

PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Summary

Development initiatives focused on the improvement of the quality of life in rural communities have failed to deliver the promised benefits to the people. Among other issues these initiatives have routinely targeted improved management of community held resources. While there are some rare exceptions, in most rural communities the resource base continues to deteriorate.

There is evidence throughout the world that conventional development often does not have desirable effects on the quality of lives of people, natural resources, and environmental conditions. It does not fully take into account the socio-cultural, economic, and ecological factors that are unique to each society. This is particularly true in the third world where development may represent a radical departure from traditional thinking and lifestyles. However, a strong attitude is emerging in the world that development as it is conventionally construed, is not contextually appropriate.

To mitigate against the downside effects of conventional development, the people who live with the consequences of development must be allowed to take control of their destiny or future desirable development. The only practical and arguably defensible approach to development is to involve people at the grassroots level as principal actors in the decision-making process, rather than treating them as landscape to be exploited. People should be involved in the participatory development process as conceived

through the open systems theory, where they would have to determine the ends of development and the means of achieving them.

Considering the above-mentioned situation, a participatory development model, based on the Search Conference methodology, is presented as an important alternative approach to development—one in which people could be actively engaged, creatively and continuously adapting to their changing socioeconomic and ecological conditions as they articulate their common ideas and actively work towards their achievement. The Search Conference is an ecological adaptation methodology based on an open system in which there are continuous changes. The main components of an open system model are the environment and the system (i.e. community). Therefore, the community is an important, though often neglected, component for achieving sustainability of natural resources management.

1. Introduction

Sustainability is the ability of a socio-ecological system to maintain, indefinitely, its productivity, even though this system could be affected by large perturbations. Therefore, sustainability has two objectives. The first is the biological objective that seeks to conserve the structure of the ecosystem without exterminating it. The second concerns the social system in which all people in the ecosystem must have the opportunity to improve their sociocultural conditions (Tisdell, 1991).

It is important to recognize that sustainability is a continual process, instead of some finite end point at which one arrives. Also, sustainability means that development programs must integrate the local people's requirements, desires, motivations, and identity in relation to the surrounding landscape. The local people who will live with development initiatives must participate equally and fully in all debates and discussions. In this case, the programs must be founded on local requirements and cultural values in balance with those of the broader outside world.

Managing natural resources involves dealing with change in two dimensions, the natural resources dimension and the human dimension (Weicherding, 1984). For most of human history, sustainable resource use was not an issue. Now, in an era of rapid population growth, resource consumption and technological change, it is necessary to realize that a host of other issues, in the political, economic, social and cultural areas must be addressed holistically to achieve sustainable development.

The world community is interested in sustainable development, i.e. preservation and enhancement of environmental quality and the protection of natural resources for present and future generations. If we are to move toward sustainable development, resource administration must address a number of important factors. These include: population growth, economic inequity, inadequate protection of natural resources and environmental degradation, natural risks, poor-quality resource management including inadequate investment in re-development and restoration, and land tenure barriers to efficient use of resources (Kimmins, 1992). Sustainable development must simultaneously provide socioeconomic, environmental, cultural, and service benefits for current demands, while insuring the capacity to provide the same or better for future

generations. Sustainable development implies a successful search for equilibrium between long and short term objectives, emphasizing both distributional equity and quality of life.

In addition, forests worldwide play a major role in sustaining human life. There are approximately 3400 million hectares of forests occupying nearly 25% of the world's land area (CIDA, 1993). Pressures on these forests to supply goods and services are increasing rapidly. In rural areas forests are often, directly or indirectly, the primary source of the basics to sustain life.

The increasing pressures for fuel wood and other commodities may make it difficult to obtain popular support for broader management efforts focused on sustainable development. A factor that has been identified as contributing to the lack of community support for improved management is the conventional top-down approach to the development of management initiative and projects. It seems evident that development initiatives must involve the direct participation of the local populations in designing, planning, and managing projects.

Sustainable development needs community knowledge and support. The empirical record demonstrates that the communities require substantial participation in decisions that affect them. This is best secured by democratization of the decision process, and by giving communities effective (participative democratic) control over the use of the resource upon which they depend.

2. Participatory Development Model: A Base for Sustainable Resource Management

Sustainable resource management is only achievable if the people who bear the consequences of development are actively conscious of their goals and purpose in life. In that sense, people will be actively adaptive to the turbulence of their social environment, and always motivated to improve the quality of their lives and natural resources and environmental conditions in the long term. Therefore, a participatory development model based on the Search Conference approach is an important alternative to achieve sustainable resource management.

