

Evaluating Capacity Building and Participatory Development in Community Timber Operations of the Petén, Guatemala

by Lisa H. Patel, MESC 2005

Introduction

The UNDP defines capacity-building as “the process by which individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, and societies increase their abilities to (1) perform core functions, solve problems, and define and achieve objectives and (2) understand and deal with their development needs in a broad context and in a sustainable manner” (1997). Capacity itself can be divided into three realms: physical, human, and social. Physical capacity describes equipment and capital, human capacity refers to the education and skill set of individuals, while social capacity, the most difficult of the three to assess, describes the nature of interactions between individuals in a community through networks or institutions.

Building community capacity to implement a project requires cultivating a sense of ownership and responsibility, made possible through active local participation in the decision-making process. Both the ways that external agents, such as governments or development institutions, open spaces for participation, and the ways that these spaces are utilized by local people influence eventual project outcomes.

I researched the process of capacity-building in community timber harvesting projects of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR). The MBR, the largest contiguous tract of tropical rainforest

in Central America, was created in 1990 amidst a flurry of reports regarding rapid deforestation from increasing immigration and “slash and burn” agriculture (Grunberg et al. 2000). The Guatemalan government, caught in a struggle between the preservationist tendencies of international conservation NGOs and insufficient resources to properly protect the forest, granted communities within the reserve concessions to manage the land. However, the government required that each community receive Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)¹ certification to ensure sustainable forest management, and also required that each community have an “accompanying NGO,” called a *regente*, to assist with meeting FSC standards, implementing sustainable forest management plans, and forming governance bodies capable of administering the project. Communities were also subject to yearly evaluations from CONAP, the Guatemalan environmental agency responsible for MBR management, to ensure that operations were running smoothly.

The international non-governmental organizations Conservation International and the Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Learning Center (CATIE) were among the first organizations to provide technical assistance to communities seeking concessions. In 1991, USAID provided funding to these organizations to build local institutions within Guatemala to ensure that technical support would ensue without the continuing need of international NGOs. These institutions received funding to help communities create timber operations from the ground up, including governance structures,

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management plans, and business plans. In the year 2000, funding from USAID changed again. While the communities had received the necessary training from these NGOs in technical aspects of management, USAID contracted Chemonics, a development consulting firm, to build a stronger business vision.

Ten years after the first community began timber harvesting, multiple assessment reports point to the same problem: while communities have been successfully capacitated in technical aspects, social capacity remains weak throughout the communities, threatening the future sustainability and success of the projects (Chemonics 2003).

The blame for this gap in capacity has been laid upon NGOs, communities, and the government. This article examines how capacity building has translated into project implementation. In particular, I examine the role of social capacity in creating a participatory project in a situation where the form of production was new to communities. Ultimately, I will argue that development projects must build the necessary social capacity by cultivating high levels of community participation and ownership to create strong and vibrant community operations.

Methods

I conducted informal, unstructured interviews in Spanish with the community members of Uaxactún and Carmelita and collected project assessment documents for analysis. I focused on seven community harvesting operations in four of the thirteen communities within and outside the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Each operation is run by a *junta directiva* (board of directors), which is chosen by the *socios* (members) of the organization during a general

assembly meeting. The board of directors is composed of a treasurer, vice-president, president, and secretary. While meetings of the general assembly occur once every few weeks, the board of directors meets more frequently. During these meetings, budgets, activities, and plans of operation for all economic actions are discussed and decided.

I also interviewed community associations that have arisen as a result of the concessions: ACOFOP, a political association representing the thirteen communities of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, and FORESCOM, the commercial coalition of community operations, currently consisting of nine of the thirteen operations. Finally, I interviewed an array of NGOs, funding agencies, and government representatives involved in the project, including CONAP; USAID; Chemonics; *Naturaleza para la Vida* and *Mundo Justo*, two regional Guatemalan NGOs that originally served as *regentes* for communities but are now being phased out in favor of FORESCOM; and Smartwood, the non-profit auditor organization that evaluates community concession operations for certification under FSC standards.

The interviews focused on perceptions of the original funders of the project and the NGOs that played a pivotal role in the capacity-building process of the communities I visited. Individuals were asked to comment on the role of the NGOs as well as on the status and

Key Players in the Management of Maya Biosphere Reserve

FORESCOM: the commercial coalition of community operations whose goal is to increase volumes, bargaining power, and profits for communities.

