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Designing Participatory Strategies for Forest Projects in West Africa: Two Case Studies from Benin

Eva Sodeik

The Monitoring Team Approach to Project Follow-up and Evaluation: Experiences from two SIDA-Funded Programmes in Central America

Lasse Krantz and Rolain Borel

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DESIGNING PARTICIPATORY STRATEGIES FOR FOREST PROJECTS IN WEST AFRICA: TWO CASE STUDIES FROM BENIN

Eva Sodeik

SUMMARY

Taking two forestry projects in Benin as case studies, this paper examines different approaches to achieving participation. Critical factors for ensuring success are the formulation of clear and broadly accepted objectives, the involvement of an appropriate implementing organisation, the ability to take enough time to overcome communication barriers and resolve organisational problems, the identification of a common interest between the project and the local population. Given these and other favourable conditions, projects can move beyond a 'functional' type of participation, in which local people become involved for a variety of material benefits (particularly employment), to 'political' participation with full involvement of people in decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

The need for community participation in forest management at the local level is now generally accepted. Close cooperation with farmers, self-help organisations, forest user groups and village committees is perceived as an important factor contributing to project success in the field of sustainable forest management in Africa as elsewhere. The idea of participation is therefore found in most project documents. In practice, however, many questions remain about how best to achieve community

participation. Devising a strategy which combines not only the diverging interests of all actors involved (local population, forestry department, etc.) but which also takes into account different aspects of community forest management (economic, legal, social, physical) is a difficult task. Furthermore, the identification of relevant target groups who are both able and willing to cooperate is often easier said than done.

These issues were the focus of a one-year study (1995-96) in Benin (West Africa). Two forestry projects in the northern part of this former French colony were used as case-studies for the observation and analysis of activities and problems relating to participatory approaches¹. This article provides a summary of their experiences and makes some recommendations for forest projects wishing to adopt a participatory strategy.

CASE 1: WORKING WITH PEOPLE

The GTZ-financed forestry project in Bassila, near the Togolese border, started in 1988 as a technical forest rehabilitation programme. It was implemented by the national timber office

¹ As observations ended in February 1996, new trends and changes in strategy of both projects since that time are not considered in this article.

(ONAB²), with the assistance of some expatriates (mostly European volunteers and, from 1994, a technical adviser from a German consulting company). The initial project approach involved planting fast-growing tree species (*Tectona grandis*, *Gmelina arborea*) and investigating methods of enriching natural forests (gallery and dry forests) with indigenous species. Contact with local communities was limited to formal encounters with political authorities and the recruitment of forest workers. Soon, however, the need to integrate people's interests – and thus to enlarge the project's scope – became evident. The illegal felling of trees by individual timber merchants and farmers alike, the burning of large areas of bush every year and the extension of agricultural area through slash-and-burn practices all contributed to the loss of forest cover. This destruction far outweighed the impact of the project's plantations. In addition, conflicts with traditional landowners about the plantation sites urged a rethink of project strategy.

Gradually, therefore, more attention was paid to agricultural, social and legal issues. First contacts were made with local organisations to discuss forestry-related questions and possible forms of cooperation. In 1992, the project set up a new section concerned with the promotion of self-help activities, the collection of relevant information about social and economic conditions in the surrounding villages, and agricultural extension. During its planning review in 1993 the project then decided to adopt a participatory approach, including the use of village workshops to develop joint land management plans. Building of new and strengthening of existing local organisations

² Office National du Bois

in the field of resource management became part of the project strategy. The implementation of this strategy, however, revealed a number of serious constraints as well as conflicts.

Constraints

Compared with other regions of Benin, forest cover in the Bassila area is still relatively rich. As a result, local people do not consider forest degradation to be a major problem. The project's objective to restore timber species for industrial use was not, therefore, of immediate interest to the mostly farming population. Nor was the idea of protecting forests for ecological reasons. This conflict of interest between the project and the population undermined the latter's motivation to collaborate.

If logging or other uses of rich natural forests are excluded, income-generating activities in the field of forestry are not abundant. Planting of fast-growing timber trees or fruit trees on private land is one possibility offering material benefits in the medium term and therefore constitutes a favourite area of collaboration. The project provided help for this activity by supplying seedlings and other inputs. However, the willingness of farmers to invest in tree-planting may be constrained by unresolved problems of land tenure. In the Bassila area, only the traditional landowners, largely belonging to the Anii ethnic group, are permitted to plant trees. While immigrant communities (Otamari, Lokpa and others) can obtain land fairly easily to cultivate annual crops, they are generally not permitted to plant any perennial crops. In cases in which permission is given, it is on the condition that the planted trees belong to the landowner and that the latter receives a large part (30-50%) of the harvest. Though the project attempted to

resolve such problems, it did not succeed in negotiating better conditions. Consequently, it had to accept the nearly total disengagement of immigrant farmers.

