

COMMUNITY BASED PLANNING WORKSHOP

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DECENTRALISATION AND COMMUNITY BASED PLANNING IN ZIMBABWE: A CRITICAL REVIEW

Diana Conyers

**PO Box 71
Binga**

**Ministry of Local Government Public Works and National Housing
Intermediate Technology Development Group
Khanya-managing rural change cc**

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 What is Community Based Planning?

The term *community based planning* is a relatively new term, which may be unfamiliar to some participants. However, it is not really a new concept. I am sure that everyone here has heard of *community participation in planning* and, although it can be argued that community based planning is not quite the same as community participation in planning, both terms are used to cover such a wide range of planning activities that they are, in effect, interchangeable.

For the purposes of this Workshop, the term *community based planning* will be used to refer to *any planning which addresses activities or problems at community level in which the members of the communities themselves are involved*. The term *community* is, in this context, used in a geographical sense, to refer to the lowest tiers in the planning system, which in Zimbabwean terms means the ward level (or its equivalent) and below.

1.2 Types of Community Based Planning

There are, as already indicated, many different types of community based planning. They differ from each other in terms of:

- the nature and scope of activities or problems which are being addressed (eg. project planning, sectoral planning or integrated area planning);
- the nature and extent of linkages with ‘higher’ level planning and/or local governance systems (eg. district, sectoral or national planning systems);
- the stages in the planning cycle at which community members are involved (eg. in the case of project planning: problem identification; project identification and design; implementation; operation and maintenance; and monitoring and evaluation);
- the degree of community involvement at each stage (eg. in the case of project identification and design, whether the community is merely informed of what is going to be done, is consulted as to the nature and form of the project, or makes all the decisions);
- the type of external organisation (if any) which initiates and/or supports the planning activity (eg. local authority, government department, NGO);

1.3 Why Community Based Planning?

Community based planning should not be regarded as an end in itself, but as a means of achieving a more tangible development objective. The problem, however, is that it can be used to achieve a number of very different types of objective. The three main types are:

- to make plans more relevant to local needs and conditions;
- to increase community involvement in the provision of public services, due to lack of capacity in government agencies; and
- to increase people’s control over their own lives and livelihoods.

The type of objective has important implications in terms of the type of community based planning which is likely to result. For example, if the main objective is to make the plan more relevant to local needs, community planning is usually part of a ‘higher’ level planning

system and community participation is likely to be mainly in the project identification and design stage and to involve no more than consultation. Similarly, if the main objective is to increase community participation in service provision, community planning tends again to be part of a higher level planning system, but communities are likely to be involved mainly in project implementation and/or operation and maintenance, where they are expected to play a major role. And if the main objective is to increase people's control over their own lives and livelihoods, community planning is usually part of a wider process of establishing an effective system of democratic local governance and communities are likely to play a major role in all stages of the process.

As participants in this Workshop, it is important that we ask ourselves why we are concerned about community based planning, individually and collectively, so that we know what we are trying to achieve and have some basis from which to evaluate our successes and failures.

1.4 Decentralisation and Community Based Planning

Decentralisation and community based planning are closely related. Decentralisation is the transfer of central government functions to government (or, in some cases, non-government) institutions at 'lower' levels. Although the types of functions which are decentralised vary, they inevitably involve the planning and implementation of local (ie. 'community based') development activities. However, although the level to which functions are decentralised also varies, more often than not it is an 'intermediate' level, such as the 'district', rather than the community level itself. The institutions at this intermediate level are, therefore, faced with the question of whether to involve communities in the planning of local development activities and, if so, how. Furthermore, if these institutions are, as is often the case, elected local authorities, they are directly responsible to these local communities through their elected members. Consequently, they are under particular pressure to respond to community needs and to involve at least some community members (notably the councillors) in the planning process. In summary, therefore, community based planning is, or should be, an integral part of the decentralisation process and an essential component of any local authority's activities.

2. COMMUNITY BASED PLANNING IN ZIMBABWE

2.1 Introduction

Zimbabwe is currently involved in a process of decentralisation to rural district councils (RDCs), which are elected local government authorities at an 'intermediate' (ie. somewhere between national and community) level. Community based planning should, therefore, be an important component of the decentralisation and local authority capacity building agenda. Hence this Workshop.

