Crop failure in Dalocha, Ethiopia: a Participatory Emergency Response:

The following is a summary of a paper recently published in Disasters. The views expressed are those of the author.

Many NGOs are seeking to incorporate into relief operations some of the basic principles normally applied to development projects, e.g. consulting and working with the community and designing responses based on livelihood protection. Action Aid Ethiopia (AAE) adopted this type of approach when faced with a drought induced emergency in Dalocaha, Ethiopia. AAE began working in 34 rural Pas of Dalocha woreda in 1989. The primary focus of AAEs work was food security and health although water and education initiatives were subsequently incorporated into the programme after 1991.

In 1993 the harvest largely failed due to excessive meher rains, which then curtailed early. With continued rainfall and pest infestation, 1994 brought widespread food shortages. In March 1994 AAE set up food stress monitoring systems. Monitoring found that in March only 10% of households were eating one meal per day, but by the end of June the proportion had risen to 63%. The prices of grain had also increased dramatically, while livestock prices had plummeted. In order to assess the extent of the problem field staff divided into four groups, and between 28th of June and 5th of July conducted 168 focus groups discussions. These groups included iddir leaders, elders, religious leaders, PA executives, groups of women from poor household, and savings and credit groups. Each group listed poor households and destitutes affected by the acute food shortage. These lists were cross-checked with existing PA data. Over the same period an intensive sample survey of 2,066 households covering 15.8% of the population was conducted by AAE in the project area. The discussions and survey confirmed the extent of the problem. It was apparent that for many the only option would soon be migration, either to look for work, or to seek help from distant clan relations, or to borrow at exorbitant interest rates from the few rich farmers who could still afford to lend.

In considering a response the NGOs' first step was to consult the farmers. An all day workshop was held for group leaders from 102 AAE development groups. The community representative identified their problems which included: widespread hunger and animal disease - the causes were late and inadequate rainfall and high grain prices. Community representatives went on to suggest the following solutions:

* food on soft loan at zero interest to be repaid over 2-3 years,
* wheat seed and fertilizer on credit to those who had lost maize crops,
* more and cheaper drugs available through health posts,
* blankets, on credit,
* training/advice on savings and grain storage.

The farmers also clearly suggested, that assistance for group members should be channelled through the groups, and that for non-group members it should be organised through one of the respected local institution, such as the iddir.

Strategies on how to target non AAE group members had to be worked out. Taking the advice of communities, it was decided to set up committees in each of the 34 Pas, comprising members from a selection of respected local
institutions, e.g. iddirs and elders, etc. These were known as disaster prevention committees. It was felt that the DPCs (define) provided a safe way of avoiding undue power ending up in the hands of any one group. Data, obtained through the PRA wealth ranking exercise carried out in 1992 were used to help check beneficiary lists compiled by the DPCs and group leaders. The entire targeting process was completed in only two weeks due to large numbers of staff being involved. It was decided that there should not be a separate intervention for the destitute, elderly or infirm as the project was designed to support productive households. It was felt that, to do otherwise would undermine the traditional community mechanism which affords support to the poorest, and might transfer dependency to the NGO. The obvious risk of this strategy was, that if the community was too impoverished by the drought, the poorest might starve. In this particular case it was believed that this was unlikely to happen, as AAE staff had such regular contact with all the community.

The group leader's workshop took place on 12th of July, and by 1st of August the DPCs had been set up and trained, beneficiaries verified, blankets, seed and fertilizer distributed, drugs delivered to health posts, grain purchased and transport and stores arranged, as well as discussions with local government completed.

Impact of the project on local livelihoods

The project mitigated hunger and probably saved some lives, unquestionably it saved many livelihoods. The project gave food grains to 6,700 households, blankets to 2,800 households, seed to 2,000 households and fertilizer to the same number. The most visible negative impact appears to have been an increase in the burden of credit. Evidence of credit overburdening in some sections of the community was such, that more recent partial crop failures have been addressed through cash for work activities, rather than increased credit. A lesson to be learnt is that community involvement in intervention choice does not automatically mean infallibility. Also, people's circumstances change, for example, it could not be predicted that the government would insist on tax repayments during this period. Also, some beneficiaries were not in the credit and loans schemes and may already have been overburdened with credit, so that the intervention was not appropriate for them. The decision to implement a credit scheme was based on a notion of what was most appropriate for the majority of the community.

Conclusions

The project was timely and swiftly executed. This was largely possible, due to the large staff involvement, the pre-existence of NGO/community relationships, and use of existing structures. Within ten weeks the whole project had been implemented including community assessment. The project highlighted the utility of working with both traditional community and government structures. It also demonstrated that there are circumstances where creation of new structures can be appropriate and effective. Again, due to their existing presence in the area, the NGO had a sound understanding of local institutions and their roles, and was thus able to facilitate the creation of an appropriate structure for the task within a very short time frame. More caution and more time would be needed to set up a similar committee from scratch in an unfamiliar area. Inclusion of the community's knowledge in the targeting process greatly enhanced the effectiveness of the project. In this case, the targeting using community wealth ranking and social mapping worked well, and the local government administration were impressed by the accuracy of the information collected. The overall conclusion is that the participatory approach worked well, and success was partly due to this being a relatively small scale project. It may be seen as an experiment with a particular type of approach, which other agencies working in a development context could adopt or adapt when faced with the need to respond to emergencies. A major challenge then is to scale up this approach for use in different scenarios. In less stable communities, and in areas where implementing agencies have no prior involvement, not all aspects of the case study will be relevant to other situations. Different facets of the participatory approach will be appropriate in different situations. It is also implicit that, for community participation to work at all, there is first a need for agencies and government to want to recognise the affected populations' resources and abilities, as well as their needs.

Taken from Field Exchange 4

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