

Operations Evaluation Department

Lessons and Practices No. 18

August 28, 2002

Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society Engagement in World Bank Supported Projects: Lessons from OED Evaluations

Introduction

In recent years the World Bank has greatly expanded its relationships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs). The World Bank defines NGOs as private organizations that pursue activities to relieve the suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development. In 1999, OED reported on a study that sought to identify factors contributing to successful World Bank-NGO collaboration¹. A number of other OED studies also have addressed issues related to the Bank's interactions with NGOs and CBOs. This paper draws on that body of work to identify some of the important findings and recommendations that should inform Bank policies.

Findings

NGOs/CBOs have been underutilized in Bank work

In the NGO study, OED found a gap between promise and performance. Comparison of information in the Bank's NGO database with individual projects indicates that the language of NGO/CBO involvement in Bank-supported projects outstripped the reality. The demand for partnerships with NGOs and CBOs exceeded the supply of willing and able partners. Equally the Bank and borrowers tried to do too much too quickly without building up their own capacity to work with NGOs and CBOs, and without clear indicators of

¹ OED, *Nongovernmental Organizations in World Bank-Supported Projects* (1999c).

progress. Claims regarding NGO involvement in Bank operations were inflated.

Other OED evaluations support this finding. For example, OED's comparative study on resettlement² reported that while NGOs were the logical choice for doing baseline surveys, organizing resettler participation and intervening at the grassroots level, the resettlement programs studied suffered from too little voluntary constructive grassroots activities by NGOs. A review of participation in Bank work³ similarly found that NGOs were valuable but underused partners, although government agencies often turned to them to build capacity. OED's post conflict study⁴ found that too much dependence was placed on the existing bureaucracy and not enough use made of NGOs. Bank staff were not generally familiar with working in conflict countries nor with the international relief and rehabilitation system. This led to little understanding of and contact with international and local NGOs.

Part of the underutilization problem may be that NGO/CBO participation is not engaged throughout the project cycle. OED's evaluation of IDA⁵ found that NGO respondents across countries wanted to be more involved "in all phases of the project cycle" rather than only in project design. Respondents argued that creating space and mechanisms for government-civil society dialogue are only a first step; if the processes do not result in genuine input and impact on decision making, they are hardly more than gestures. For example, one respondent lamented that participants were "treated like decorations...but their inputs [aren't] taken into account." Other NGO representatives suggested that more attention should be paid to the implications of participation on already established parliamentary processes, some arguing that IDA should work to strengthen the integrity of such processes.

The NGO study did find that provision for NGO/CBO involvement was high in Bank projects where participation was critical, notably in social funds. The OED social funds⁶ study carried out in 2002 found that social fund engagement with NGOs as it relates to institutional development has taken three forms: direct support through training or technical assistance; NGO participation as eligible subproject sponsors or intermediaries; and

² Picciotto, et. al., *Involuntary Resettlement: Comparative Perspectives* (2001).

³ OED, "Participation in Development Assistance" (2001b).

⁴ OED, *The World Bank's Experience with Post-Conflict Reconstruction* (1998b).

⁵ OED, *OED IDA Review: Report on Country Consultations* (2001a); *IDA's Partnership for Poverty Reduction: An Independent Review of the International Development Association's Performance* (2002b).

⁶ OED, *Social Funds: Assessing Effectiveness* (2002c).

subcontracting of specific activities, such as outreach or service delivery to NGOs. This is relevant because the OED participation review⁷ found that even modest participation brought about quality improvements. Project design became more relevant as beneficiaries, many for the first time, influenced the placement of facilities such as rural roads and markets, indicated the level of service they wanted and were willing to pay for, and selected community projects they considered more important.

Consultation with NGOs/CBOs remains tentative

The OED study on aid coordination found that while the Bank had given substantially more attention to cooperation with civil society (particularly NGOs) and the private sector in recent years, it is still in a tentative, experimental mode when it comes to actively seeking their increased involvement in aid coordination processes.⁸ This finding was echoed in the OED forestry⁹ evaluation, which also found limitations in consultative processes as one of the elements that had contributed to implementation failures and deficient outcomes, and recommended strengthened efforts in incorporating the perspectives of the private sector and civil society (as well as those of the government) into development processes.

Country assistance evaluations (CAEs) carried out in Mozambique, Vietnam and Bangladesh¹⁰ all noted that a more strategic approach to partnership and involvement of NGOs and civil society is needed. All the studies pointed to the fact that there was scope for greater NGO-government collaboration and interaction.

⁷ OED, "Participation in Development Assistance" (2001b).

⁸ OED, *The Drive to Partnership: Aid Coordination and The World Bank* (2001c).

⁹ OED, *The World Bank Forest Strategy: Striking the Right Balance* (2000c).

