Community Participation in Earthquake Reconstruction Program of Azad Kashmir

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Abstract

Communities are regarded as prime stakeholders to development work that takes place in their regions they reside. They play an equally vital role as the architects, engineers and developers of any development project. This paper focuses on the importance of community participation and to suggest a strategic frame work for effective reconstruction work in the earthquake hit areas. The paper examined how contributions of the local community were effectively harnessed by garnering knowledge that constituted the relationship between nature and the built environment. Measures were taken to generate public awareness on pertinent issues throughout the development phases of the projects executed during the reconstruction works. Meetings were conducted at the planning, designing, construction and handing over stages of the projects. Community participation was facilitated by making presentations, incorporating comments of the local people in the site selection and project implementation. Proactive engagement and consultation with the local community was adopted in the design and construction through frequent interactions. This work provided a framework which may be useful for calamity hit areas and can be adopted in any culture.

Keywords

Earthquake, Reconstruction, Community participation, Framework, Azad Kashmir, Pakistan

1. Introduction

The paper focuses on the strategic framework required for effective community participation for promotion of sustainable development. The perspective adopted for this paper is principally drawn from the authors' participation in community meetings in Azad Kashmir. Through the engagement process, the authors came across different cultural norms and lifestyles according to which the communities respond to problems and opportunities. There is no generic approach that can be applied globally, some may prefer to act alone while others in a group, Organizing informal groups or arousing friends is one model while direct work through a political party is another approach (Bracht and Tsorous,1990). There is tremendous scope for societal change if the capacity of an individual is enhanced through community participation. This boost team spirit, which is great motivation and leads to the development of a healthy environment. Community organization is a planned process to activate a community to use its own social structures and any available resources to accomplish community goal (Bracht and Tsourus, 1990).

Sustainability is defined as the ability to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Brundtland Commission, 1987). The crux of all development work lies in the financial resources that are at disposal. It is the need of the hour to look beyond the traditional

paradigm and explore better alternatives to viewing development projects. Researchers (Brundtland Commission, 1987) describe that the basic essence of sustainability entails all factors such as environment, economic and social responsibility.

Social responsibility is the most vital factor governing development work which came to light during the reconstruction work of the earthquake affected region. It was the morning of October 2005, the fury of nature that shook the calmness and tranquility of the serene north of Pakistan, brought anguish and woes to the lives of over 3.5 million people. The earthquake caused massive loss of precious lives as well as livelihood to the victims, while dipping all essential facilities and infrastructure to dust and debris (ERRA, 2011). In addition to reconstruction work, lots of immediate relief work poured in from national and international organizations. Very little attention was paid on the need for adopting social consciousness by involving the community in the development work. The objective of this study is to: 1) reveal the importance of the community participation in construction development projects executed in earthquake reconstruction program of Azad Kashmir; and 2) to suggest a strategic framework for effective reconstruction works.

2. Background of Study

2.1 Community Participation

Being the prime stakeholder to any development project in its region, the community's involvement in the wroks is imminent. White (1996) revealed that project can not be funded for implementation without provision for participation of the local community while Grander and Lewis (1996) stated that particpation has now become so ever present in development jargon as to be often virtually without meaning. Nonetheless, the involvement of the community is not a cosmetic exercise but is meant to include them from the inception to the completion stages. It seeks to stimulate and coalesce community energies, interests and resources in a collective response for healthier cities and environments (Bracht and Tsourus, 1990). By virtue of its involvement, the community is inculcated with a sense of ownership, which would further extend the community's interest in development of their region.

