



INTERNATIONAL FOOD  
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United Nations  
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# Linking Research and Action

STRENGTHENING FOOD ASSISTANCE AND FOOD POLICY RESEARCH

## Strengthening Capacity for Participatory Development

**Capacity development is essential to participatory initiatives, especially given the recent trend toward decentralized governance in many developing countries. Communities need both the wherewithal to carry out development activities themselves, and the capability to make demands of government officials and service providers. Programmes that support local capacity development and community participation must take local needs and institutions into account, and provide an enabling environment for community action.**

Since 2000, the World Food Programme (WFP) has sought to engage all stakeholders, including food aid beneficiaries, in “the planning, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of all its activities.” Specifically, the agency aims to “bring the poorest and marginalized people into its assistance programmes, strengthen their representation in community structures and overcome gender inequalities” while also “maintaining sufficient flexibility to ensure its programmes’ suitability to local situations and capacities.” Furthermore, participatory programming serves both as “a means for reaching marginalized groups with appropriate types and levels of assistance, and as an end with the aim of building self-reliance and empowering women and men.”

WFP intends to assure that stakeholders contribute knowledge, skills, and resources to processes that influence their lives. It works to enhance the capacity of its own

and partner organization staff to carry out participatory programmes, while also providing technical training in such areas as project planning and management to leaders and members of people’s organizations and community groups.

Nowadays, most relief and development agencies express their support for participation, decentralization, and partnership. But beneficiaries of food aid and other interventions need the know-how, capability, and institutional support to make decisions and implement projects effectively. The capacity of all stakeholders to claim their rights and fulfil their responsibilities is crucial. Too often, assistance programmes neglect capacity development, particularly since it may take a long time before it shows results.

Nevertheless, capacity development is essential to participatory initiatives, especially given the recent trend toward decentralized governance in many developing countries. Communities need both the wherewithal to carry out development activities themselves, and the capability to make demands of government officials and service providers. Programmes that support local capacity development and community participation must take local needs and institutions into account, and provide an enabling environment for community action.

For their part, local and national government agencies need to have the capacity and *commitment* to respond to community demands. They must see community residents not as objects to be developed (or exploited) but as citizens with rights and responsibilities who participate in and ultimately own the development process, and to whom they are accountable. This requires transparent governmental processes that allow for citizen input.

Community participation and empowerment can help assure the success of relief and development interventions. Researchers have found that community engagement contributes to other objectives, such as proj-

ect cost-effectiveness, long-term sustainability, technological innovation, pro-poor growth, and good governance.

Empowerment has both economic and political aspects (see table). Empowering poor and marginalized people means facilitating their access to productive resources (including human capital, i.e., education, knowledge, and skills, as well as income-producing assets). It also means that they participate meaningfully in the processes and decisions that affect them. In particular, empowered communities are able to devise plans and strategies, manage activities, and solve problems. According to the World Bank (Narayan 2002), empowerment includes access to information, inclusion and participation, accountability of power-holders, and local organizational capacity. This last element means that communities can work together, create organizations, and mobilize resources to address the issues that affect them.

This brief synthesizes lessons from the authors’ studies of food aid projects, implemented by WFP and the nongovernmental organization CARE, in diverse settings: both urban and rural areas of Ethiopia; Zambia’s capital city, Lusaka; and rural Mauritania and Peru. The brief shows how such projects can build the capacity of both communities and government institutions and foster effective community participation in development. We note that many other organizations have made similar use of food aid.

Specifically, the brief looks at the following questions: How do food aid agencies need to change in order to facilitate capacity development? What are effective ways to build and sustain community capacity? How can interventions develop voice and accountability structures? How can projects foster government officials’ capability to listen and respond to community needs and demands? How do participatory programmes facilitate the capturing of syner-

gies among activities? How can programmes empower women? And finally, what is the appropriate balance in participatory programming between an emphasis on process and one on concrete outputs?

### International Agencies: From top-down managers to catalysts for change

Organizations such as WFP can play a very important part in efforts to foster participatory approaches in emergency, transition, or development situations. This may require organizational learning and change. Many relief and development agencies have institutional histories and standard operating procedures geared more toward project management, the provision of technical advice, or the logistics of moving commodities and funds than creating participatory structures and processes in communities. Nevertheless, the technical expertise and resources of an agency such as WFP may prove extremely important in facilitating community empowerment. Furthermore, organizations that have long experience working in communities and often enjoy good relationships with government officials can help build strong linkages between government, especially at the local level, and communities. In order to become effective catalysts for capacity development and participatory programmes, agencies may need to go beyond the training approach and create new operating procedures in areas that lie beyond their traditional project portfolios, such as social mobilization, organizational development, system analysis, and policy impact.

