

COLLECTIVE ACTION AND PROPERTY RIGHTS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Strengthening Collective Action

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Through collective action, forest users, fishers, irrigators, herders, and other rural producers can improve and sustain resources vital for their lives. Inclusive institutions for collective action empower communities to protect and improve their livelihoods. Many communities of resource users possess long-standing traditions of local cooperation, though these traditions may have been weakened in more recent times. In other cases, collective action seems absent, even when it ought to offer substantial benefits for those involved.

What can be done when people seem unable or unwilling to act together to pursue their interests? Insights on factors crucial to stimulating and sustaining collective action have come from abstract game theory, laboratory experiments, historical research, case studies, and practical experience. This brief draws on this research to review how citizens, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies, and others can strengthen collective action.

FACILITATING COLLECTIVE ACTION

Facilitators, community organizers, and similar change agents have catalyzed communities to organize bottom-up identification of priorities, planning, and action. In the Gal Oya irrigation system in Sri Lanka, institutional organizers helped farmers organize themselves, transforming a situation of many conflicts with the irrigation agency and among farmers into one in which farmers worked together to successfully repair irrigation canals, equitably share water during shortage, and cooperate effectively with the irrigation agency in planning and implementing irrigation system rehabilitation.

Facilitators in different programs have included recent university graduates, retrained agency field staff, local community members, and “farmer consultants.” Facilitation approaches have built on earlier methods in community development and community organizing, combined with reforms to enhance the capacity of technical agencies to work with communities. Facilitators in legal empowerment programs have helped paralegals and others in the community learn about their rights and responsibilities and strengthen their ability to protect local rights and interests.

Changes in policies and regulations and in everyday attitudes and practices of agency staff can make it much easier for communities and agencies to work together in managing resources. Communities may already be capable of organizing themselves, independently or with modest help, such as in arranging elections. Where additional stimulus is helpful, facilitators can reduce the initial barriers and costs of organizing. Care is needed, however, to avoid dependence on facilitators and instead build sustainable local capacity. Facilitators can reach out to include poorer and more marginalized people in collective action.

PARTICIPATORY LEARNING AND ACTION

The popularity of participatory rapid appraisal (PRA) has highlighted the rich toolkit of techniques available for analyzing, planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating collective action in rural development and resource management. The effectiveness of participatory learning and action techniques is founded on principles of empowerment, community control, and respect for local knowledge. Joint walkthroughs, transects, sketch maps, scale models, cropping calendars, matrix ranking, buzz groups, and other techniques not only quickly generate valid information and support analysis by stakeholders, but also are fun for those involved. “Icebreaker” activities and listening skills exercises help bring groups together and build trust and mutual understanding. Including a diverse mix of participants—women, poor people, ethnic minorities, elders, youths, and others—encourages a full range of concerns to be voiced. Where conflicts among stakeholders are severe, alternative dispute resolution methods of negotiation, mediation, and arbitration may be useful.

Participatory application of planning methods such as logical framework analysis empowers local stakeholders to make decisions. Integrated pest management, which relies on coordinated action among neighboring farmers, has shown the value of integrating local and scientific knowledge. Technical tools, such as geographic information systems and computer models, can support better-informed decisionmaking by local stakeholders. Sustaining changes beyond the stages of initial enthusiasm requires good follow-through from planning to action and a supportive institutional environment.

REDESIGNING INSTITUTIONS AND INCENTIVES

When villagers have the authority to determine who harvests wood and other products from nearby forests, they can better guard against overexploitation and benefit from improved management. Many of the problems of initiating and sustaining collective action can be traced to inadequate incentives and to institutional arrangements that discourage and displace collective action. For example, state laws and regulations that deny local people the right to control local resources leave them unable to enforce sanctions against violators. In other cases governments want to delegate responsibilities, such as protection of tree seedlings, without securing the rights of users to share in the benefits of harvesting timber and other forest products.