The area of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJ&K) is a land of fascinating people, language and culture (AJK Government, 2011). An estimated 42% of the total geographical area of the state is occupied by forest and is a major source of revenue generation for the state government (AJK Govt, 2011). Most of the population is spread out as pockets of rural settlements and do not have the facilities to avail quality health and education. Just after the earthquake, the immediate recovery efforts were centred in the major districts of AJ&K and those affected had to travel down to get facilitated. The larger component of the reconstruction program was to be focused on smaller rural settlements. A central semi autonomous body Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehablitation Authority (ERRA) was established for expediting the recovery efforts. ERRA worked alongside various national and international donors to ensure smooth transition for reconstruction and improve the state of infrastructure. Despite the comprehensive mandate of the body, much remained to be seen as far as the community was engaged to advance sustainability goals.

This highly linear consultation process threw light on pertinent questions like who should participate? How should participation be encouraged? Where does participation occur? Communities were categorized according to the type of development work they were affiliated with such as School Management Committee (SMC) and Health management Committee (HMC. It was really important to identify how the community best be represented. For this purpose, representatives from institutes of health and education alongside that of village elders of settlement were selected. A chairman, who was appointed by the elders of the region, headed the committee. The committee further constituted a Vice-Chairman, General Secretary, Finance Secretary and 5 to 6 members who belong to the particular area.

There was no limit on the number of people acquiring membership of the committees. Nonetheless, preference was given to those who had a genuine interest in uplifting the overall condition of their neighborhood. Support for the procedure was obtained from the previous research of Wandersman and Giarmartino (1980) that participation was most likely among those who were concerned about their neighborhood, have experience in community leadership and felt that competent colleague can be enlisted to support the project. It was important to encourage the local to be actively engaged in the execution of development work and their knowledge and expertise was taken into account. Irrespective of whatever development stage of a project full community participation was encouraged.

2.2 Planning and Design Development

This process started with a need of development work required. ERRA took the lead by identifying the type of development work required for the area, however, the micro affair of identifying the exact location of the site for building health and educational facility was left to the community and the developers. The development process comprises of a number of individual steps, which helps in attainment of sustainability. In addition to the selection of sites and execution of technical feasibility, a consensus from the community is imperative. If there is no ownership of the process, this leads to a potential conflict later on. The process starts from selection of a site which leads to design development. The information was disseminated with the help of *social mobilizers*. These are groups of people who inform and encourage the locals about plans of upcoming development in their region. *Social mobilizers* were instrumental in summoning people to community meetings and they helped organize joint sessions between the client, consultant and community. The procedure helped integrate community participation at all stages of the process. The community members took an active participation through a series of presentations on different themes from concept development to delivery of final products. The community was made familiar about the different types of facilities that were being built and they were given the opportunities to register their comments and be engaged in the follow-up stage. It is observed that there is a very positive outcome in the community as ownership. A consensus was achieved in the design phase once the trust between the client, contractor and end user was bridged. This engagement helped resolve and preempt potent bottlenecks to achieve project progress.

2.3 Construction and Follow Up

The construction phase served to include more of the local community, who joined in with much ease and comfort. The communities were observed to resolve issues of contention by employing proactive measures and this involvement beforehand helped in alleviating the development of any issues that came into being. The issues that were dealt with entailed those of land, labor and utilities requiring input from the local community. These were effectively dealt with as there was willingness on part of the community in addressing the problems. Since the community was involved at all stages of the project, they viewed it with much ease and appreciation.

The final phase of the entire construction cycle is that of operation and maintenance. This phase demands substantial financial and technical resources including continuous community input. This is a challenging phase as the decisions community makes influence the outcome of the project. The technical experts go only to a certain extent in undertaking the design aspect of the project, however, the responsibility lies on the community to make appropriate decisions during the life-cycle of the project.

2.4 Participants Alleviation Strategies

In order to maintain a spirit of participation, a few of the development organizations organized social and cultural events to encourage social bonding. Additionally, festivals were organized to expose local communities and make them more confident with their peers. There was a ceremonial handing over of the

facility by the donor to the end-users, in the presence of other community members. Small token of appreciation in form of prizes and gifts were also given to the most active participants.