The Workshop programme assumes, quite rightly, that there is already a great deal of experience of community based planning in Zimbabwe. The purpose of the Workshop is to draw lessons from this experience and agree upon a common framework for future activity. This section of my presentation gives a brief overview of the range and scope of community based planning activities over the two decades since Independence. I shall not attempt either

to provide a comprehensive list of all such activities or to describe any of them in detail, since I do not have the time or the knowledge to do so.

I have grouped the various community based planning activities into three categories, based on the three types of objective identified in section 1.3 above. In those cases where an activity has more than one objective, I have either listed it under the one which I consider most important or, in a few cases, included it in more than one category. I am aware that, in using such a basic categorisation, I am undoubtedly over-simplifying the situation and probably also provoking objections from some participants who feel that their activities have been wrongly classified – or omitted altogether.

2.2 Community Based Planning to Make Plans More Relevant to Local Needs and Conditions

Most attempts at community based planning in Zimbabwe to date have been designed primarily for this purpose. The category may be further subdivided into those activities initiated or supported by government agencies and those sponsored by NGOs.

The first group includes the following:

- the ‘bottom up’ planning system introduced in the 1980s in response to the 1984 Prime Minister’s Directive, which was probably the most comprehensive attempt at community based planning in the country to date;
- the Integrated Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Programme (IRWSSP), which may also be classified under the second objective (see section 2.3);
- the component of District Development Grants (DDGs), provided under the RDC Capacity Building Programme, which are earmarked for ‘community based’ projects;
- the Community Action Project (CAP), which focuses on the poorest districts;
- the District Environmental Action Plans (DEAPs), which have also been limited to some districts.

It is not possible to list all those in the second category, since there are many NGOs engaged in ‘community based’ development activities and most involve some form of community based planning. I will, therefore, merely give a few examples of those whose experience is particularly relevant to this Workshop. They are:

- SNV, which has worked very closely with RDCs in the districts where it has been involved;
- Plan International, which has major programmes in several different parts of the country and gives special attention to community participation;
- CARE International, which has played an important role in promoting community involvement in natural resource management;
- Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG), which fits best under the third objective (see section 2.4) but also warrants mention here.

2.3 Community Based Planning to Increase Community Involvement in Service Provision

This form of community based planning has become increasingly important in the last decade, owing to the Government’s policy of reducing the role of the public sector (which is

part of the broader economic structural adjustment programme) and, most recently, the severe financial constraints under which the government agencies are currently operating. However, it is not easy to find incontestable examples, since this objective is seldom explicitly stated; community based activities intended to serve this purpose are, more often than not, 'marketed' under one of the other two objectives.

The following are examples of activities which, in my view, are intended at least partially to achieve this objective:

- the community based maintenance component of the IRWSSP, especially in the last few years, when the Government's capacity to maintain rural water supplies has been severely curtailed;
- the establishment of School Development Committees, which have been given increasing responsibility for organising and (especially recently) funding educational activities;
- the Ministry of Transport's pilot community road maintenance project;
- three programmes designed to increase community involvement in natural resource management, which are intended to assist Government to conserve natural resources, but also fit in the third category (see section 2.4), namely:
 - the CAMPFIRE programme;
 - the establishment of community based fishing associations on Lake Kariba; and
 - the Forestry Commission's pilot projects to involve communities in the management of forest reserves.

2.4 Community Based Planning to Increase People's Control over their own Lives and Livelihoods

There are a number of government programmes involving community planning which are intended to increase people's control over their own lives or livelihoods, although in most cases such programmes also have other objectives of a national rather than local nature. Examples include:

- many of the activities of the Ministry of Youth Development, Gender and Employment Creation, especially those undertaken by what was then the Department of Community Development during the 1980s;
- some of Agritex's agricultural extension activities, especially its village land use planning;
- the three community based natural resource management programmes mentioned in section 2.3, especially CAMPFIRE, which is probably the only significant community planning activity in which substantial amounts of money have been made available to local communities to use as they wish.