### Building and sustaining capacity

In the projects reviewed for this brief, WFP's and CARE's use of food assistance went well beyond simply transferring commodities to beneficiary communities. The projects helped both the residents of low-income communities and local government officials to acquire new skills and additional resources. For example, in Ethiopia, WFP helped the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development to design a community-based, participatory methodology for identifying food aid beneficiaries and planning and managing soil and water conservation activities, as well as a results-based management system for its implementation. WFP has also helped community members and agricultural extension agents to collaborate on making use of the methodology. On

the other side of Africa, in Mauritania, WFP has trained rural community health and nutrition promoters, who are themselves community residents chosen by their neighbours, and who then take on a key role in behaviour change communication activities.

CARE has carried out similar activities in its efforts to promote community participation. In Peru, the agency trained rural mayors and council members in planning, budgeting, municipal management, formulation of ordinances, conflict resolution, and

Key elements of capacity	
Element	Component parts
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Human</li> <li>➤ Financial</li> <li>➤ Social/organizational</li> <li>➤ Physical</li> <li>➤ Natural</li> </ul>
Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Legal status</li> <li>➤ Legitimacy</li> <li>➤ Mandate</li> <li>➤ Relationship to constituency</li> </ul>
Responsibility Motivation Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Incentives</li> <li>➤ Values</li> <li>➤ Vision</li> </ul>
AAA Systems (Assessment, Analysis, and Action)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Problem identification</li> <li>➤ Solving</li> <li>➤ Planning</li> <li>➤ Learning</li> </ul>
Source: adapted from Gillespie 2004.	

general development. CARE also facilitated the creation of a regular process of dialogue through which the officials consult communities about their needs. In an urban setting, CARE helped to organize community-based committees to plan and manage road building and latrine digging in low-income neighbourhoods of Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa. CARE provided the committees with technical assistance and training. In Lusaka, the agency helped to establish similar neighbourhood committees to improve local infrastructure, boost incomes, and empower residents.

A common characteristic across these projects is community needs assessment. The food-aid supported projects helped beneficiaries to learn how to systematically carry out such appraisals. In rural Ethiopia, for example, WFP and local agriculture officials have provided communities with both menus of soil and water conservation options, and also encouraged communities to develop their conservation strategies, in consultation with extension experts who can offer technical advice on how best to carry them out. In the Lusaka project, CARE's role shifted over time from managing a traditional food-for-work urban infrastructure project to an emphasis on developing the neighbourhoods' ability to analyze and act on their own needs.

But projects such as these must face the

key question of how to sustain capacity development once the donor agency withdraws. In Ethiopia, there is clear evidence that communities that have "graduated" from the WFP-supported soil and water conservation project have the capability to continue planning and managing activities even in the absence of food aid resources. This is true not only because the project provided training, but also because improved natural resource management has increased community well-being, thereby offering tangible incentives to maintain and expand conservation structures and activities. In Mauritania, the project offers beneficiaries health and nutrition education that they can use to assure their own well-being beyond the life of the project. In Lusaka, the city government has incorporated the neighbourhood representative bodies developed through CARE's project into its own structures. These allow communities to articulate their needs and also facilitate the provision of municipal services to the communities. In Peru, the local officials whom the project had trained became more skilled at mobilizing resources from higher levels of government, thus assuring the ongoing implementation of their plans and budgets.

### Voice and accountability structures

All of the projects reviewed for this brief place a great deal of emphasis on building representative, community-level structures to facilitate participatory development. In most cases, the projects worked with committees made up of residents, usually elected by community-wide meetings. In some cases, the committees must bring plans back to the whole community for debate, amendment, and approval.

Community-based development committees offer a major vehicle for articulating demands to local officials and holding them accountable for helping to meet locally identified priorities. Not surprisingly, in some cases the empowerment of communities has significantly shifted local power dynamics and resulted in a degree of political tension. Projects have helped manage such conflicts, however. One way to do this is to bring stakeholders together to assure clear definitions of rights and responsibilities, as well as expectations and lines of accountability. In CARE's project in Addis Ababa, project communities and municipal officials explicitly spelled all this out in written agreements that served as a form of "social contract."

## Getting Officials on board

Community empowerment is very much about the relationship between residents and their government. In the context of decentralization, it is especially important for local officials to have the capacity to listen and respond to community demands. This is true for both local officeholders such as mayors and councillors, and also local government employees. Most of the projects reviewed sought to develop this capacity. The relationship between agricultural extension agents and community-based planning teams is an essential element in WFP's Ethiopia project. In view of the project's successes, many district-level conservation officials have concluded that collaboration with communities is fundamental to achieving sustainable results. In Peru, CARE's project helped local officeholders to become effective at community consultation, as well as planning and budgeting. When local officials collaborate on development activities with engaged communities, they can become advocates on behalf of those communities vis-à-vis other government agencies and higher levels of authority.

