GROUPS & COOPERATIVES

Understanding the drivers and barriers to community group membership and engagement has important implications for development policy and practice. The Univeristy of Leeds has been researching how communities living in the East Usambara Mountains (EUM) of northeastern Tanzania experience groups and cooperatives for almost ten years through GCRF-AFRICAP and PhD work.

More recently, FoSTA-Health has been exploring the establishment and function of groups and the opportunities and challenges of membership. This includes exploring how knowledge and benefits are shared with the wider community.

This briefing note summarises some of our key findings of to what works and what doesn't in the establishment and functioning of groups & cooperatives.

ESTABLISHMENT OF GROUPS

SELECTION CRITERIA

Finite resources may limit the membership size of groups, and different types of groups select members in different ways. This can often lead to confusion of the criteria for selection – sometimes with perceptions of selection bias as to who is perceived to be 'hard-working' and well-liked. This can in turn lead to challenges both within the function of groups (e.g. enforcement of fines and by-laws), but also affect wider community relationships (e.g. suspicion and distrust in leadership).

It is important to make sure that interventions are reaching all members of the community – particularly the more vulnerable and marginalised. Varied forms of awareness raising should be utilised, e.g. beyond dissemination in village assemblies where not everyone is present. This will help to inform all citizens of group establishment, and to make the selection criteria and processes more transparent.

MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS

Across Muheza District in the EUM, more men participate in groups and cooperatives than women. This may be for a variety of reasons, e.g. women typically have more domestic responsibilities than men which means they have less time for group work. They may not be permitted to join groups by their husband, or they may simply not see a reason to join if their husband is already a member. However, non-group members rarely receive the group benefits, such as training and education. Some groups also have a financial requirement which not all can afford. This limits who can join.

It is therefore important to consider how to ensure all members of the community are enabled to join groups, if they want to. This may include additional support for women, such as childcare or financial support, that may offer them the free time and resources needed to become a member.

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

Groups are an easier way for development and policy organisations to reach a larger number of people. However, not everyone wants to be in a group. Some farmers prefer non-group work. Development approaches need to recognise this and make space for these farmers within their interventions.

One of the main reasons for not wanting to join groups is because of the legacy of previous groups and cooperatives. Some failed or collapsed owing to financial mismanagement, unfaithful members, and failed promises from development and policyworkers. It is important to be mindful of this legacy in how this has shaped current perceptions on groups and cooperatives & trust in institutions. Pracitioners should listen to and include community reflections on what worked and what didn't.

FUNCTIONING OF GROUPS

STRUCTURE

There is sometimes a disconnect between the purpose and goals of the group members and those of the development workers. This often has a big impact on the functioning and sustainability of groups beyond project lifecycles. It is important to be clear from the outset to manage expectations, and to avoid overpromising to ensure compliance.

One way towards this is to ensure participatory engagement from the outset. This involves working with the communities to listen, understand and integrate their desires, expectations and concerns into group structure. Leadership and roles should be open and transparent, in addition to periodic group updates on progress.

ACTIVITIES & INFORMATION

Often group members complained about poor participation within group activities. This can lead to high levels of drop-out and also conflict. Typically it is the poor, vulnerable and more marginalised members who face challenges attending activities – particularly those with caring responsibilities. In addition, abilities to receive a lot of information in a short time can differ, leading to overload and drop-out.

More needs to be done to ensure that information and activities are varied and consider different abilities. There should also be consideration of seasonal calendars and existing livelihood activities vs the time demands of projects.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Conflict can be common amongst groups when there is a mismatch in expectations and capacities to engage. For example, in cases where the leadership roles and group activities are not clearly defined, this can lead to a lack of understanding about the management of finances within groups. This community 'blaming culture' can affect group and wider community relationships.

There needs to be integrated training on conflict resolution within groups, and an awareness that fines and punishment may not be the best conflict management strategy. Incorporating community traditions of reconciliation can help.

OPPORTUNITIES

Bringing people together to share ideas and work together can help to build collective agency (see briefing note 3). Collective action and collaboration can foster empowerment as it emphasises solidarity, teamwork and mutual support to achieve shared goals.

Group work also provides the foundation to test more innovative approaches to participation (see briefing note 5) to be made more inclusive of the poor and vulnerable.

It is important to look at the legacy of past groups – taking on learning of what worked well and building on that. Community perspectives should be a central component of this reflection and learning – as they have unique perspecitves and experiences.

CHALLENGES

One of the main challenges is the sharing of benefits – from training and education to monetary benefits. Many groups use knowledge sharing models such as Community Based Trainers (CBTs) with the assumption that these CBTs share knowledge both within and outside of the group. This doesn't always happen, particularly if there is no incentive for CBTs to do so, and can lead to elite capture.

There needs to be careful consideration of approaches to avoid 'participation burden' when the time required for group work outweighs the benefits. Elite capture and nepotism needs to be avoided, and appropriate support provided to enable the most vulnerable to participate fully, e.g. disabled, elderly, children, and those who face difficulties accessing and maintaining membership of groups.

Another key challenge is the sustainability of groups beyond project lifecycle. Participatory engagement through citizen control (see briefing note 5) will help to ensure group survival.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make sure that information regarding upcoming group formation and the selection criteria is shared widely & in different formats so that everyone has the necessary information to join if they wish.

- Consider what additional support (if any) can be provided to enable the most vulnerable to participate fully – this may be financial or childcare support to free up time for women.

- Regularly sit down with communities to listen to their reflections on what works and what does not work in the establishment and functioning of groups, and incorporate their perceptions into your work.

- Integrate a) conflict resolution training, & b) a model for sustainability beyond project end into group acitivites.

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