Land tenure questions also complicated the development of land management plans. In the case of communal land, negotiations were difficult due to the sometimes disputed claims by traditional landowners. In the case of the state-owned forest reserves (*forêts classées*), the project's counterpart organisation, ONAB, was not willing to give local communities access to these long protected areas. Although a new liberal forest act was introduced in 1993, the ONAB representative in Bassila resisted community participation in forest reserves, arguing that the new law was not applicable. Only in 1996, with the appointment of a new director to the project, could joint management of state forest reserves be openly discussed.

Other constraints faced by the project included religious concerns (especially about sacred forests), and the seasonal migration of young men to Nigeria, which resulted in periodic labour shortages.

Conflict

Resulting in part from these constraints, the project was confronted with different areas of conflict. In the project team itself, conflict between the two sections (forestry and sociology) was responsible for paralysing activities for some time. The sociology/agricultural section insisted on a holistic approach and wanted to give villagers the right to decide freely about land use, even, to a limited extent, in state forest reserves. The foresters, on the other hand, were not willing to concede *usufruct* rights in state forests.

Instead, they wanted to limit the participatory approach to private land; e.g. private plantations, and the application of agroforestry methods in fields, as well as the use of non-timber products from the savanna vegetation types.

Conflicts also arose in the villages where traditional landowners, sensitised by the project's venture into land use plans, renewed their claims against people cultivating fields or making other use of their land. Disputes over borders also occurred in some villages. Other conflicts between different interest groups, not linked to project activities, but eventually nurtured by them, endangered one of the village workshops held in 1995. Rival political factions or enmities between families resulted in a divided or reduced audience for information and negotiations. In some instances, village workshops were manipulated by interest groups for their own purposes.

What could be done

In this situation of restricted room for manoeuvre for the project staff, and with no real consensus about the strategy to adopt, the complex task of elaborating management plans for the whole area was finally dropped. A pragmatic, down-to-earth approach of 'working with the people' was adopted, which took account of the above-mentioned problems. Its components were:

- Young men from the neighbouring villages were recruited as labourers for project plantations in forest reserves. This provided them with cash income.
- The project created village tree nurseries managed by local self-help groups. The production of forest seedlings (indigenous as well as exotic species) responded to the

project's demands and was subsidised by the latter. The sales revenue was distributed – more or less equally – between group members.

- Interested farmers with access to traditional land use were given seedlings of timber trees. These were mostly planted in fields in order to protect them against bush fires and weeds. Generally, the density of planted trees was low so that crops could be cultivated between them for three or even more years. This kind of agroforestry is widely practised in the region's traditional farming systems, in which valuable trees (e.g. *Parkia biglobosa*, *Chlorophora excelsa*) are retained when clearing the field (see Schreckenber 1996 on this point).
- Small communal plantations were equally supported by the project, for example in school-yards or market places.
- An inventory of existing private plantations (mostly teak, *Tectona grandis*, and cashew-nut, *Anacardium occidentale*) was established with the intention of providing technical advice and marketing support to their owners. The task of developing management plans to ensure the sustainable use of the plantations could not be completed in the period of observation, mainly due to the large number, but often small size, of private plantations.
- Some farmers' organisations were established to provide a link between the project and the respective villages. Members of these groups were trained in agroforestry methods (i.e. mulching, improved fallow and so on) and supported in testing the new methods on communal land. To motivate people for the

extra work, some inputs were supplied or funding requests forwarded to other relevant organisations working in the area.

- Other income-generating activities, linked in some way to the management of natural resources, were discussed and eventually tested, but not put into practice until the end of 1995. Examples included improved bee-keeping methods and the processing of non-timber forest products like karité kernels (*Vitellaria paradoxa*) or oil palm nuts.

In summary, the project's strategy included the motivation of the local population by providing material incentives for the execution of a number of forest-related activities. The perceived need to deal not only with forestry issues but to integrate all aspects of resource use ('*Gestion de Terroir*' in a wider sense), resulted in a somewhat arbitrary and incoherent set of project activities. This diversity was partly due to the professional specialisation and ensuing different interests of project staff. The lack of coherence was felt not only by the project staff itself but also by the target groups with some people becoming irritated and quite suspicious about the project's objectives. Others perceived the project as a source of material and/or financial inputs without necessarily linking this to forest protection.