Research has identified key design principles that promote collective action. Resource management institutions must adapt to local conditions, offering local organizations the autonomy to devise and revise their own rules. Participants will address problems they identify as important, so it is essential that the actions taken will benefit those involved. Groups need the power to set boundaries and control access to the resource, to monitor rule violations, and to enforce sanctions. Rules need to be workable in terms of local ideas and resources. For example,

fishers find it simpler to control locations and kinds of fishing gear rather than to regulate the amount that can be caught. Crafting and applying such rules depends on both local agreements and adequate legal backing from government. Small face-to-face groups with strong, shared interests can combine into larger federations. Where resource boundaries do not fit administrative units, resource user groups need support to organize themselves in suitably specialized organizations, backed by necessary legal authority, that still accommodate village and other administrative bodies. Incentives matter not just for ordinary resource users, but also for leaders and for those who spend long hours, often at night or in bad weather, patrolling forests, canals, or other remote areas. Local organizations need authority and autonomy to establish a structure that fits their conditions, with adequate incentives for members and leaders, enforceable sanctions against those who violate rules, and feedback mechanisms to learn from experience.

POLICY REFORMS

In programs such as irrigation and forest management, national governments are partially or fully devolving authority to user groups or local governments. States are not only withdrawing from some activities, but are also building capacity to provide new services such as technical advice, dispute resolution through courts and other forums, and regulatory arrangements to protect broader societal concerns. Strengthening the resource tenure of existing local institutions by, for example, formalizing community rights to regulate land use, reinforces incentives for collective action.

One of the most powerful tools available for promoting collective action lies in changing how governments provide financial assistance. Subsidies can be offered to stimulate, rather than displace, sustainable collective action. Social funds have pioneered creative approaches to financing for community infrastructure development. New approaches to agricultural extension allow users to choose among a variety of service providers. Grants, loans, vouchers, and demand-driven “menus” for training and other services can all be designed to increase incentives for collective action and local resource mobilization.

HARNESSING SOCIAL ENERGY

Successful change often depends heavily on intangibles: political will, trust, reputation, and legitimacy. When these are lacking, communications strategies—such as political advocacy, public relations campaigns, training programs, study tours, and dissemination of success stories—may be ineffective. They may even backfire, breeding cynicism and disappointment and discrediting future efforts. Where suitable conditions exist or have been created, good communications are key to bringing about change. Assurance that fellow resource users share a willingness to try new approaches, reinforced by visible support from leaders in high places in government, can be crucial in changing expectations and transforming decisions about joining in and supporting collective action.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

Communities are not homogenous, and attention needs to be paid to the implications of economic and social differences. Innovative efforts to initiate collective action should be based on a pragmatic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of communities, markets, and governments and the opportunities for appropriately combining different institutions. Whereas local resource users possess valuable knowledge and social links that help create and enforce rules, governments often retain advantages in providing technical information, resolving disputes, and strategically promoting wider societal interests such as equity and environmental sustainability.

Governments have an important role in counterbalancing the potential for local corruption and other abuses. They can limit local elites’ efforts to grab the lion’s share of benefits from collective action. Government’s role includes promoting democratic processes for choosing leaders and making decisions, establishing accountability mechanisms for reporting the use of funds, and taking proactive initiatives to help the poor, excluded, or disadvantaged to organize themselves and protect their interests.

Pilot projects often pioneer ideas about strengthening collective action. Success stories have, however, often benefited from extra attention, special resources, strong charismatic leaders, and other exceptional factors. Expanding innovations successfully requires developing approaches suited to actual conditions and sustainable on a routine basis with ordinary levels of resources.

CONCLUSION

There is no one best way, no magic bullet or uniform recipe, to strengthen collective action, in general or within a single sector. Research on the ecological dynamics of rangelands and fisheries, for example, has demonstrated the pitfalls of oversimplified management strategies that assume certain knowledge and stable conditions, instead emphasizing the need for well-informed local management able to cope with risk and uncertainty by adapting to changing circumstances. Research and experience show that reforms to strengthen collective action need to employ multiple approaches and to be customized by local resource users to fit their local conditions in ways that allow for continuing learning and adaptation. ■

For further reading, see *PLA Notes* (www.iied.org) featuring articles on participatory learning and action approaches; N. Uphoff, *Learning from Gal Oya: Possibilities for Participatory Development and Post-Newtonian Social Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); R. Meinzen-Dick, A. Knox, and M. Di Gregorio, eds., *Collective Action, Property Rights, and Devolution of Natural Resource Management: Exchange of Knowledge and Implications for Policy* (Feldafing, Germany: German Foundation for International Development [DSE], 2001); E. Ostrom, “Coping with Tragedies of the Commons,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 493–535 (<http://polisci.annualreviews.org/cgi/content/full/2/1/493>).

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