Linking Research and Action
STRENGTHENING FOOD ASSISTANCE AND FOOD POLICY RESEARCH

Using Food Aid to Empower Communities
Concepts and Examples from Madagascar and Honduras

> In successful community-driven development, mechanisms must link citizens with government and enable each to listen as well as act and raise his or her voice.

The World Food Programme now uses 80 percent of its resources for relief. Yet innovative programmes show how food aid can contribute to long-term development by helping to build stakeholders' capacities and empower communities. Capacity and empowerment as outputs then become critical inputs into future development.

This brief presents a conceptual model of community empowerment, and then uses examples from Madagascar and Honduras to show how food aid successfully empowered communities and government.

A Model of Empowerment

Community-driven development (CDD) is a prime example of community empowerment. CDD does not mean that the community must fund, manage, and staff all services or projects itself, but rather that the community participates meaningfully in, and fundamentally drives, decisions about its own development.

What are the basic requirements for successful CDD? In essence, the community must be able to "demand" development and the government must be able to "supply" it. Mechanisms such as community development committees must link citizens with government. These mechanisms must enable each actor to listen as well as act and raise their voice (see figure). Civil society and other development organizations, such as local NGOs, can work with citizens and government to strengthen the capacities of each, the mechanisms that link them, and the policy environment in which they operate.

Yet donors often short-change the actions needed to accomplish these things. They may require projects to demonstrate impact in an unrealistically short time. They believe they are participatory when they "consult" with the community. They hope that quick workshops on residents' roles and responsibilities will be sufficient.

But building capacity and empowment require much more. Organizations must work with residents so that they learn by actually doing the job. Legal frameworks must clarify, protect, and encourage citizens' ways of interacting with government and driving development.

Genuine CDD is also difficult since a participatory process by definition excludes having outsiders determine community needs and interventions. Yet if the donor does not know the exact intervention at the project start, how will it know how much to budget? What if the community chooses priorities different from those of the donor? Some organizations have creative solutions to these questions, but standard procedures often discourage such innovation.

Case Studies

How, specifically, can projects use food aid to empower communities? The projects described used food, primarily through food-for-work (FFW), to complement other activities and resources. The projects built stakeholders' capacities, strengthened linking mechanisms, and improved the policy environment—changing the relationship between citizen and government.

Building Community Capacities: Mahavita, Madagascar

Mahavita was an urban livelihood-improvement programme initiated by CARE in Antananarivo, Madagascar, in the late 1990s. From the beginning, instead of focusing on "outputs," Mahavita focused on "processes." Through a genuine partnership, Mahavita staff guided community residents through a participatory diagnostic to evaluate their developmental needs, then worked with them to design strategies and implement interventions. All along, residents were learning how to do things so that in the end they could carry out the process themselves.

The main expression of CDD was the community-driven preparation of a neighbourhood development plan. CARE created representative, community-level institutions, called *structures de developpement* (SD), to develop this plan. In each community, Mahavita conducted a needs assessment; identified priorities; noted which priorities CARE could help meet; and worked with communities to find ways to meet remaining needs, including outreach to municipal authorities and international donors.

But the community had little experience with these tasks. How to identify community needs and priorities? Working alongside CARE, the SD learned how to use participatory tools to carry out an assessment. How to meet identified needs? Again working with CARE, the SD wrote a neighbourhood development plan. They identified and described priority projects, such as public laundry basins and standpipes, and wrote funding requests. But the community had no experience with project management. How would it manage projects that actually got funded? Because Mahavita already planned to use FFW to build infrastructure, CARE could immediately provide some resources to meet infrastructure needs. By collaborating with CARE on the FFW project, SD and community residents learned how to design and manage a project.

Importantly, the availability of food and other financial resources meant that community residents quickly saw concrete results from their efforts. Without these results, enthusiasm and community structures would have withered.

The municipality's interest in Mahavita increased as city officials saw how communities made and implemented their own plans. They now look to the SDs to coordinate community development, and incorporate community plans into their own efforts.

Other tangible results? An effective doubling of project resources, since communities brought in funds from other donors and drew less than expected on project funds. Now aware of community capacities, the World Bank and other donors have begun to turn to the community rather than, say, national authorities, to implement certain projects.