Although there are many NGO activities which are concerned to increase people's control over their own lives and livelihoods, there are relatively few in which this is the main objective and community based planning is specifically used for this purpose. Three such examples are:

- many of ITDG's activities (eg. its community based agricultural planning project in Chivi District);

- Africa Community Publishing and Development Trust (ACPDT)'s work with communities in Gokwe North District; and
- the Binga Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (Binga CCJP)'s conscientisation and community development activities in Binga District.

In addition, of course, there are many ad hoc activities which communities initiate and implement, either on their own or with local sources of financial or technical assistance. Unfortunately, such cases are seldom documented, so it is difficult to learn from the important lessons which they may offer.

3. PREREQUISITES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY BASED PLANNING

3.1 Introduction

I do not intend to try to evaluate the successes and failures of the various community based planning activities mentioned in section 2, either individually or collectively. These should emerge from the subsequent group discussions. At this point, I will merely say that, although there are elements of success and failure in all these activities, in my view the failures tend to outnumber the successes.

In order to help us to identify the nature and causes of both the successes and failures and thus to chart the way forward, I would like to conclude this presentation by discussing the *prerequisites* for effective community based planning; in other words, the conditions that are necessary for community based planning to be effective.

These prerequisites may be divided into three categories:

- those related to the nature of the planning system;
- those related to the characteristics of the community; and
- those related to the organisation (for example, local authority, central government agency or NGO) responsible for initiating and/or supporting the planning process.

The three categories are discussed in turn below. In each case, I begin by listing what I believe to be the prerequisites, based on my personal experience and observation (in Zimbabwe and elsewhere) and on the extensive international literature on community based planning and related topics. Then, in order to facilitate our analysis of the Zimbabwean situation, I consider the factors which are most likely to hamper the achievement of these conditions in this country.

3.2 The Planning System

In order for community based planning to be effective:

1. The main objective of the planning process should be to increase people's control over their lives and livelihoods. It should be seen as part of a wider process of democratisation, in which communities are encouraged and facilitated to play an active role in the overall process of local governance.

2. The planning process should focus on issues which are of concern or interest to the community concerned; ideally it should be initiated by the community itself.
3. The financial and other resources necessary to address the issue must be available, so that the community is assured that something will materialise from the planning process. If there is any doubt about this or there are conditions attached to the provision of resources, this should be made clear to the community before the planning process begins, in order to avoid disappointment later.
4. The planning procedures should be flexible enough to adapt to the specific conditions of each community. For example, they should take account of local cultural practices and norms, utilise existing community structures if they exist and are appropriate rather than create new ones, and allow individuals to play roles compatible with their interests and abilities. They should also be flexible in terms of time, so that communities can go through the process at their own pace.
5. The planning procedures should be as simple as possible. Furthermore, they should be explained to the participants in clear, straightforward terms, avoiding unnecessarily complex concepts and jargon – but not in a paternalistic manner.

In Zimbabwe, it is often difficult to meet these conditions, because:

- The process is usually initiated at national or district level, in order to achieve national or district objectives (or national or district perceptions of the needs at community level), and is often tied to particular sectors or types of project. Of particular concern is the fact that, in recent years, the valid argument that people should have more control over their own lives and livelihoods has been used to justify moves by central government agencies (and sometimes also local authorities) to abandon their responsibility for providing basic services and ‘pass the buck’ to local communities.
- Zimbabwe has a long history of autocratic national and local political systems, including the kingdoms and chieftainships of precolonial times, the colonial and UDI regimes, and the de facto one-party state system of the 1980s. This makes current attempts to establish a democratic system of governance, especially at the local level, very difficult.
- Financial and other resources are limited, and their availability is seldom guaranteed and often subject to numerous conditions. In the 1980s, the main problem was that financial resources were highly centralised, hence the failure of the ‘bottom up’ planning system. During the 1990s, there was some financial decentralisation to RDCs, but mainly through donor funding which was subject to various conditions. And now there is an acute shortage of any sort of funding.
- Planning procedures are usually standardised and designed by people at national level, whose understanding of the local environment is limited, while the people facilitating the process at community level generally lack the experience and/or self-confidence necessary to adapt such procedures to local conditions. The procedures used to involve communities in the IRWSSP are a good example of this problem.