In these years, the project took its first steps towards getting in touch with the villages in the area. It is not clear, however, whether it achieved its objective of raising people's awareness of issues surrounding natural resource management and environmental protection.

CASE 2: TALKING WITH PEOPLE

A different approach was chosen by the forestry component, Volet Aménagement Forestier (VAF), of a large multilateral natural resource management programme, the *Projet de Gestion des Ressources Naturelles* (PGRN) in Benin. Based in Parakou, the VAF started in 1993. It was implemented by technical staff from Benin's forestry department, (*Direction des Forêts et des Ressources Naturelles* : DFRN), two expatriate consultants, and members of an American NGO sub-contracted to deal with organisational issues. VAF's objective was mainly to develop management plans for some of the bigger forest reserves in the northern and central provinces of Benin. A step-by-step approach was decided upon, beginning with the state forest of Toui-Kilibo. This vast forest area, situated near the Nigerian border in Zou province, was partly inhabited and exploited by small settler communities, Peulh herders and neighbouring, indigenous villages. Instead of persecuting these illegal settlers and forest users, the central pillar of the project's strategy was to cooperate with them. In order to find a consensus acceptable to all groups concerned – and to assure sustainable forest management – the full participation of the different interest groups in the establishment of management plans was sought. How this objective was reached is described in the following paragraphs.

First step

A series of information sessions was organised in all the villages and hamlets in and near the forest reserve of Toui-Kilibo. Information about the aims and strategies of the project was provided and villagers' questions answered. An important point emphasised by the project

was the fact that illegal settlements and uses of the forest would not be punished if people were willing to cooperate with VAF in elaborating management plans. The project staff explained that if people agreed to use forest land and products in a planned and sustainable manner, they would benefit not only from the different economic activities but also receive technical training and other support from the VAF. Most villages, even some of those situated farther away, opted for collaboration.

Second step

Besides technical activities (forest inventory, test-plantations and the like), work in the villages was oriented towards information gathering. Socio-economic studies of the villages helped to improve the understanding of the social fabric, existing conflicts, economic problems (e.g. land scarcity) and other relevant aspects of village life. An inventory of agricultural land cultivated inside the forest reserve by the farmers of each hamlet was the basis for an appreciation of the area needed by the respective settlements. It became clearer which kind of forest-related activities were important in the area and contacts were made with different groups of users.

Third step

Village committees were set up representing all relevant interest groups. In the case of multi-ethnic villages, the project staff made sure that every ethnic group was represented. This organisational task – very sensitive as regards internal conflict – was carried out by three village-based organisational specialists (*Techniciens d'Appui à l'Organisation Paysanne*). They were recruited by CLUSA (Cooperative League of the USA), an American NGO responsible for all aspects of people's

participation in the project team. The emerging committees (*Comité Villageois de Gestion Forestière*) served as a link to the project and provided a forum for discussion of forest-related issues. Their tasks were to nominate representatives of the inter-village committee (acting at the municipality-level), to select villagers for training courses (in bee-keeping, sawing, etc.), and to participate in the negotiation of the management plan itself.

Fourth step

The discussions of the management plan of Toui-Kilibo state forest began in September 1995 with representatives of every village and user group. Every field of intervention was discussed separately over several weeks: roads, agriculture, charcoal production and so forth. These different bodies of specialists were composed of project staff, state representatives (mostly foresters), some technical experts and the village representatives. Consensus had to be reached over every detail in order to ensure the proper implementation of the resulting management plan in the villages, as well as by the national forest service. Feedback sessions in the villages concerned were an integral part of the whole negotiation process. They helped to integrate differing views of other villagers.

Fifth step

Early in 1996, an agreement was reached and the management plan completed, though it did not come into force officially until it was signed in November, 1996. From this point on, the village committees were supposed to apply all relevant rules and to enforce them at village level. They were backed in this task by the organisational specialists mentioned above. Several activities were taken up with the support of VAF, including technical training in

charcoal production, timber extraction with a mobile sawmill, and literacy training in local languages to allow for book-keeping and proper monitoring.

