Inclusive planning and allocation for rural services

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Introduction

Sloganeering about 'participation in development' no longer goes without challenge. Tallying up the once-hidden vices of participation alongside its known virtues, a recent review concluded that participatory development is an 'essentially contested concept'.[1] Yet it is clear that delivery of sustainable, equitable, and affordable rural services is helped if users are involved in choices about priorities and delivery options. They tend to be more prepared to invest their own resources and sometimes, though not as often as hoped, this involvement makes those services more accessible to vulnerable sections of the population (Cernea 1985).

In developing countries, it is often argued that this kind of participation is constrained by the representative political process. The 'distance' — political, economic, and social — between elected leaders and their constituency is simply too great for voices to be heard and participation to be effective. Special measures are necessary. In response, it has been agreed that intensive community consultation techniques (such as found in the 'PRA toolbox' much popularised by Robert Chambers and associates) can greatly improve the quality of local service planning decisions. Most donors now insist that these techniques are adopted and many are supporting networks, training programmes, manuals, and guides to help to install them in routine planning practices in developing countries.

Two issues are being debated in countries like Uganda, where participatory practice is promoted by a host of NGO and government agencies. One is about 'cost effectiveness'. Given limited resources, pragmatic local leaders ask whether the return on intensive participatory

planning justifies the investment? Advocates of participation answer with a resounding 'Yes'. But the evidence is less tidy and unequivocal. It is not clear where it is best to invest scarce resources in the many decisions that need to be made in identifying and responding to service delivery needs. Where should participatory 'entry points' and 'veto points' be created in the planning and delivery process? Advocates of participation seldom give clear advice. A second issue now arising is whether current approaches to participation in planning actually divert attention from other, more pressing, problems in ensuring services are not just well planned but that resources are sensibly allocated, and that delivery is appropriately regulated and sustained.

We try to put this debate into a broader context. When asked to define 'participation' priorities, advocates tend to focus narrowly on the technicalities of a planning process. Their concern is to maximise participation when 'community-service users' identify 'needs', then prioritise investment options amongst competing possibilities and assemble these in the form of 'community plans' for action by higher authorities. In contrast, we illustrate the many other points in the process, possibly more significant, where things go wrong and, ultimately, where the actual delivery of services is determined.

Our second concern is more fundamental. In many cases, the techniques of participatory planning are becoming absorbed in the routine administrative process of planning. While some advocates of these techniques applaud this, we think this both sells short the potential contribution of these techniques and, more importantly, can have adverse, negative impacts on the quality of the process of allocating resources wisely to competing priorities. This approach can weaken the political relationship between leaders and their constituency. Increasingly, the administrative apparatus of planning comes to stand between leaders and constituencies. Constituents' political demands become administratively disciplined at the same time that the administrative and technical organs of local government become politicised. We argue that the key is not participation in planning, but rather creating an accountable, inclusive process within the broader frame of political representation at all levels and stages in the service planning and delivery cycle.

We suggest that participation be regarded as part of a broader process of 'inclusive planning and allocation'. Accountability is the key to this. Accountability of politicians to their constituency is the main rationale for popular participation. Accountability of technicians is also essential to ensure the range of design, engineering, fiscal, environmental, and other

'technical' factors are competently brought to the attention of politicians. And finally, inclusive planning and allocation requires accountability between different levels of local and central authorities responsible, to set the policy framework, regulate, and enforce compliance.

Background

These observations draw on experience gained through the District Development Project (DDP) in Uganda since 1996. Uganda's turbulent history since independence in 1963 is well known — coups in 1966 and 1971, the war with Tanzania in 1979, the protracted guerrilla struggle 1981–85 and victory of the National Resistance Movement (NRM) in January 1986. Less well known is Uganda's radical experiment with democratic decentralisation since 1992, one of the few instances of classic devolution on sub-Saharan Africa.[2] The DDP is part of the far-reaching changes occurring in the way development services are planned and financed as a result of decentralisation (see Villadsen and Lubanga 1996).

The project aims to test participatory planning and decentralised financing procedures under the 1997 Local Government Act. The Act empowers local governments with responsibility for a wide range of services — in fact, central government ministries, by and large, are left with responsibility for policy development and for regulating and providing technical guidance to local governments. Although still under-resourced, there is a commitment to devolve a major share of the national budget to fiscally, administratively, and politically autonomous local governments. There are problems as well: the new 'rules of the game' are unfamiliar, some central ministries resist devolution of their powers, there is conflict, corruption and mistrust amongst different levels of local government and their constituents. But there is also a surprising amount of innovation and creativity.