Participations were encouraged to take place at the site where the facility was to be built. The approach ensured comprehensive participation and feedback, which would do away with the glitch of misinformation. Prior to the community meeting, stakeholders to the development program helped come to a consensus on the action plan merited for the smooth operation of the project. This integrated approach made the process more efficient, reflecting the true idea of sustainability.

2.5 Barriers

Today's challenges highlight the importance of community involvement with the government and private sector. This merits a paradigm shift in the way the government operates, particularly with regard to the way public response and its relations are handled. Nonetheless, the participation of all members of the public is not entirely a smooth process

Public consultation is not always a smooth process. There are numerous hurdles due to a region's social, cultural and political norms. Deciding on the legitimacy of those who claim, or have been selected to, represent the community is a continous dilemma in a community participation process (Bracht and Tsourus, 1990). The committee formed from community members hailed from different political backgrounds and it was observed that their views were divergent many a times. A number of factors contributed to impeding an effective participation of the public. This included lack of confidence to express one's views; low communication skills and low levels of educational attainment.

2.5.1 Social and Cultural Barriers

One of the obstacle for achieving full participation was the unavailability of a suitable time for the meeting when all members were occupied with their daily routines. This was important when men had to go out to get livelihoods for their families, and women stayed indoors to do household work and take care of their children. Due to busy routines, it was a challenge to get them to spare time and participate in meetings.

For cultural reasons, it was not considered acceptable for women to participate in public hearings. This was viewed as an immense challenge in getting women's inputs on development issues directly related to them. It was difficult to obtain specific information pertaining to health and educational facilities. Those women who were interested to be part of the community development process were encourage and were hired to motivate other women to participate. This enabled share of information, consolidation of communication channels and receiving an effective feedback. Women were generally observed to integrate well with teams and were garnered to be role players where the construction of a new girls school or health unit was taking place.

The reconstruction efforts threw light to another important concern of the community regarding those involved with the development work. A number of defunct organisations were actively pursuing their vested interests in the areas. This had left the community disillusion about the prospects of the actual motive of organisations that sought to play a role in the recovery. This lack of trust and disillusion had alleviated so as to allow further progress. It was observed that the community was inflicted by the trauma of the disaster and the sense of being exploited added to their reluctance in engaging proactively with organisations that were genuinely there for their benefit.

Disaster mitigation was impacted by power and the misuse of power. The misuse of power found in the ongoing environment in which disaster mitigation tries to gain a foothold, and in the effects that disaster and crisis have on opportunities for corruption (Wisner and Walker, 2005). The disaster aftermath is

followed by pouring on a number of organisations that take it as an opportunity to exploit the situation. Additionally, corruption is generally an endemic problem and has been the case with AJ&K where the people have lost trust in organisations that claim to be advancing goal of disaster recovery and development. The authors observed that it was a challenging task to reinstate communities faith and confidence on the development work.

2.5.2 Political Biasism

Political bias, connections and affiliations has had a negative impact on the public participation program. Those members of the community who have better political backing are exposed to new ideas and policies than others, thereby being more empowered. Political bias by relief organizations usually translates to people with connections get help, whereas others do not. The social fabric in the areas is extremely complicated and delicate; relief organizations were not able to see what was going on in the society (IUCN, 2005). Many times government officials were reluctant to share ideas with the community and capacitate them by allowing them to individually exert authority on the paradigms they represent. This has served to create a trust void between the implementing body and the end user.