All project activities were therefore directly connected to the ultimate objective of establishing (and implementing) this management plan, incidentally the first to be in force in Benin. The creation of village nurseries, run by local organisations, and of forest worker associations was thus seen as a means to an end rather than a result in itself. Certainly, the members of these groups appreciated the opportunity to find additional income by working with the project. Their role is expected to develop, however, from one of being recipients of external inputs to being professional groups serving as subcontractors. A similar process will occur for any other village organisation created during the implementation phase.

Elements of success

Two factors particularly contributed to VAF's success in the Toui-Kilibo state forest. Firstly, the context in which the project intervened was clearly delimited. It dealt only with state forest areas for which the forest department – as the implementing institution – had direct responsibility. The fact that some villages or individuals admitted to having illegally occupied or used this forest area, helped to open the door for cooperation. The assurance by the project that legal use would be permitted in the future (instead of users being persecuted) was of central importance for the population concerned and ensured continued motivation.

Secondly, the presence of the above-mentioned organisational specialists, living in the villages

and ensuring permanent information flow – with the possibility of clarifying questions – was important. ‘Talking with people’ is not as easy as it may seem to technicians and administrators. Not only does one have to know a lot about the social, economic and legal aspects of villagers' lives, but it is also necessary to deal with (omnipresent) conflicts about diverging interests, ethnic and gender issues. Furthermore, one has to ensure the involvement of all parts of the society and to help local organisations in understanding and carrying out their role. Therefore, it is imperative to win the confidence of the people concerned to introduce the new idea of people participating in such politically important spheres as the management of state forests. On the other hand, a close follow-up of forest-related activities in implementing the management plan is just as important for lasting project success.

CONTRASTING APPROACHES

The different manner in which participatory approaches for forest management were put into practice in the two examples demonstrated the wide spectrum of possible interventions and strategies. As both projects were situated within the same political and legal framework as well as being located in a very similar natural and social environment, one might have expected to find more similarities. But, there were, in fact, many differences with respect to the projects' detailed objectives and their direct working contexts. These are briefly described below:

- The *implementing organisation*, which plays an important role in decision making, differed in the two cases. In the Bassila project, ONAB tried to orient the project towards (timber) plantations and the protection of state forests,

pursuing its official goal of timber production. It had no interest in, and no competence for, taking important decisions about participatory state forest management. Although probably the right partner for the project's early objective of achieving forest rehabilitation, ONAB was less appropriate when the project became more participatory and had the stated objective of elaborating land management plans with local people. In the second case, the forest department, DFRN, was a difficult, but appropriate implementing organisation for VAF's objectives.

- Another important difference lies in the *field of intervention* of the two projects. For the state forest reserve in the VAF case, the legal situation as regards land and tree tenure and *usufruct* rights was clear. Working both in state forests and on land held under traditional tenure systems, the case in Bassila was a lot more complex. Different property rights, a multitude of actors and interest groups, and all kinds of land use forced this project to integrate too many different aspects. This whole body of intertwined activities was probably beyond the capacity of what was a relatively small project.
- Finally, the *interpretation of both participation and sustainable forest use* also differed. These somewhat ideological questions are of crucial importance in designing a project strategy, as is discussed in the next two sections.

TREES OR PEOPLE AS TARGET GROUPS?

In the case of the PGRN forest component, VAF, it was assumed that sustainable forest

management could be achieved through a combination of forest use and forest protection (see PGRN-VAF 1996: 3). This offered the nearby population more chances to be involved and provided them with incentives for collaboration. It helped to establish a confidence that was historically absent in the relationship between the people and foresters³.

Where strategies for the rehabilitation of natural resources are restricted to protection only (and perhaps reforestation), participation is not easy to achieve. In arid regions where the effects of deforestation are perceived as a problem (firewood scarcity, erosion, etc.), farmers and users of tree products may be willing to cooperate wholeheartedly with a forest project. But in areas like those described in this paper, where forest degradation consists mostly of depletion of timber species, and direct repercussions are not yet felt by the people, the material benefits to them of a protective strategy are nil. If such a strategy is adopted where trees constitute the real target group, other incentives have to be found to encourage people to participate. Once the project inputs stop at the end of the project, villagers are often no longer interested in the so-called natural resource management activities.

Dealing with illegal forest users or settlers was also easier in the VAF strategy which co-opted people by allowing restricted and regulated use. This option would not be available in a 'protection-only' strategy, which would rather require that the people in question be resettled,

³ This lack of confidence was due primarily to the formerly restrictive way in which paramilitary-trained foresters had protected the state's property.

as was indeed the case in another forest project in Benin.