## Capturing Synergies

Community participation can enhance the ability to capture synergies among different development activities. In both Ethiopia and Mauritania, WFP supports a variety of interventions in project communities, including school feeding, HIV/AIDS education, food storage, and income-generating activities groups for women. The projects encourage community-based bodies associated with these activities to interact and plan joint initiatives, such as constructing school wells

and planting school gardens. Synergies along these lines can broaden and deepen community planning and management capacity. CARE's projects in urban Zambia and rural Peru were both similarly multi-faceted, supporting a broad range of activities through community and local government interaction.

## Empowering Women

Several of the projects reviewed for this brief explicitly included empowerment of women as a component. In the WFP-supported project in Ethiopia, half of the members of community-based planning teams are women, and such representation has proved effective in making women's voices heard in the planning process. For example, women have pressed planning teams to address the needs of female-headed households in conservation strategies. The project has also organized income-generating groups among women. These help poor women to boost their incomes and learn skills in the areas of collective action, decision-making, and leadership, thereby contributing to both the economic and political aspects of empowerment. In Mauritania, the WFP project has organized Food Management Committees to oversee its activities, and 60 percent of these have women in leadership positions.

## Process or Project Orientation?

Building sustainable capacity is a long-term proposition that may extend well beyond the limits of the typical project cycle (three-to-five years). In addition, efforts to enable low-income communities to participate effectively in their own development require

that agencies take on a capacity development *process* orientation, with greater attention to such factors as local ownership, voice and accountability, and the equal ability of men and women to influence decisions. This may require agencies to look past their usual focus on *producing tangible outputs* (soil and water conservation structures, community nutrition centres, municipal water systems, all-weather roads) that will benefit a measurable number of people. A stronger emphasis on a capacity development process can help to assure that the community maintains the project outputs, whatever they may be, over the long term. For example, in Ethiopia, WFP and government conservation officials discovered that unless they consulted and engaged communities in the design and implementation of activities, it was difficult to get them to carry out the hard labour involved in maintaining structures such as terraces, woodlots, and small-scale dams. Likewise, in Addis Ababa, CARE found that urban communities would maintain the local roads that they built because they had participated in the project's decision-making process and felt a sense of ownership.

Capacity development thus involves a significant shift in approach. Agencies must recognize that food aid is not just a simple resource transfer. Rather, it can serve as a useful tool to nurture the ability of citizens to participate effectively in planning and carrying out development, as well as advocacy vis-à-vis their governments. It can also help make governments responsive to the needs and demands of their citizens.

**Authors:** Marc J. Cohen (m.j.cohen@cgiar.org) and James L. Garrett, International Food Policy Research Institute; Mariagrazia Rocchigiani, World Food Programme

**Layout:** Jay Willis

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**For further reading** (1 and 2 are accessible at <http://www.ifpri.org/divs/fcnd/fcndp.asp>)

1. J. L. Garrett (2004) *Community Empowerment and Scaling-Up in Urban Areas: The Evolution of Push/Prospect in Zambia*, Food Consumption and Nutrition Division Discussion Paper 177. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute.
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3. D. Narayan, ed. (2002) *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
4. J. L. Garrett (2005) *Using Food Aid to Empower Communities: Concepts and Examples from Madagascar and Honduras*, Linking Research and Action Brief. Rome and Washington, DC: World Food Programme and International Food Policy Research Institute. Accessible at [http://www.wfp.org/policies/Introduction/other/index.asp?section=6&sub\\_section=1#briefs](http://www.wfp.org/policies/Introduction/other/index.asp?section=6&sub_section=1#briefs).
5. M. J. Cohen, M. Rocchigiani, and J. L. Garrett (forthcoming) *Empowering Communities through Food-Based Programmes*, Occasional Paper. Rome: World Food Programme.

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### INSTITUTIONAL CONTACTS:

Food Consumption and Nutrition Division, International Food Policy Research Institute (www.ifpri.org), 2033 K St., NW, Washington, DC 20006-1002 USA, Tel: +1-202-862-5600, Fax: +1-202-467-4439, Email: IFPRI-FCN@cgiar.org

World Food Programme (www.wfp.org), 68/70 via Cesare Giulio Viola, Parco dei Medici, I-00148 Rome, Italy, Tel: +39-06-65132628, Fax +39-06-65132840 Email: wfpinfo@wfp.org