- There is a tendency, in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, to ‘mystify’ planning and to regard complex procedures as superior to simple ones. For example, ‘participatory rural appraisal’ (PRA) is a simple concept, based on a few common sense principles that anyone with any knowledge of a local community can adapt to suit his or her needs. But it has been turned into a ‘profession’, which can only be practised by people who have attended the ‘right’ course and read the ‘right’ books and manuals.
- The time available for planning is usually short and constrained by deadlines, often imposed by higher levels of authority or donor agencies.

3.3 The Community

In order for community based planning to be effective:

1. There should be a substantial amount of interest in or concern about the issue within the community. The community members should consider that the time and effort which they have to put into the planning process is justified in terms of the benefits they expect to get from it.
2. The community should be ‘politically aware’; in other words, people should be familiar with local and national political structures and aware of their rights and responsibilities in relation to these structures. They should also be organised, and should either have some sort of institutional structure which is appropriate for planning purposes or be prepared to establish one.
3. There should be sufficient social and political cohesion within the community to enable agreement to be reached during the planning process and to ensure that the plans will not be sabotaged or hijacked by some individuals or groups.
4. The key individuals involved in the planning process (eg. the established community leaders or members of a planning committee) should include one or more people who have the personal leadership qualities necessary to steer the process. Such qualities include interest in the issue or project, commitment to the development of the community, honesty, integrity, organisational ability and charisma.
5. The community should not have had previous negative experience of community plans or projects, since this is likely to discourage people from participating in what appears to them to be a similar exercise. Positive experience of such plans or projects, on the other hand, is likely to be beneficial, since the community will have a positive attitude and some idea of what is involved.

In Zimbabwe, it is often difficult to meet these conditions because:

- Communities tend not to regard the planning process as ‘theirs’, primarily because (as already indicated) it is seldom initiated by them. Furthermore, as in all societies, local people have other commitments which require their time and energy, and they may well consider these more important. This applies particularly to women, for whom attendance at planning meetings is yet another burden on their already overworked shoulders.

- ‘Political awareness’ in most rural Zimbabwean communities is still lacking, although this situation is gradually changing. Furthermore, in most cases the only formal structures appropriate for planning purposes are the ward and village development committees established in the 1980s, which have been neglected in recent years and, most recently, confused by the introduction of new structures under the Traditional Leaders Act. Furthermore, these structures tend to be dominated by a few individuals who do not adequately represent the majority of the population; a clear indication of this is that, if you ask anyone at village level about the VIDCO, he or she will assume you are referring to the VIDCO chairperson.
- Zimbabwean communities, like communities everywhere, are not homogeneous; they are composed of different interest groups (political, economic and social), each with its own needs, priorities and institutional structures, and conflicts between these groups, and the individuals who dominate them, are common.
- People with the leadership qualities described under point 4 above are rare in any community, in Zimbabwe or elsewhere. Moreover, such people are often under-utilised, since planning processes designed at national or district level generally operate through the official community leaders, and unfortunately they are seldom the people with the best leadership qualities.
- There have been many failed attempts at community based planning in Zimbabwe; the ‘bottom up’ planning system of the 1980s is the most obvious, but by no means the only, example. Consequently, most people’s past experience is negative rather than positive.

3.4 The Initiating or Supporting Organisation

In order for community based planning to be effective:

1. The organisation which is initiating and/or supporting the planning process should be democratic rather than autocratic in nature and should have an understanding of, and commitment to, the objectives and basic principles of community based planning at an organisational level.
2. The organisation should be prepared to delegate to the communities as much responsibility as is necessary to ensure the success of the exercise (including control over financial resources if appropriate), but at the same time provide whatever organisational and technical advice and support they need during the planning process.
3. The organisation should have sufficient resources to provide the necessary advice and support, including:
 - staff with appropriate attitudes and facilitatory skills;
 - access to technical expertise;
 - access to vehicles - and fuel; and
 - financial resources.
4. The organisation should be well organised and managed, so that it is able to play its role efficiently and respond quickly and effectively to community needs.

