Consensus-Building Process

What does 'CONSENSUS' mean?

We asked people what they thought consensus meant. Here are some of the responses they gave:

"An agreed opinion of several ideas as a result of discussion among one or several groups of people in communities to get better conditions or an improved situation"

"A shared understanding or an agreement on how to move forward."

"A common decision taken by a group of people with diverse opinions and views on a particular problem."

> Consensus means agreement on an understanding of an idea, view or opinion.

So, CONSENSUS BUILDING is:

> a way of arriving at a common decision acceptable to almost all the people involved who have diverse views and opinions on a particular problem or subject

About the Consensus-Building Process

Many people work hard to improve the situation of disadvantaged communities. Those who work with government agencies, non-governmental organizations and development projects have expertise in many areas.

> I would like people to know about the challenges I face.

Fishers and farmers also have expertise – through their own life experiences – about their situation and what they think needs to be done to change it.

> If we hear from everyone, we can start to work out solutions which are good for everyone.

> I feel more hopeful now.

The stories that fishers and farmers tell about their lives can give us a deeper understanding of the realities of their experiences. They can help policy-makers to build an understanding of the aspirations and complex livelihoods strategies of "recipients": poor women, men and youth, including tribal and other disadvantaged and marginalized groups. They can provide a rich source of information for policy debate and thus inform policy change.

A Consensus-Building Process is a way of providing a space where these stories can be told, so that policies can be improved to better support poor people's needs.

How does the Consensus-Building Process work?

In the STREAM project called *Investigating improved policy on aquaculture service provision to poor people,* many "stakeholders" were involved in the development of schemes to support tribal communities to undertake aquaculture: tribal communities, researchers, policy-makers and others.

Different people have conflicting views. These differences can be about what the goal, outcomes and activities of a scheme should be, and who should be helped and how. STREAM used a Consensus-Building Process to ensure that everyone's voice was heard.

In this process, each member of the "group" knew who the other group members were but each member worked separately. In the first step, state and national government policy-makers were asked to give their opinions or views on policy change. This established some of the views and opposing views among the group.

A moderator collated their responses and returned them to the participants. Then they were given the comments of everyone involved in the process but they weren't told which comment came from which person. They were now able to agree or disagree and to change their own view, namelessly.

All participants in the process were then required to accept the collected response of the moderator and support it. Either they had to change their views in line with the new emerging consensus; or they could reject it and give more arguments why others should change their views.

In this case, the policy-makers were asked to select from 42 change priorities proposed by project participants. This resulted in 13 prioritized recommendations for policy change.

The Consensus-Building Process involves…

… giving time to build trusting, on-going relationships among all stakeholders, working with the same people, villages, agencies and organizations.

… enabling people to express their views in a supportive and constructive atmosphere.

… engaging people who are poor in policy-making and decisions about service delivery processes, so that policies aimed at poverty alleviation can be improved.

… providing space and time to share meaning: well presented statements, drama and video film documentaries.

… using activities which enable equitable participation.

… listening to people's voices, especially those of people who are poor.

… providing anonymity and opportunity outside of hierarchies, such as by taking people away from their usual places, so that they can work together in "neutral" spaces to share each other's perceptions.

A 7-step Consensus-Building Process: overview

Well, you know, I am an old, old woman, and I've seen a lot of things in my life. But I have **never** seen poor people change policy.

1. Grass Roots Consultation

Discussions with farmers and fishers
- Farmers' group, village cooperatives meeting
- Village, Village Development Committee, municipality level workshop
- District, state, provincial level workshop

2. Compilation of Issues and Points

Draft issues and priorities identified by community

3. Priority Ranking

Present compiled issues to policy-makers at various levels for priority ranking according to their opinion

4. Summarizing

Summarize the priority ranking of policy-makers

5. Final Presentation

Present the summarized priority rankings for final discussion of policy-makers and farmers

6. Entering into Policy Formulation

Convert the identified recommendations into policies

7. Changes in Policy

Grandma, please read the story about *Mahajal*, and you will see how we can change policy.

Mahajal - The Big Fishing Net

These are scenes from the play *Mahajal - The Big Fishing Net*, which was performed in front of policy-makers at central government level. The play tells the stories of real people and the challenges they face as they try to earn their livelihoods. These stories were first told during the Consensus-Building Process.

This play was a way of taking the concerns of poor people to policy-makers. Thirteen of the recommendations made during this process were taken on by policy-makers.

Some advantages of the Consensus-Building Process

I feel safe to say what I really think.

I don't need to worry that I will upset my boss.

I feel confident that the decision has been made in the fairest way.

I can have my say.

The moderator helps us so we all have the information, but there are fewer arguments.

Sometimes group decision-making can be difficult, because in the group there are many different people with different personalities and different statuses. For example, some members of the group can be over-dominant which may mean that some other voices aren't heard. Some people may be afraid to voice their opinion in front of people who are senior to them in some way.

The Consensus-Building Process technique keeps the benefits of group decision-making while avoiding some of its limitations, e.g., over-dominant group members, political lobbying, "not wanting to criticize the boss".

Useful Contacts

Other Better-Practice Guidelines

There are more Better-Practice Guidelines in this series. These include:

- Information Access Surveys
- Self-Help Groups

You can get more copies of this and other Better-Practice Guidelines from your STREAM Country Office, from the STREAM Regional Office or from the STREAM Website.

We would like your feedback about these Better-Practice Guidelines. You can let us know by phoning, emailing or writing to the Communications Hub Manager at your STREAM Country Office.

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