2.1. Participative Strategic Planning and Community

Increasingly, participative strategic planning has become the method of choice for social work organizations in their attempts to determine future direction. Participative strategic planning seeks to answer the most basic question about why the organization/community exists, what it does, and how it does it. The result of the process is a complimentary plan that serves as a guide for future organizational action.

The process is distinguished from other methods of public decision in two key ways. First, instead of delegating responsibility for formulating and implementing policies to a few persons, strategic planning brings citizens into the policy-making process. Second, it is an ongoing process that stresses the importance of continually monitoring the progress toward agreed goals and objectives.

For communities, participative strategic planning is a systematic process to help them determine “what is next” in light of the social and economic uncertainties they face. The process determines where the community wants to go and develops ways to get there. In this process, residents of a community can be brought together to reconcile different viewpoints regarding the decision-making for their future development and to use the imagination of all its citizens to re-examine how its resources can support a better common development. In the decision-making process, the community must build a consensus for a common vision of the kind of economy and job opportunities that each community’s future should hold. It must integrate economic, physical, environmental, and human development.

Community development affords an opportunity for applying the democratic process in decision-making. In particular, it can involve a participatory democracy design which encourages a direct participation of the community's people in the process of strategic planning. This process involves as many members of a community as possible in the process of improving democracy through participation.

The success of community-based initiatives lies in the residents’ ability to clearly state their goals and objectives and to set out their plan of action in a systematic and logical framework. Participative strategic planning provides an organizational structure for focusing that effort and creativity in productive ways. The planning process answers three related questions: Where is our community today? What do we want our community to be like in the future? and How can we most effectively get from here to there?. This kind of planning is based on the assumptions that people are purposeful, ideal seeking, want to learn, and want to create and exercise control over their futures.

Once a community has its own plan, the next all-important step is to take action to implement it. It is helpful at this stage to create an implementation strategy, outlining who will take the lead in various projects, identifying responsibilities, estimating costs, and working out a timetable for completion.

2.2. Development of Community-based Forestry Initiatives

Community-based forestry is a form of management which can be achieved by developing learning and planning communities that are capable of adapting to changing environments. These communities are important in forested regions, since sustainable utilization of these resources depends on an adaptive relationship with their environment.

Cisneros and Coumo (1994) describe community-based strategic planning as a collaborative process which should involve community members with a common vision for the future. Envisioning the future based on long range goals is a fundamental step in community-based strategic planning. The community gathers information on the needs, resources and opportunities regarding achieving their desirable future goal in coming up with a plan for attaining this goal. A strategic plan (as the basis for community-based forestry) should have clearly stated achievable goals, implications of conditions and decisions, alternative actions, and should identify necessary decisions for setting priorities.

Community forestry implies collective management for the common good. If discussion of sustainable community forestry is to begin, let alone be accepted, the people who will live with the consequences must be involved in the discussion and decision-making. Such a participative democratic process may represent the only real hope for success when working within risky and unstable fields, as in the case of contemporary forestry policy-making.

Real community-based forestry is thus characterized by an ecologically adaptive community, sustainability in utilization and management of forest resources and production of a “learning and planning” community. This state of affairs can be achieved by involving “real participation” through processes that aim at Participative Democracy. Participative democracy allows for effective participation in which every single individual’s opinion is heard and incorporated into the decision-making process. It is not a representative system, every individual’s interests are considered. This idea it is argued, encourages self managing groups which are capable of working together to achieve desirable goals. Self managing groups define an area of common interests and a context of ‘we-ness’ which encourages open and truthful communication (Emery, 1994). This aspect is crucial to achieving community-based forestry. The local people assume a joint responsibility for carrying out a task together to achieve their desirable goal, with joint responsibility for its outcome.

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Biographical Sketch

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She has worked in forestry enterprises, national and international non-governmental organizations, research and academic institutions. Her distinctions include: Member of the National Investigators System in Mexico, and National Forestry Merit Award Mexico 1998. She is the author or co-author of more than 20 articles in journals and proceedings. She is a member of the International Network for Community Forestry in Canada, the International Association for Study of Common Property in USA., and the Mexican Association of Forestry Professionals, among other organizations.

She is currently professor-researcher at the Universidad Autonoma de Chihuahua. Her main work areas are Sustainable Natural Resources Management and Sustainable Forestry Development.