5. The organisation should be prepared to accept the decisions made by the communities, even if this means revising its own plans or priorities. If for any reason it is not possible to accept a community decision (eg. it is not practicable, or does not conform to the guidelines provided), this must be explained clearly and honestly to the community.

In Zimbabwe, it is often difficult to meet these conditions because:

- Most local authorities and central government agencies in Zimbabwe, and also many NGOs, operate in an autocratic manner. This is not surprising, given the hierarchical structure of bureaucracies everywhere and Zimbabwe's history of autocratic political systems.
- It is not easy to instil a commitment to community based planning in any organisation, especially those with inherent autocratic tendencies. It involves a fundamental change in *organisational culture*, which in turn requires a high degree of commitment from the organisation's leadership and takes time. The problems of bringing about such fundamental changes in local authorities have been demonstrated by the experience of the RDC Capacity Building Programme.
- There are very few people in any organisation, or in the country as a whole, who have the qualities necessary to be effective facilitators. Facilitators cannot simply be trained, since the qualities required relate to attitude and approach rather than knowledge, and they are the product of organisational culture and the maturity and self-confidence which comes with experience rather than training. This point has also been demonstrated by the experience of the RDC Capacity Building Programme.
- The technical expertise necessary to resolve problems at community level is often lacking, particularly at district level. The main sources of such expertise are central government staff, and their technical knowledge and experience is often limited, especially when it comes to resolving complex problems or finding new, more appropriate ways of addressing a problem. In Binga, for example, one of the biggest community development problems is lack of technical expertise on ways of providing water in areas where conventional methods have failed and on economically and socially viable methods of using this water for cultivation.
- Few local authorities or central government agencies have the financial resources necessary to support community based planning without donor assistance, and (as already indicated) donor involvement tends to limit the flexibility and sustainability of the process. For example, the various funds made available to local authorities in the late 1990s (ie. DDGs, RDF, CAP) provided a much needed source of funding for local development projects. However, they also created problems, since each had its own set of rules and administrative procedures. And now most of this funding has been suspended or withdrawn, leaving RDCs – and local communities, whose expectations had been raised – in the lurch.
- Many Zimbabwean organisations, including local authorities, central government agencies and NGOs, are unfortunately not well organised or managed. This can be attributed to a variety of interrelated factors, ranging from fundamental problems inherent in any bureaucratic organisation, through inappropriate structures and inadequate financial and human resources, to the increasingly difficult political and

economic environment which exists in the country today. Once again, the experience of the RDC Capacity Building Programme illustrates the nature and extent of the problem. Strengthening the capacity of RDCs is proving to be a long and painful process, and many of the gains which were made during the early part of the programme have been lost due to the current political and economic problems.

- Many organisations, in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, cannot cope with the uncertainty and loss of control which effective community planning entails. This is related to the problem of organisational culture discussed earlier. However, the immediate cause is often a lack of confidence and/or self-esteem among those in positions of authority.

3.5 Conclusions

The above analysis suggests that, although effective community based planning is not actually impossible, it is very difficult, especially in the conditions pertaining in Zimbabwe – which, I hasten to add, are found to a greater or lesser degree in most countries. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that Zimbabwe’s record to date has been somewhat disappointing.

Most of the problems identified above stem, directly or indirectly, from four main factors:

- lack of a democratic environment and participatory organisational culture at national, district and community levels;
- poor organisation and management within both communities and supporting organisations;
- lack of people with appropriate leadership qualities at all levels; and
- financial constraints.

These are problems which Zimbabwe, like so many other countries, has been facing ever since Independence. Unfortunately, however, at present they are all being exacerbated by the political and economic environment prevailing in the country.

Should we, therefore, abandon any attempt at community based planning? That is for the Workshop to decide. However, my own view is that we should not – for two reasons. *Firstly*, it is not politically expedient to do so. If their needs and opinions are blatantly ignored by politicians and planners, the people will, sooner or later, find other, less constructive ways of meeting these needs and expressing these opinions. *Secondly*, it is professionally unethical to do so. If we do not even try to work with people at the community level, we may forget that they exist, and thus lose sight of the objective of ‘development’ planning, which is to improve the quality of the lives of the majority of the population.