CONAP: the environmental regulation branch of the Guatemalan government. CONAP administers the management of the Maya Biosphere Reserve and other protected areas, and carries out yearly evaluations of community concessions

ACOFOP: a political association representing thirteen communities of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. ACOFOP initially fought for communities' rights gaining concessions.

Working with individuals that did not have the necessary reading or education level hindered the success of trainings.

3. Technical and social capacity-building: Methods utilized by NGOs for “social capacity-building” were criticized as being insufficient, poorly planned, and too rushed. Additionally, NGOs criticized themselves and were criticized by others for failing to build the necessary knowledge and consciousness among the population regarding the importance of the project to the communities’ livelihood. While social issues were overwhelmingly seen to have been neglected, six of twelve individuals agreed that the communities had the necessary technical training to handle management, including species identification, proper felling and silvicultural techniques, and minimization of environmental impact and debris.

4. Criticisms of NGO involvement: Seven of twelve individuals expressed a negative attitude toward the work carried out by NGOs in the region, including individuals that worked for local NGOs. Individuals criticized the duration and motives of NGO participation, claiming that NGOs would merely dump money on communities then leave as quickly as they had arrived, and that NGOs were interested more in continuing their own funding than in building self-sustaining communities. Several respondents stated that by requiring mandatory NGO involvement, the government created the perfect opportunity for the paternalistic relationship that developed between certain NGO workers and communities. This paternalism both cultivated a sense of dependence on the part of the communities and made communities wary of working with NGOs in the future. The propensity toward self-critique by NGO workers indicates proof for another source of complaint from outside observers: that NGO field workers were often forced to work within constraints or under command from higher authorities who did not understand field realities.

Responses from communities: Junta directivas

1. Participation of socios: The junta directivas found that many socios did not participate actively enough and did not understand the importance or the purpose of the project. While general assembly meetings were always well-attended, junta directiva members commented that participation was usually limited to a small number of individuals. Their explanation for this was either that the NGOs did not complete their job in raising people’s awareness, or that community members were too busy with other concerns to understand the implications of the forestry project.

2. Separating timber management from community governance: Under the traditional structure of governance, the president of the junta directiva also serves as the manager of the project. The Association of Arbol Verde is the first association to disconnect these roles by appointing a separate manager for the timber harvesting operation – a condition dictated by the Smartwood assessor. The junta directiva of Arbol Verde felt that this change positively influenced the organization, facilitating better communication and order. Additionally, the manager could stay on longer than a two-year term, as the position was hired as opposed to elected, which facilitated better institutional memory. Other community organizations did not see the necessity of appointing a separate manager. Some said that this would require yet another salary, money which they did not have, while others said that the president was doing a fine job with management.

3. Differing attitudes regarding NGOs: Personal experiences greatly colored attitudes toward NGOs. For example, the junta directiva of Arbol Verde argued that NGOs were more interested in increasing their own funds than in building community capacity. The junta directiva, both collectively and individually, articulated a desire to change the way

funding for NGOs worked, claiming that money should go directly to communities. The junta directivas of other communities expressed milder opinions, with the main criticism being NGOs' short time commitment. The communities of Uaxactún and Carmelita expressed generally positive reactions to NGO involvement, particularly to the technical assistance provided during early phases of the forestry project and the vital advocacy and assistance roles that NGOs played in gaining community concessions.

Responses from communities: Socios

In both Uaxactún and Carmelita, there were vocal opponents to the formation of the concession itself; people cited greater community division, corruption, and having been tricked or under-informed as negative impacts on the community. Additionally, many individuals expressed concern over being in debt to buy or rent more equipment for the timber operation.

Overall, a majority of individuals interviewed expressed positive or neutral views, saying either that the project had little impact or that the project had generated new jobs for the community. However, no individual expressed that the community as a whole was improving as a result of the project. The only direct benefits people claimed to see were either jobs or the money they received at the end of each fiscal year for being members of the organization.

Discussion

In assessing community concessions around MBR, community operations are divided between the succeeding, the stagnating, and the failing. What factors separate the more "successful" enterprises from the stagnating or failing operations?