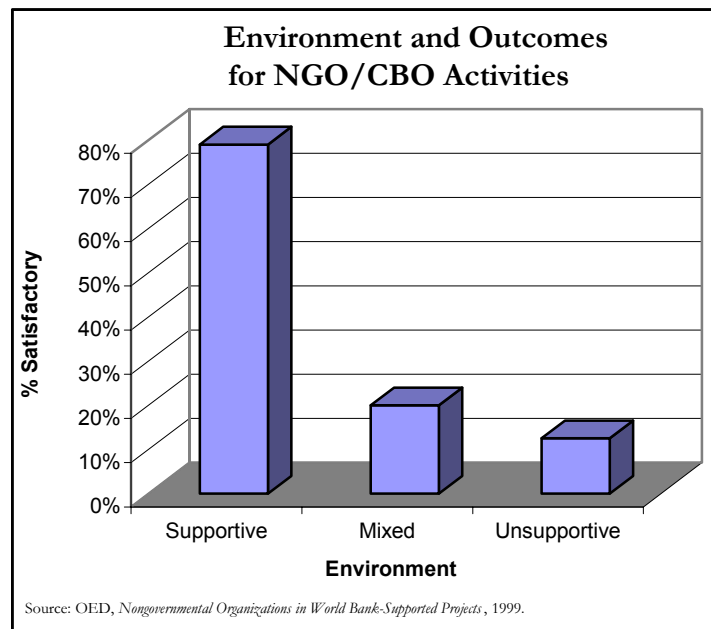
¹⁰ OED, *Vietnam Country Assistance Evaluation* (2001d); *Rebuilding the Mozambique Economy: Assessment of a Development Partnership* (1998a), *Bangladesh: Progress Through Partnership* (1999a).

Working relationships among partners are often ineffective

The aid coordination evaluation also found that the Bank, borrowers, NGOs, CBOs, and cofinanciers often failed to cooperate effectively to realize the opportunities that partnerships present. Project designs reflected low levels of information about government NGO/CBO relations and their abilities to work together. In addition the Bank and donors sometimes followed independent paths regarding NGOs/CBOs, even in cofinanced projects. Without clear signs of basic agreement between partners in advance, effective collaboration is unlikely. Several appraisal documents promised that NGOs “will be involved” without saying which NGOs, why, when and how making the exercise unproductive. Indeed, OED project assessments revealed more about procedural difficulties in evolving relationships than they did about development effectiveness. In half the projects assessed, the partners had divergent objectives, did not understand how well the others worked, did not match capacities with appointed roles, and did not adjust their administrative procedures to the meet the needs of others.

The NGO evaluation also found that the enabling environment for NGO/CBO activity was critical for a satisfactory outcome (see figure).

In half the cases assessed, NGOs/CBOs were operating in an environment that was less than fully supportive. Achievements attributable to NGOs/CBOs were evident in some projects but in most they were difficult to discern. NGO/CBO involvement was not clearly conceived during project design, and monitoring and evaluation was either poorly designed or not done.



OED also found cases where involvement was potentially disadvantageous to NGOs: first where procedures are ill adapted to NGO capacities; second when project support is not sustained during or after implementation; and third when

Bank-supported projects impose unrealistically short timetables on processes such as scaling up of NGOs or participatory work with communities.

Participation of NGOs and civil society organizations in some project implementation has increased

The OED Study on the Bank's water resource strategy¹¹ found that there was a clear increase over recent years in the participation of NGOs and civil society organizations in project implementation for poverty focused projects. (Non-poverty projects had lower levels of civil society participation in implementation.) This is important because the participation review¹² found that even modest levels of participation bring about quality improvements. Project design became more relevant as beneficiaries, many for the first time, influenced the placement of facilities such as rural roads and markets, indicated the level of service they wanted and were willing to pay for, and selected community projects they considered important. Playing a role in decision-making--far more than contributions in cash, kind, or labor--led villagers to assume ownership of a project, increasing both impact and sustainability.

Government skepticism hinders engagement with NGOs

The participation review found that the biggest constraint on participation was government skepticism about participatory approaches. Most government agencies lacked the capacity to engage in participation. Communities did not have enough training and ongoing technical support, and community capacity building was rarely a long-term objective. Within a country, Bank advocacy and persistence helped overcome government resistance. Within the Bank, the most important factor was the nature of the task manager's belief in, and experience with, participation. Once Bank staff practiced participatory approaches, they tended to keep using them. NGO-civil society specialists in the Bank's field offices made an important contribution by facilitating participation in CAS consultations.

Monitoring and evaluation of Bank NGO/CBO activities is weak

OED found that weak M&E originates with poorly structured projects in which the contribution expected from NGOs/CBOs is not clearly identified, leading to an absence of indicators and a low priority for M&E. Lack of

¹¹ OED, *Bridging Troubled Waters: Assessing the World Bank Water Resources Strategy* (2002a).

¹² OED, "Participation in Development Assistance" (2001b).

experience by project implementation units and NGOs exacerbates this problem. Where the aim is to empower communities, M&E is conceptually difficult, requiring participation in developing simple, implementable and low-cost M&E systems.

Recommendations

OED recommended that the Bank:

- develop strategic partnerships (both operational and advisory) with donors, foundations, and others with comparative advantage in knowledge and experience working with NGOs;
- encourage a supportive environment for NGO/CBO partnerships through policy dialogue reflected in Country Assistance Strategies, improve the policy environment and promote good practice in laws regulating NGOs/CBOs , and strengthen the quality of participatory processes in projects and in CAS preparation;
- build capacity in client agencies and communities to foster participation and develop country-level approaches and other instruments to strengthen the long-term impact of participation;
- improve significantly, in specific country contexts, its understanding of NGOs/CBOs and their relationships with borrowers;
- ensure that project preparation is inclusive and participatory when NGO/CBO partnerships are envisaged;
- reduce constraints and improve Bank institutional support for participation by helping borrowers and Bank staff to employ fully the flexibility that exists in Bank procedures;
- implement a Bank-wide monitoring system for NGO/CBO involvement; and
- develop--together with borrowers--simple low cost monitoring systems that provide appropriate incentives for monitoring, make evaluations of partnerships activities joint exercises, and seek to capture beneficiary views routinely in M&E and disseminate good M&E practice.

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