To take decentralisation further, government has defined two key tasks for the DDP. First, the need to improve the capacity of local councils to plan, finance, and manage the delivery of services to their constituencies. Second, there is a pressing need to develop a system of incentives and sanctions to promote accountability and establish a clear link between taxes and transfers received and services delivered. DDP is therefore piloting different approaches to decentralised planning and financing for rural services.

Formulation of the DDP began with an analysis of how services were currently planned and produced. Communities, Local Councillors,

contractors, NGOs, and community-based organisations (CBOs) were therefore asked to help construct 'service decision trees' by talking through, in a structured way, each step in the process. Lively debates ensued about the rules of the game and how it was played. This led to talks about how it could be improved before significantly greater amounts of funds became available through decentralisation. For three months across five districts, we moved back and forth over the following kinds of questions:

- how were investment projects identified and prioritised, who was involved, with what effect?
- how were priorities designed, costed, and appraised?
- how were decisions made about who would be the 'owner' of the investment if many different agencies were contributing to creating and maintaining the service?
- how were designs and bills of quantity produced and checked when facilities needed to be constructed or rehabilitated?
- what were the different arrangements for involving contractors or local *fundis*; who hired them, who decided to hire them, who monitored and supervised their work, etc.?
- how were arrangements made to ensure the ancillary services were made available (such as the drugs for a health clinic, the health workers were trained and assigned to work in the facility, etc.)?

Service decision trees

The rough and ready 'service decision trees' revealed interesting, sometimes surprising insights into how business is done at the local level. We learnt the following:

1 *The 'formal' versus the 'actual' way of doing business.* While the formal rules of the game (for planning, appraising, budgeting, delivering services) are the same across the country, there is an extraordinary range of local practices. At various times, in the same locality and for the same sector of service, rules were observed for part of the process, at times they appeared to be flouted, at times a mixture of rule and local arrangement was applied. Practices were not often just 'changed at will', but it was clear the mix of local history, politics, skills, and traditions were crucially important in how local governments, community organisations, informal leaders, contractors, and so on actually worked to plan and produce services.

2 *Linear versus iterative planning and allocation.* Although planning and production of services is typically described in terms of a series of linear steps, actual practice is more typically iterative where steps are often 'leapt over' and missed, earlier decisions are constantly revisited and changed. For instance, 'appraisal' of proposals or designs rarely occurred as a single event, but was often continuous — once the cost implications of a prior choice became known, for instance, people often moved back to change the early choice. Sometimes design standards were altered, the scale of investment was increased or decreased, and 'burning priorities' constantly changed. The volatile and itinerant political process of planning and investing in services was in constant tension with the administratively defined, linear, and forward-moving process defined in statutes and regulations.

3 *Community service provision and 'transfer funding'.* A large share of the resources needed to establish and maintain local services came from outside the local government sector, from community contributions, external donors, local politicians and other elites. We learnt that the bulk of services was created and sustained by communities, with next to no involvement of local councils. We also learnt that in addition to taxes, community contributions sometimes funded significant parts of the local authority mandated to deliver the service. School fees, for instance, were often 'trapped' at the district level, to cover the gaps in funds available for keeping the district education office functioning.

4 *More exclusive decisions once the need had been prioritised.* Not surprising was that many people were excluded from decisions, and often the 'wrong priority' was funded. Less expected was realisation that as the process progressed from establishing priorities to appraisal, budgeting, and delivery of services, decisions were made by increasingly fewer people and according to more exclusive criteria. Consequently, local priorities were often radically reshaped as they moved through the hands of councillors and technicians toward final delivery. Decisions tended, therefore, to become increasingly parochial, ignoring wider ramifications and consequences, and less accountable.

5 *Participation and priorities for improvement.* Most people wanted greater say in how investment priorities were decided. But *more* were concerned with what happened once the list of priorities had been decided, regardless of whether they had been directly involved. In other words, more people were concerned about the fact that the technical quality of decisions was often poor.[3] They were annoyed that

> what was often defined as a 'technical' issue was often a 'political' judgement. And irrespective of whether their priorities had been accepted, local people were often more concerned that leaders and technical staff (of local governments, NGOs, and CBOs alike) tended not to be accountable for their conduct once decisions had been made.

