

Ghana NORPREP Implementation Support Mission No. 4 (Dec. 2006) Reflections on design and implementation - a discussion note¹

This note aims to present some reflections based on the experience of the Northern Region Poverty Reduction Programme in Ghana, a co financed by the GoG, IFAD, District Assemblies and communities. NORPREP was designed following some principles of the CDD approach². Compared with other CDD approaches in Ghana, NORPREP had several distinguishing features: primary responsibility for implementation was vested in the Regional Coordinating Council (RCC) through the Regional Planning Coordination Unit (RCPU) as opposed to a project coordination unit; all components were fully embedded within government structures (following a programme-support approach); and 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 build capacity of elected council members at district level and below.

Selecting the right drivers for the Programme's institutional change agenda

NORPREP has an important institutional change agenda that involves changing the way that District Assemblies (DA) prepare their Annual Workplans and Budgets. The idea was to make the planning process more bottom-up, by starting with PRAs and community action plans, and working toward Area Council (AC) Plans to be fed into District Annual Work Plan and Budgets (DAWPBs). Although the institutional change agenda was implicit in the activities described in the NORPREP appraisal report, its implications became clearer during implementation.

Locus of responsibility for making institutional change happen

The original programme design gave inadequate attention to the question of who – on what administrative level – should take responsibility for driving the Programme's institutional change agenda. It is not only a question of who has the **authority** but also of who has the **incentive** to drive a process of bottom-up institutional change. The experience from the 4th Implementation Support mission suggests that it was probably inappropriate for IFAD to have entrusted overall responsibility for institutional change to the Regional Coordinating Director (RCD) and day-to-day implementation responsibility to the Regional Planning Coordination Unit (RPCU). Although the RCD has sufficient authority, he has limited incentive to drive a process of bottom-up institutional change at district level and below. The RPCU is under-staffed and overworked and lacks both the time and incentive to pursue bottom-up 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 on institutional change within the decentralized public administration. It would have been more appropriate to entrust the Programme's institutional change agenda to an independent programme coordination unit, attached to, but with sufficient autonomy from, the regional 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

¹ The ideas are the collective expression of a brainstorming undertaken during the IFAD implementation support mission by Ms. A. Carloni (Mission Leader/IFAD consultant), G. Van Vliet (Governance Specialist/IFAD consultant), M. Manssouri (IFAD Country Programme Manager), M. Ahmed, Chef Technical Adviser, RPCU/NORPREP Programme Support Unit (SU), Ms. A. Habib, Human Resources Officer, NORPREP PSU.

² About the IFAD Community-driven development approach in West and Central Africa, refer to Fidafrigue web site <http://www.fidafrigue.net/article807.html>

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 was designed to have only an advisory role and did not have the authority to launch the process of sensitization, capacity building and innovation on its own. The day to day responsibility for programme implementation was vested in the Chief Economic Planner of the RPCU, under the authority of the Regional Coordinating Director. The Programme Support Team (PST) members 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 the recurring question: must all activities in a CDD project be demand driven?

Within NORPREP all programme activities, 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. The decision to require the 18 districts to put all sensitization and capacity building activities into their own annual Workplans and budgets 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 any initial sensitization.³

³ As Paolo Freire already emphasized many years ago: there is a paradoxical relationship between communities and outside agents because “nobody can help a community and no community can evolve without the intervention of others.” 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 its own initiatives. Therefore, it is essential for NORPREP project staff to maintain initiative on some very basic activities such as sensitization and capacity building that a prerequisite for a dialogue to take place.

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 even 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. 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). When the programme objective is institutional change aimed at unleashing local initiative at district level and below, it is essential for a demand-driven programme to have some project-led activities such as sensitization and capacity building activities that are a prerequisite for bottom-up planning to take place at community, area council and district level.

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

CDD projects in Ghana give the impression of working through elected representatives because they channel investment through the District Assemblies and – to a lesser extent – through the Area Councils. However, to date the main focus of donor projects including NORPREP has been on building the capacity of district **planners** and other **civil servants** attached to the DAs and ACs. In spite of the fact that earlier Village Infrastructure Project (VIP)⁴ review missions (Preparation MTR 2001, MTR 2002, MTR 2004), emphasized the need to work with **elected** members of the DAs and ACs in addition to civil servants employed by DAs, to date, the elected representatives of DAs and ACs have received limited capacity building support. The experience of the current implementation support mission suggests that elected representatives have 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 attached to the DAs and ACs seem to have a limited incentive to make an extra effort to implement sub-projects quickly. Moreover, the hired technical staff is 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. Each AC is supposed to employ a secretary, treasurer, typist and a messenger. Most ACs have few hired staff because they are unable to generate and retain enough revenue to pay their salaries. 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.

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.

Institutional Arrangements that foster Activity versus Passivity

Nearly all rural development projects in Ghana have adopted a programme support approach that makes use of existing planning and budgeting and implementation procedures at district level. One consequence of using district-level procedures to respond to small community-level initiatives is that they slow down the pace of action, thereby discouraging community-level initiative. Although the existing district-level procedures may be appropriate for larger public facilities located in the district centres and area council

⁴ Village Infrastructure Project was a CDD project in Ghana co-financed by IFAD, World Bank and KfW

sites, they may be inappropriate and unnecessarily heavy for small community-level facilities. A distinction ought to be made between the **domain** of larger district-level facilities and that of smaller small community-built and owned facilities. Each domain may require a different set of implementation modalities.

Working through the DA annual planning cycle and the government tender process makes communities passive because they are forced 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. The system of tendering sub-project implementation to outside contractors further discourages local initiative. Consequently, communities do not care what happens to their Community Action Plans (CAPs). They do not own them or even bother to obtain a copy.

How the Rapid Results Initiative Activates Citizen Participation

The Rapid Results Initiative (RRI) piloted by the World Bank-financed Community Based Rural Development Project (CBRDP) 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

Need to refocus

The NORPREP design document puts heavy emphasis on building capacity at district level and below to undertake 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 implementation support mission experience suggests that the NORPREP capacity building component should focus on building capacity especially at below-district and community level. The training should not end with participatory planning but enable communities and their representatives to undertake the whole sub-project cycle, including implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

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.