2.6 Capacity Building and Ownership

The process of community participation not only instilled awareness among the local people about the power they exert on decisions that concern them, but have built their capacity for future development works. For individuals, capacity building relates to leadership development, advocacy skills, training/speaking abilities, technical skills, organizing skills, and other areas of personal and professional development (Linnell, 2003). The process of recovery and reconstruction exposed to the people of Azad Kashmir a lot of things they would originally never have thought of. A number of national and international organization came in there with different objectives and development plans, however, each in return built the local capacity to respond and react to a natural disaster of the sort that struck in 2005. With adequate support and training, it seems more likely that pre-existing local capabilities are harnessed towards building disaster resiliant communities (Leersum and Arora, 2011). The people of Azad Kashmir through their participation, got an opportunity to be part of a global recovery program. Their interest in the development work of their region helped them to become managers and developers, while building their capacity to respond in a most appropriate way. People had started coming out with their ideas of development and presented to the authorities about what is most needed for their region. Once the credibility of an organisation undertaking a particular type of development work was established, communities were elevated to a sense of importance and they came out voluntarily to support the cause. This entire process not only helped develop capacities of the community but also allowed contractors and designers to understand the nitty gritty involved in interacting with people. As they became more cognizant of cultural and social issues, they realized the importance of public input. The importance was thus reflected in the decision making during the design and management steps. A few of the key design decisions which evolved as an understanding of social and cultural norms through community partcicpation were:

- flat areas are to be used as play grounds;
- orientation of the toilet blocks;
- south facing vernadas/corridors;
- high windows for privacy;
- opaque boundary wall in girls school/ colleges and health facilities;
- separate waiting areas for males and females;
- separate toilet blocks.

One of the most satisfying and productive outcome of this process was the sense of community ownership. It is very important for any community development project to get a buy in from its public to

ensure an effective follow up. A sense of ownership is developed through an ongoing process of community development from feasibility stage to completion of the facility. Along with the development works, participation of stakeholders in events like a book festival, local cultural festival helps in consolidating bonds. The more these events are arranged and the greater the participation, there exist a better comfort level between all parties. Giving due share of respect and partnership on an equal footing gives the community a sense of belonging. This in turn helped in bringing a socially integrated community. The more aware the people of a society are the more ready they are to participate and contribute for their region.

3. Analysis and Results

Data is driven from authors direct participation in the eartquake reconstruction work, where the prime author was part of the Pakistan Earthqauke Reconstruction and Recovery Program funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), from 2007 to 2010. The author participated in design development of the health and education facilities under the earthquake reconstruction program. A series of presentaions were made to community at different stages of its development. The community particpation was ensured by the efforts of social mobilizers and community liason officers who set the date, time and location of the meeting. The information was circulated to all the stakeholders and the represntative of particpants. Meetings were initiated with an introduction of the partcipants, development phase and the developed proposal. The need of the development plan and the concept was presented to all stakeholders for their interest and understanding. The concerns of community generally varied from region to region depending upon the level of their exposure and understanding of the subject matter. To make the design concievable rendered elevations, plans and images were displayed, presented by the designers or community liason officer. The particpants were then given an opportunity to show their consent, and come to a consensus for moving forward.

The community particpation meetings primarily required the presence of architects, community mobilzers (persons responsible for community empowerement), EDO (Education department offficer) or his representative, principal (in case of educational facility), DHO (District health officer) or his representative (in case of health facility) and senior representative of community. An average of 20 to 30 people used to attend each meeting. The writer attended a number of these proceedings while taking notes and pictures. Generally, community meetings were held at three different stages; concept development, design development and design completion before the commencement of construction work. The process by then had developed a consensus resulting into an ownership of the user. Construction phase demanded a less rigorous follow up by the community members unless any regional issue came up. The process was followed on a similar pattern for rest of the development works falling under this particular program.