All this varied by sector. Some investments were easier to handle than others; some kinds of investment were more 'accessible' to scrutiny by the community, and tended to go off the rails less often than others; under some arrangements, complaints were fewer, satisfaction was higher.

Yet in all this diversity, we began to question four key aspects of the approach that lies behind the push for more participatory practices in service planning and delivery. First, like many similar programmes, we had assumed it would be most important to ensure community access to the 'front end' of the planning process, when needs were assessed and priorities decided. This was clearly misplaced. As one market vendor said to us, 'It doesn't really matter whether it's the roof that's improved this time, or that drains on the edges of the market are given priority. The priority is less important than what they actually do on the ground'.

Second, the planning and production of services is conventionally understood as a linear, step-wise, and uni-directional process. This is clearly at odds with the procedures employed by local people in most situations to meet their service requirements. By implication, if the intention was to support local capacities for delivery of services, it took little foresight to realise that much of what was currently offered in planning manuals, training and 're-tooling' exercises would have little value. And neither, perhaps, did it make sense to focus scarce resources on instilling this technical, rational approach in the minds of the administrative organs of local councils or NGOs. This has been a major focus of capacity building efforts for more than two decades. In few cases did we find that the administrative cadres of local councils or NGOs were not reasonably well versed in the rudiments of planning discourse. In fact, in Uganda, as throughout east and southern Africa, there is a marked contrast between the administrative staff and political leadership. On one side is a reasonably well-trained administrative cadre able to rehearse (but seldom apply) the litany of 'good planning practice'. They sit at some distance from a local leadership often alienated, completely at sea with the administrative process, and frequently determined to free themselves from the restrictions they feel it unreasonably imposes. Our third realisation, therefore, was that pushing for a PRA-type process to be installed in the local government

planning process would probably backfire. It could further politicise the administrative organ of councils and place technicians as interlocutors between local communities and their leadership.

It seemed, therefore, that large parts of the kind of 'capacity building' delivered in decentralised or participatory planning and financing programmes was ill suited to needs. Undeniably, technical skills could usefully be enhanced. But of more significance were the political skills of bargaining, compromise, and assembling the many social, technical, financial and other factors necessary for leaders to make wise decisions throughout the service planning and delivery process. Quite clearly, decentralisation has heightened political contest at the local level, and the devolution of development funds under a programme like the DDP quickly over-stretches the political skills of elected leaders. This realisation underpins the emphasis here on 'inclusive planning and allocation procedures'. However, while new skills are needed, the keystone to this approach is not 'capacity', but 'accountability'. This requires sorting through the nests of sanctions and incentives that bear on the performance of political leaders and technicians both at local and higher levels. Accountability is evidently many-sided, but the fourth thing we realised from these consultations was that accountability among different levels of local and central government was at least as important, if not more so, as the accountability of leaders to constituents, the concern that pre-occupies the contemporary clamour for 'participatory planning'. We say more about these points below.

The limits of front end participation

During our consultations, most communities were able to articulate a 'long list' of many and varied needs. People *were* concerned that priorities were often determined by the boys in the backroom, and then given a rousing beat up by politicians and leaders when presented to the expectant mass as their 'real priorities'. They wanted a wider range of priorities to be considered. But in the main, people seemed less concerned with the actual 'need' that was finally decided on, than they were with the problems that arose following this decision. This led us to wonder whether the 'opportunity cost' of one priority over another was lower than we assumed? Perhaps higher was the 'opportunity cost' of the litany of problems that occurred following the decision on what was to be the immediate priority for action? Certainly more anger was

expressed about mismanagement of resources, failure to honour commitments, poor coordination and so on, than ever arose about whether one priority or another was agreed.

This contrasts with conventional thinking about participation, which focuses on planning, and, within this, narrows to discussion of the best approaches to encourage direct community participation in the early steps in the process. Why is this? One reason is perhaps a legacy of the 1970s tradition of development where special prominence was given to the production of plans (national, regional, community, project) and to the central role of technicians, particularly planners.[4] In rural service planning, the approach is a linear process. First, baseline studies establish the 'local situation'. Typically this is understood in terms of how many people have access to what services: ratios of doctors to population, ratios to school-aged children to enrolled school pupils, the density of roads in relation to agricultural potential, and so on. Service deficits are then identified by comparing the 'local actual' against the nationally (or internationally) prescribed standard. It is then a simple matter to identify requirements and produce the plan.