Building Government Capacities: PODER, Honduras

Whereas Mahavita's initial focus was the community, PODER, in rural Honduras, started by strengthening local government. PODER trained local authorities in basic laws and roles and responsibilities of authorities and citizens; management and budget control; and strategic planning.

Working with a local steering committee, CARE developed Community Action Plans (CAPs) for each village. The presidents of the steering committees sat on the Development Council of the municipality, the administrative level above the village. In this way, the CAPs served as inputs into the municipal planning process.

Again, the availability of food and other resources was crucial to the programme's success. Village committees used FFW to implement their CAPs, financing public works such as flood protection and farm-to-market roads. These roads have cut transport time and costs, so now goods can get to market more easily and teachers and health workers can come regularly to the villages.

Over time, PODER participants became protagonists. Village residents now possess the knowledge and skills to work together and influence decisionmakers. They are more aware of the rights, roles,

and responsibilities of citizens and governments. At the same time, along with competence, municipal authorities gained credibility with residents.

A Supportive Environment
Community empowerment requires not

Figure: A schema of community empowerment

just capacity to act, but an environment that supports action. A supportive environment would include resources and a sound legal and policy framework. Mahavita and PODER, for example, benefited from existing, but laggard, efforts at decentralization in both countries. They founded linking mechanisms and showed citizens how to access and influence local government and development processes.

Outside agents can be critical catalysts in shaping this environment by helping to set up institutions and processes to link actors or provide services, bring in expertise, and provide resources.

To address resource constraints, for example, WFP could provide food directly to projects or complement monetary grants from organizations like the City Community Challenge fund in Uganda and Zambia, a funder of community-initiated projects financed by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development.

Other Considerations
A number of other programme issues arise

in supporting CDD. Leaders themselves must demonstrate an empowering mentality with staff and communities. Political conflict is almost inevitable, but likely to be manageable, as long as stakeholders clarify roles and responsibilities, achieve buy-in, and ensure transparent decision-making and accountability to the community as a whole. This lowers the probability of elite control of the process and encourages the inclusion of often-marginalized groups.

Although use of staff and community time can be more intensive than usual approaches, especially at the beginning, the return to investment is large. In addition to leveraging project resources, residents become able to propel their own development. They become less reliant on outside agents for direction and less dependent on the intervening organization for resources as well as project design, management, and operation. These are true measures of empowerment.
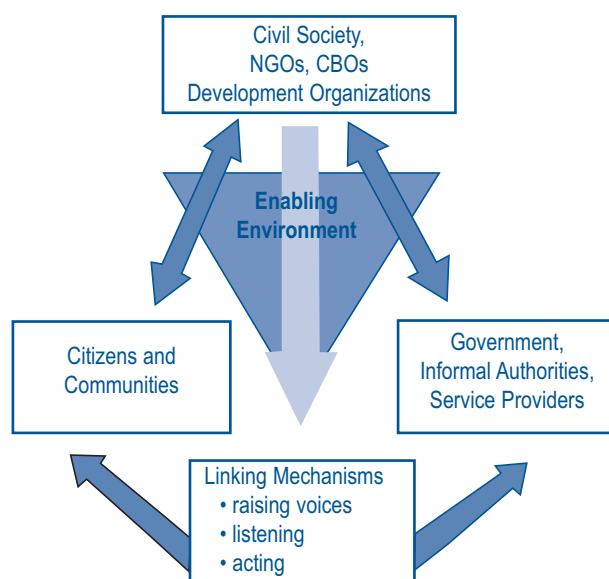
Implications for Food Assistance Programmes
Whether working for relief or long-term development, governments and aid institutions should move beyond an "interventions" perspective that sees food only as an input with direct effects. They should place projects within a broader framework of empowerment. In return, more empowered communities will have increased capacity to make "outside interventions," such as food-based programming, more effective.

The case studies show how food can be a transforming catalyst. Certainly there are other examples. The World Food Programme, for instance, has used food to support community management of natural resources. Still, the outside organization should avoid creating dependency, thereby encouraging communities and government to step up and fill their appropriate roles.

The main point is that supporting CDD often requires fundamental changes in attitudes toward development and ways of working with communities. The case studies show how this can be done.

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