

Part 3: Making full use of the participatory method

On this page in the previous few issues we have outlined the PCM method and discussed actual examples of participatory methods in development research such as Project Cycle Management(PCM) and Rapid Rural Appraisal(RRA). This time, as a summary, we would like to consider further efficient and effective applications of these participatory approaches.

In the field of regional development, planning requires consideration of the beneficiaries' needs while understanding the development policy of the recipient country. At the same time, the plan has to be drawn up based on the mutual understanding or agreement between concerned government agencies and local communities. In many cases, beneficiaries' actual needs at the ground level are not the same as what the local government agencies understand and claim to be their needs. Therefore, it is necessary for development researchers to conduct an independent survey to confirm what the actual needs are, while of course considering information from government agencies. For this purpose, there are several methods to investigate beneficiaries' real needs, such as the conventional Problem Census, RRA, long-term residential participatory survey, PCM etc. PCM, in particular, has developed as a method for community-based, participatory development projects.

We have discussed earlier that different survey methods need to be employed for different stages of a project and different scales of targeted localities. For example, in the case of a survey on environmental awareness, different types and qualities of surveys such as scoping, screening, Initial Environmental Examination(IEE) and Environmental Impact Assessment(EIA), are conducted depending on the stage of the project flow, i.e. preliminary survey, Master Plan(M/P), and Feasibility Study(F/S). In the case of a development survey, at the level of M/P relatively large areas are targeted for the survey, and seminars and PCM workshops are useful methods of collecting opinions from a wide range of people. On the other hand, at the F/S level it is more important to employ more participatory methods such as the conventional sample survey, RRA and PRA, in order to get direct and detailed information / opinions from targeted communities. What is important is to understand both the strong and weak points of the existing survey methods, to be aware of their limits, and to be creative in applying the methods to make them most effective in different situations.

In AAINews Vol.21 we reported on a river basin conservation project in Pakistan. In this project so-called group-promoters are sent to villages in the targeted region to establish and stay in long-term contact with the local villagers. These group-promoters try to understand the various needs of the local people as well as the existing social groups and their relationships and interests, in order to make a decision as to what kind of development activities would be most effective for the local communities. Moreover, the project sees the organization of the beneficiaries as the precondition for people's participation, their empowerment and eventually for sustaining the effect of the development activities. The "Aga Khan Rural Support Project", which is well known as a successful rural development project in Pakistan focusing on social development, also employs the same approach. At each and every level of the project, community participation is ensured and any activities, which cannot get local people's approval, are dismissed. More importantly, development researchers and NGOs are expected to act as the local communities' representatives, while at the same time they are also expected to be the representatives of government agencies and explain the government's position to local communities. That is to say, development researchers and NGOs are expected to play an important role to facilitate smooth communication and establish trust and a good working relationship between government agencies and local communities.

The so-called "participatory approach" can take different forms, ranging from understanding of beneficiaries' needs and organizing and empowering local people, to co-ordination between local communities and government agencies. Therefore, we think that what is important for efficient use of these approaches is not only just to pick up and apply various existing methods to different situations, but also to be creative enough to improvise and combine different methods, in order to optimize their effect according to the circumstances.