Many volumes of reflection on the unhappy 1970s and 1980s experience (when plan-based approaches to rural development reached their peak) have shown how elaborate district plans, comprehensive databases, land-use potentiality studies, resource endowment studies, etc., all produced at great cost, were consigned to a dusty neglect (e.g. Porter et al. 1991; de Valk and Wekwete 1990). Decisions by local leaders avoided priorities established in this way because they had other ideas about what needed to be done, about what were 'pressing priorities', and how the resources should be used.

In today's jargon, there was a 'disconnect', of three kinds: between the plan and the allocation process; between administratively calculated needs and politically articulated demands; and between modernist ideas about what planning should involve and how matters have tended to be decided locally. Local leaders routinely judged that the plan was wrong, technically confusing, or outdated and that it tended to take decisions away from them, decisions they appropriately judged to be theirs to make. As local leaders, as they said then and repeat today, they had the 'pulse' of local priorities. Needs and demands were often not the same thing.

Much, of course, has changed since development practice was gripped by the monetarist-inspired policies of the 1980s. The issue is not the 'plan' but the 'allocation' process. Private market forces are believed to be the most efficient allocators of scarce resources according to demands.

Administratively defined and plan-centred definitions of how development should be organised have been set aside. But not quite. Since the initial rush of enthusiasm, it has been realised that implementing market-friendly policies requires a State that is capable of creating inclusive and politically durable arrangements with a host of non-government interests — consumers, community organisations, NGOs, contractors, and other private sector groups — to deal with market externalities and promote equitable service delivery. Termed 'good governance', this nesting of private-public, state-civil society relations is said to be best achieved through decentralisation.

Ironically, the contemporary emphasis on decentralisation and participation shows how development policies travel along many paths in many directions. Both concepts have visited development previously, but then, in a kind of elliptical orbit, they shifted away from popular attention in the 1980s. Now they have returned, bending back, not to where they had been before, but nevertheless pulled in part by lingering influences from the past. In the remainder of this article we illustrate how this is occurring in recent attempts to improve decentralised, participatory planning in service provision, the unintended and negative consequences of this, and how it might be averted in future practice.

We earlier noted that our view of inclusive planning and allocation was under-written by a three-sided concept of accountability. Our comments about participation and decentralised service delivery are organised around this concept. First are relations of accountability between political leaders and their constituency. Sometimes local leaders are popularly elected: most often they are not, and in all cases and for many reasons their relationship with the citizenry is highly contested.[5] Second are relations of accountability between political leaders and their staff, including a administrators and technicians responsible for reliably advising decision-makers to promote what we've called inclusive planning and allocation. These relations are also vexed, due to historical biases in favour of administrative and technical 'fixes', as well as more enduring tensions found world-wide. Third are relations that are often not discussed in terms of accountability, but increasingly are understood as the key to successful decentralisation and local democracy. Rather than understanding decentralisation purely as the devolution of power to lower levels of public-private decision-makers, it is clear that a strong centre is as important as an empowered local level organisation bound to its constituency.[6]

Local accountability: representative and direct participation

How to get leaders to listen to the voices of their constituents, to make decisions which balance both parochial and general interests and then to stick with the decision once made, all this has been a major concern of public administration and popular democracy. It has evidently surprised many development agencies that bringing local leaders 'to account' has become even more problematic with the devolution of key powers and responsibilities to local governments. Perhaps this surprise reflects the mistaken tendency to see the local space of politics (in contrast with the national scene) as tending toward harmony, common interest, and relatively easy compromise. It may also be the result of a long running hostility to local representative government, and to local political leaders. This hostility supported the dismembering of local governments during the 1960s, when development policy favoured strong central states as the engines of change, and condoned almost three decades of neglect and incapacitation of local government.