In summary, the 'protection-only' ideology is remarkably difficult to implement in a participatory manner. The VAF strategy, on the other hand, which assumes that sustainable management can be combined with the conservation of natural resources, offers more than one entry point for people's participation. Nevertheless, it is not accepted by all foresters, many of whom fear that rules may not be applied after the project's withdrawal and that, in the end, forest degradation will be accelerated by this legalised use.

WHAT KIND OF PARTICIPATION?

'Participation' is a widely used but nevertheless very vague concept. Different ways to operationalise it can be found in the field of development. Pretty (1994: 41) identifies seven (analytical) levels of participation, ranging from passive participation (in classical top-down fashion) to self-mobilisation, where external agencies are no longer essential for action. In actual projects, however, such extreme forms are rarely found. The approaches in the two cases described can be classified as moderate forms of 'participation by consultation', 'participation for material incentives' and 'functional participation'.

Apart from the question as to *how much* participation is permitted, the *type* of participation also needs to be defined. Three different categories are suggested here:

- 'Sharing costs' – Material inputs of the target groups (mostly financial or labour contribution);
- 'Working with people' – Joint activities and

paid labour;

- 'Talking with people' – Decision making and political involvement.

Often, projects end up with a mixture of different types of participation. But in the cases described, the focus of their respective approaches was nevertheless clearly visible. VAF opted for political participation, involving people in the decision-making process in order to decide on forest management plans. Cooperation in some technical fields (nurseries, planting) was only a means to reach the final objective and was given up after the management plan came into force. In Bassila, this political participation was also intended, but could not be put into practice for the reasons cited above. Instead, it was decided to opt for a working cooperation in different fields of action.

As is shown in the Bassila example, political participation of target groups is quite difficult to achieve for a number of reasons. A crucial aspect is the readiness of implementing organisations (including their superior administrative body, e.g. the ministry) to accept local people's views and to admit their solutions as equal to their own. Without this openness, the project's efforts to obtain people's participation will be in vain (see Nelson & Wright 1995 on this point). Another important factor is the communicative know-how of project staff. As already shown, 'talking to people' is not always easy and calls for certain social and methodological skills. Due to cultural and linguistic problems, lacking information on both sides and the 'hidden agenda' of some actors involved, negotiations can lead to misunderstanding, mistrust and, finally, the break-down of the process. Finally, village

people are not used to participating on this level. Authoritarian regimes in general, and restrictive forest legislation in particular, lead to an attitude of inferiority, passive adaptation to rules and a deep mistrust of government officials on the part of villagers. To be a partner in a negotiation process and to have the possibility of sharing benefits with the state seems absurd to them in the first instance. Hidden objectives are sought. It takes time – and a lot of patience – to convince people to join in the process and cooperate openly with the project. Solutions must also be found for bridging communication gaps due largely to the multilingual context and widespread illiteracy.

CONCLUSION

Forest projects willing to adopt a participatory strategy have a wide range of options to choose from. But first they need to clarify a number of important questions about the context of their intervention (political, natural, institutional), the nature of the target group, the type of participation sought (material, functional, political) and their own willingness to accept the views of people. As these questions are directly linked to a project's objectives and the composition of its staff, possibilities for designing an implementation strategy are already constrained. Nevertheless, success in participatory management of natural resources is linked to several factors of relevance to most projects:

- A clearly delineated strategy, followed consistently in the field, helps a lot to win local people's confidence and to avoid conflict between the project staff.
- The willingness to take the necessary time is important for overcoming organisational problems in the villages as well as the

resistance of some actors involved. One major difficulty for participatory forest projects is the need to change attitudes and behavioural patterns on both sides. National foresters are often not ready to change their role from being authoritarian guards of state forests to being forest advisers for local communities and user groups. At the same time, the target group often does not perceive degradation of forests as a problem they need to resolve themselves.

- If a common interest can be found to mobilise people living in and near forest areas, the project is well on the road to reaching lasting participation.

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ACRONYMS

CLUSA	Cooperative League of the USA
DFRN	Direction des forêts et ressources naturelles (<i>Department of forests and natural resources</i>)
GTZ	German Agency for Technical Cooperation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ONAB	Office national du bois (<i>National timber office</i>)
PGRN	Projet de gestion de ressources naturelles (<i>Natural resource management project</i>)
VAF	Volet aménagement forestier (<i>Forest management component</i>)