1. **A coerced process:** Community ownership in a project is high only when communities are given power to control and decide their futures

(Fukuda-Parr 2002). As Soza (2003) notes, the granting of concessions in the MBR was a forced process, as communities were told that they must either become certified or lose their right to live on the land. By failing to give communities a legitimate choice and creating stringent requirements of NGO assistance, the government forced a relationship between NGOs and communities, often leading to a pattern of paternalism and dependence (Chemonics 2001). In part because of this dynamic, community ownership over the process of concession formation was low, resulting in low levels of participation and knowledge from the general assembly and the general sentiment that the project had not benefited the community as a whole.

2. **Lack of education:** In the case of Uaxactún and Carmelita, community members who had access to basic education were asked to manage multi-hundred thousand dollar timber operations with rigorous FSC certification within the span of a few years. NGO and government respondents reported that basic education did not translate well into the language of business, making project implementation difficult because leaders did not have the appropriate educational background to understand how to make important management decisions.

The constant references to "lack of education" point to a failing on the part of NGOs and the government to understand the capacity of the community from the onset. As timber harvesting was a new form of production and required new forms of organization for project implementation, NGOs and the government failed to consider how to structure training or project implementation to account for this difference in capacity.

3. **Failing to plan for social capacity-building:** One salient point that emerged from interview responses was the seemingly contradictory sense that social capacity-building was neglected from the onset, even while the social aspect

was recognized by all players as having vast implications for whether the projects would ultimately succeed.

On the one hand, failure to factor social capacity into plans can be attributed merely to the government's reliance on international conservation NGOs to assist communities. As one individual noted, employees of conservation organizations are trained in ecological and biological sciences rather than social sciences or business administration and were thus unable to provide the needed expertise to build solid community governments or timber operations. On the other hand, neglecting the social question can be viewed as a larger symptom of development projects. While project design may incorporate the building of certain forms of social capacity, such as conducting leadership training or information sessions for the community at large, this approach is similar to technical skills training and in many ways fails to account for the unique and complicated nature of social capacity. Technical skills are easy to teach and fit well within the still-dominant paradigm of development thinking, where the outsider development institution provides the necessary skills in a short, defined period of time.

Social capacity cannot be taught in a workshop or explained in a seminar. It is worked into the fabric of a society itself and requires a long-term investment by NGOs and government to build the trust, knowledge, and relationships that ultimately translate into the participation and the capacity of a community to carry out a development project. Targeting social capacity in these projects can be elusive. Moreover, while building capacity is a daunting enough task, *creating* capacity, as this project attempted, can be counter-productive. Creating capacity in this case did not entail a careful assessment of what capacity existed; rather, NGOs entered communities to provide a "crash course" in timber harvesting with the hopes that communities would not only pick up the necessary skills, but also organically

build the necessary organizational infrastructure through leadership and civic participation to make their projects succeed.

Conclusion

Neglecting the social and human dimensions of capacity-building is not a unique symptom of the timber harvesting operations of Petén. A similar story has unfolded in projects throughout the world (Campbell and Vainio-Mattila 2003; Madrid and Chapela 2003; Newmark and Hough 2000). Thus, my argument is special not for its rarity, but rather for its ubiquity. Development is both quick and slow to change: quick in that new projects are constantly funded throughout the world, and projects are modified as each project is created; slow in that the institutional memories of organizations can be lumbering and the lessons learned forgotten in the glut of experiences from year to year.

In this case, communities were introduced to new forms of production without proper attention to building their social and human capacity through participation. In the future, assessments regarding a community's capacity to carry out a development project should be strengthened and should incorporate the human, social, and physical aspects of capacity. More importantly, the pervasive reference in development project evaluation to gaps in social capacity, both in the Petén and around the world, point to the importance of creating projects that are people-driven and led. Only when community ownership of a project is high – a goal achieved by accounting for community capacity and creating spaces for community members to influence the design and conception of projects – can participatory development be realized.

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Endnotes

¹ The Forest Stewardship Council has evolved as an independent, third-party auditor of forest management. Certified timber is stamped with the FSC logo to alert consumers that the wood was harvested under a sustainable management plan. Certification is thus a consumer-oriented solution to forest degradation, working on the assumption that consumers would be willing to pay a price premium on timber that they know has been harvested sustainably.

² It is worth noting here that while different communities worked with several different local and international NGOs, my analysis treats these NGOs equally. I found that community perceptions of NGO involvement were based not on the line between Guatemalan and foreign, but rather between whether or not an individual employee was from the community itself.

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