For these and many other reasons, the tendency in rural development practice has been to devise techniques to achieve *administratively* what is judged to be difficult through local official *political* processes. Planning procedures, in this light, are often seen as a way of putting fetters on local political leaders, to discipline them, to make them accountable through administrative means. The central difficulty of this approach has been how to establish the legitimacy of a planning and allocation process that effectively sidelines and limits the involvement of political leadership in the re-presentation of local needs and priorities. The special privilege given to administrative practices in decentralised planning and financing has, as a result, faced three problems: how to tune administratively defined needs and priorities to local preferences; how to provide a measure of legitimacy to the list of priorities and plans for action that eventually must be served up to officials for endorsement; and, how to make sure the leadership is accountable to the subsequent recommendations of the technical/administrative professionals.

The increasing popularity of PRA among all shades of development professionals is in large measure explained by these problems. First, PRA promises direct access to 'needs' (within the limits of what is judged administratively reasonable by the agency directing the process). Second, it offers the authority of having 'spoken to the people', and is in practice

becoming an essential support to the administrative cadre in their contest with political leaders. And, third, in the 'best case' PRAs, it offers the veiled threat of direct action by a newly empowered community in the event that leaders choose not to adopt the results of direct participation. In short, techniques of direct participation (and PRA is only one of a range on offer) provide political legitimacy to the first steps of an administratively dominated process.

However, these 'strengths' of direct participation are also problematic. As we learnt during the 'service decision tree' consultations, the more acute problems of performance and accountability arise later in the delivery process — in appraisal, contracting, supervision, not to mention sustaining the service over time. Second and far more importantly, this understanding of participation confuses the question of accountability. It intends to politicise the administrative cadre (be it employed by NGOs, or the local government, or departments of the central state) in the mistaken belief that it is they that should be directly accountable to the citizenry. Not only does this ensure the continued contest between administrators/technicians and elected local leaders, it also locates the former between the leadership and their constituency and thereby dilutes the most important relationship of accountability intended by decentralised governance.

Leaders, technicians and more inclusive decisions

Relations of accountability between professionals and elected leaders have received little attention in discussions about improving the quality of rural service delivery. Not surprisingly, if quality is understood to be primarily dependent on the degree of match between social preferences and planned priorities, it makes sense to focus attention and resources on what we have termed the 'front end' of the planning process. But local experiences show time and again that social preferences are only one aspect of producing a quality decision — technical and financial considerations are often deservedly paramount. At other times the managerial feasibility and risk of different options must hold sway.

The devolution to local governments of responsibility to balance these factors, and to negotiate amongst the interests these factors reflect, has been considered a panacea. Unfortunately, the focus on the administrative resolution of the problems that arise in 'balancing and

bargaining' has tended to misconstrue the direction of accountability between professionals and official leaders. We argue that the techniques developed over the past decade to support direct participation have much to offer in redirecting this relationship and realigning the administrative cadre to become more accountable to elected leaders. This however, requires that we understand these techniques, such as in the PRA toolbox, in a different way. Their relevance is not in providing the stamp of an unassailable, once-for-all 'truth' to local needs and priorities, as tends to occur when the results of PRA exercises are incorporated into local plans. Rather, their potential lies in their use as an aid to thinking, to transparency, and to inclusiveness in the many decisions that need to be made by political leaders as a proposal moves from early prioritisation through to delivery of the service.

The crucial need for inclusive planning and allocation is to introduce more creative ways of ensuring that the technical, administrative and financial dimensions of decisions are included alongside social demands and political priorities. Much attention has been given to 'opening up' local-local dialogue. This is the focus of PRA practice. We suggest the political process of formal, institutional politics needs also to be opened up and made, as defined earlier in this article, more inclusive and accountable. Many local leaders will agree their meetings need to be opened up. Others, of course, are keen to ensure that curtains are pulled around official meetings. But, by opening up, some local leaders suggest a different twist to 'accountability' by agreeing that decisions need to *account for* the many social, technical and other factors necessary for quality service outcomes. In this view, professional staff, the employees of the leadership, are accountable to politicians in both old and new ways. Well established, though often neglected, is their responsibility to ensure timely, appropriate and accurate information is brought to the table for consideration. New, is a broader understanding of their responsibility to introduce skills and techniques through which a range of possibilities, other interests, other implications are included in decisions that tend, under normal procedures, just to 'be taken'. Rather than mistakenly seeing themselves as torchbearers for the community in a contest with political leaders, administrative cadres become accountable to facilitate an inclusive planning and allocation process and accountability between leaders and their constituency.