Figure 1 explains the whole process wherein meetings were arranged at the planning, designing, construction and handing over phase of the projects. The key stakeholders were the client, consultant, contractor and most importantly the members of the community. Community participation and their interest was ensured by conducting meetings, making presentations, incorporating comments of the community, reviewing the process and conducting follow up exercises. By following this process, site selection, project selection and project implementation was facilitated in the earthquake reconstruction and recovery program.
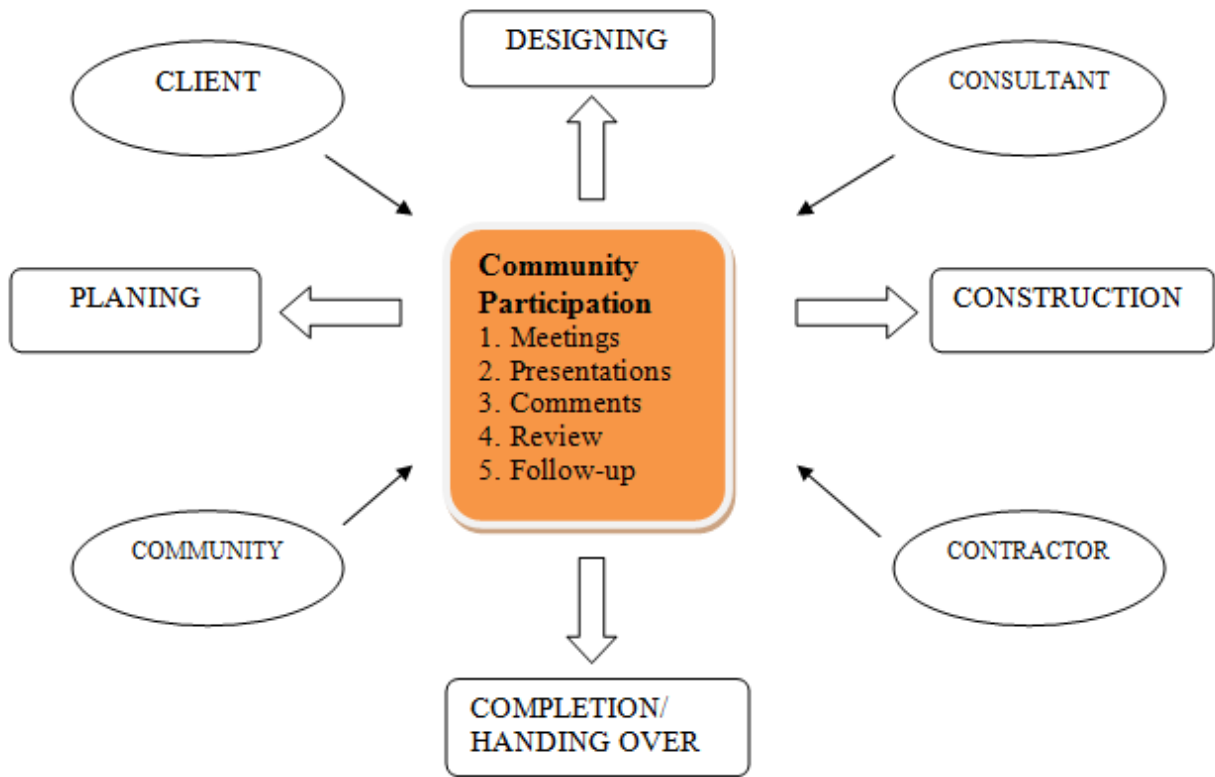
Figure 1: Community Participation Framework

4. Concluding Remarks

The development work ensured communities participation which made it more in line with sustainability concept. Community stands as one of the prime stakeholder of the development works in their regions. This integrated approach of community participation at different levels of planning, design and construction enabled public acceptance and belonging to the projects. Community participation assured developers that the development works were in accordance with the requirements. The people of Azad Kashmir were devastated by the earthquake and they had lost a lot of loved ones and precious belongings. There was a need to get their confidence and interest back in the development work of their region. Thus the reconstruction work was carried out by involving the communities.

The recovery works were executed by keeping in view bridging mutual distrust between developers and communities, integration of communities into the design process, overcoming government agencies reluctance to engage to giving local people the space to exert their authority. Community involvement was upheld at every phase, be it the design or construction phase, and was necessary for sustainable development whereby the hallmark of this is the community ownership.

7. Acknowledgement

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