function and could establish guidelines. Coordination is thus achieved through what Mintzberg (1979) refers to as the concept of “standardization” rather than direct supervision. The community, through its representative CDC, assumes a key function and can enforce certain issues, but this is reconcilable with the principles of democracy and empowerment. Through standardization of work practices it can, for example, demand that agents’ involvement be of a collaborative and participative nature such as requiring development actions to become the responsibility of communities consisting of nominated or elected local community members working in collaboration with development agents. Other procedures that can be enforced by the CDC are that activities should be programmed and that the action or program committees report on a regular basis to the CDC. Such coordination that is demanded and enforced by the community is more likely to be successful in the long term.

Although agents’ involvement is essentially arranged with and through the CDC, direct mutual liaison between the various agents operating in a community should be encouraged. This could lead to the formation of a professional liaison or extension committee, as shown in Figure 2, operating under a revolving chairmanship and being represented on the central council by its chair. It could be argued that communities may not be able to undertake such a leading management role in development. While this may be true, guidance and training can build community capacity. In fact, this is congruent with the development or extension philosophy of helping people help themselves and is one of the main purposes of the proposed organizational linkage system (Düvel, 1995). Experience indicates that this kind of institution building is not likely to take place spontaneously, but will have to be stimulated and guided; a process that relies heavily on the idealistic and selfless involvement of one or more development agents.

Practical considerations in applying the suggested organizational structure to specific local circumstances include:

1. The need and degree to which various local institutions should be involved and/or represented on the CDC.

2. The appropriate size and boundaries of the development organization’s service area, and the number of sub-committees that can be effectively consolidated into a cohesive unit that accepts ownership for its own development.

3. Deciding whether to start with different existing operational committees and coordinate them through representation in the CDC or establish a CDC first and then form the required action or program committees.

Conclusion

The proposed organizational linkage structure is intended to promote cooperation and coordination among development organizations through involvement of the community, thereby providing a more structured and permanent basis for interaction between the organizations involved. The same structure allows for an empowerment of the community to ultimately take ownership of the development process. The adoption of this organizational model in developmental programs usually requires adaptations to be made in order to meet the specific local circumstances and institutional structures, but its relevancy is closely related to the importance attached to participative development.
References