For observers of local political meetings, the needs are obvious. Most leaders tend to 'go to sleep' as the Chairperson moves, item by item, through an over-packed agenda. Their attention may come alive, in the

manner of a late night game of cards, when it is their turn to deal, when their particular interests are at stake. On the positive side, meetings are energised when the pro-forma process is disrupted by an unusual turn of events, by an unexpected or novel way of approaching a decision. In this sense, the quality of the technique used to engender 'novelty' is of little importance — introducing a SWOT analysis, a pair-wise ranking, or a GAP assessment is energising the first, second, and maybe the third time, but once it becomes routine, any technique becomes just another box to be ticked and … well, let's move onto the next agenda item, and '…What time do we break for lunch?'

The impressive tool box of participatory techniques developed for local dialogue about needs and priorities could easily be adapted for use in the political process where appraisal occurs, budgets are allocated, and arrangements are made to contract and deliver services. In best practice, PRA techniques are more useful as instruments for enhancing dialogue. By simply introducing a novel approach, humour, or the different angle to a problem they can help achieve a profoundly different outcome to proceedings. Sometimes this includes introducing the 'Ah, ha' element into decisions, where the obvious question can be asked about who is to benefit from a decision, who will lose out, and decisions are made more transparent. It can also mean awareness about the long-term implications — financial, social, environmental — of a decision about to be made that would otherwise be neglected, not for any malign reason, but because issues may 'not have been thought about that way'.

We noted that this article was in part prompted by a concern about how the participatory approach of the conventional PRA-style methods could be 'scaled up'. It is often imagined that with greater institutional capacity, with more resources, and time, that the intensive planning dialogue at community level will become routine. In Uganda, there are 847 sub-county governments, many times more village level councils — the smallest mandated planning unit. Inside each is a wide array of associations of interests by virtue of gender or class, proximity to a watercourse, an access track, a field or valley. All have particular attributes deserving special planning consideration. The imagination of 10,000 village PRAs is a fiction. It wrongly perceives priority issues in service delivery. It works to undermine key relations of accountability that must be strengthened in rural politics. It is also profoundly wasteful of resources at the same time as discrediting the potential contribution such techniques could make to inclusive planning and allocation for rural service delivery.

Capacity versus performance in inclusive planning and allocation

The case studies of how particular services were planned and delivered in rural Uganda clearly affirmed the importance of 'vertical' accountability in producing quality outcomes. The responsiveness of leaders to constituents is undeniably important, as is the contract of accountability between professionals and elected leaders. But these relationships seldom in themselves determine whether enduring arrangements are made for equity, quality, and sustainability in service delivery. The quality of local planning processes, the observance of service design standards, the thoroughness of appraisal, financial management, compliance with audit, contracting, and other procedures all depend crucially on the relationships between higher and lower authorities charged to set standards, to regulate and enforce compliance, and to encourage good performance. As one astute local official remarked, 'Decentralisation and centralisation are two sides of the same coin'.

Ugandan government officials acknowledge that decentralisation and local democracy implies a fundamental reorientation to central government. It must move from a 'command and direct' relation with local governments and develop a 'monitoring, mentoring and regulatory' function. But how to achieve this has been elusive. Clearly, under decentralisation, new skills and capacities are required in central and local authorities to apply standards, to follow procedures, to ensure more participatory or technically competent decisions. But the results of the popular focus on 'capacity building' often fall short of expectations. In part, this is because capacity building efforts frequently emphasise 'inputs' at the expense of 'outcomes', and judgements about required inputs tend to reflect externally driven perceptions of needs. The earlier mentioned example of linear, step-wise planning is a case in point. It is fair to say that all planning implies elements of a step-wise rationality: it makes good sense to have adequately appraised a project before resources are committed to detailed design work. But capacity-building programmes have ambitions that seldom stop at this point. Rather, they often aim at the wholesale replacement of existing ways of doing business locally. Many local governments and central ministries have bookshelves crowded with comprehensive planning and other manuals untouched since the day capacity building courses ended.

Unless there is a change in approach, these problems are likely to be exacerbated under decentralisation. Central government no longer has

control over the kinds of levers previously used to command the performance of lower level authorities, even if this was a rather pro-forma compliance. Under conditions of decentralised governance, central government must find ways to encourage adoption of its priorities — such as observance by local authorities of national policy on poverty or issues such as HIV/AIDS — just as local governments (and lower level communities) must find new ways to attract transfers of additional resources from the centre. In many, if not most instances, capacity is not the issue here. Rather, it is devising a compact of association between the centre and local governments through which vertical accountability is encouraged by sanctions and incentives.

How to achieve this was discussed extensively with local governments, NGOs and community organisations during design of the DDP, resulting in a number of innovative measures. A central point is that clarity about rules and procedures for decentralised planning and financing is important. However it is not sufficient. Transparency must be linked with incentives that promote the good performance of the wide range of actors included in the process, and sanctions when the various actors do not comply with agreements. To support vertical accountability, sanctions and incentives are agreed between central and local government whereby each regularly assesses the other's performance, and villagers and community organisations are involved in judging the performance of lower level local governments. Performance is measured by questions such as: were local plans honoured in practice? Do plans and budget decisions recognise the needs of different groups in the community? Was there adequate awareness about the rules, the amounts of funds transferred, about the responsibilities of local officials, about the rights of citizens? Were audit requirements met?

Making this system workable will, of course, take time, and may depend on many events beyond the ability of communities or governments to influence. But the crucial point is that there is less concern with the inputs — that is, the procedures adopted, say, to prepare a plan or budget — than in the quality of the outcomes achieved. Also important is that the results of these accountability assessments are immediately translated into incentives and sanctions, in short, the availability of development funds to local governments and community. By specifying the terms of the relationship between the centre and local government, between local governments and constituencies, a multi-sided basis has been created for accountability. If central government fails to deliver on its obligations — for instance, to prepare cost-effective

service standards in primary health care, or to ensure audit services are provided on time — it is poorly placed to insist that local governments should be accountable for their performance. Similarly, unless local governments demonstrate performance, both upwards to the centre, and downwards to their constituencies they are aware there is little prospect of attracting transfers of funds from the centre or encouraging payment of taxes or fees for services delivered.

Summary

Participation is obviously an essential requirement in improving the quality of rural service delivery. But where quality is understood to imply judgements about technical feasibility, financial viability, assessments of risk, and managerial complexity, in addition to social preferences, the focus on direct, intensive community level participation in the planning process is clearly limiting. Competent decisions and accountable performance is required from a range of actors, some of who have been systematically sidelined, and often alienated, by conventional approaches to participatory planning.

In some respects, Uganda stands apart from many countries. Its courageous commitment to political, administrative, and fiscal decentralisation in many ways matches the extraordinary strength with which everyday Ugandans survived 20 years of coups, war, and lawlessness. But issues raised here about participation, accountability, and performance are not unique to Uganda. Here, as elsewhere, it is true that special arrangements often do need to be made to ensure the voices of marginal sections of the community are heard. But frequently, the techniques used to stimulate participatory 'events' have the effect of distorting the relationships of accountability between leaders and the public, and between leaders and their technical advisers, that is essential for long term local democratisation.

We need to think more like the fox (darting around, seizing opportunities, looping back) than the tortoise (plodding along a straight path) in rural service provision. What is characteristic of successful cases where rural services are provided, or where technicians finally learned to apply sophisticated techniques of identifying needs, is not that the planning cycle is slavishly followed. Rather, successful experiences are found where local leaders and people are able to cope with the unpredictable, the unexpected, and are able to turn back, review and change what they previously thought to be the 'obvious answer'. This

requires skills for a flexible, non-linear and essentially political process, in which, as Vietnamese say, 'fences are broken' and the rules are nudged a bit in the interests of representative local governance.

Notes

1 Day (1997). Various critical commentaries on the participatory ideology are well illustrated in contributions to Sachs (1992) and Crush (1995).

2 Uganda's decentralisation corresponds to Mawhood and Davey's (1980: 405) five principles of 'classic' decentralisation.

3 This included a host of problems — poor assessment of options and risks, poor quality technical appraisal and design, poor costing, etc.

4 Leonie Sandercock (1998) provides a helpful, and critical, review of this legacy.

5 A recent article by Robert Kaplan develops this point particularly well (Kaplan 1998).

6 This is the main contribution of Judith Tendler's (1997) book on decentralised governance in Brazil.

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