Lessons from a participatory transboundary water governance project in West Africa

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by SAM WONG

Introduction

Climate change brings about erratic climatic variability. Scientists warn that this will lead to increasing episodes of flood and drought (IPCC, 2008). These changes will hit developing countries disproportionately since poor people rely heavily on natural resources and agriculture for survival (Paavola and Adger, 2002). Research also suggests that slight changes in the timing of the arrival, duration, and intensity of monsoon rains will affect the livelihoods of millions of people (UNDP, 2007).

Poor countries and communities need to strengthen their local capacities to adapt to climate change. Climate change affects everyone. It is everyone's intrinsic right to participate in decision-making and in taking action to adapt to climate change. Participatory learning and action (PLA) approaches can help outsiders work with, and learn from, local people, and enable communities to plan and implement adaptation activities.

The complexity of climate change, however, means that it is not enough to focus on the community level. Some adaptation policies can have spill-over effects, for example, one community's decision to build a dam to cope with drought will affect communities lower down the river. So coordination between communities is crucial to the success of some adaptation strategies.

This article draws on research I carried out Ghana and Burkina Faso to explore the impact of a transboundary water governance project on poor people's livelihoods.[1] It examines how communities can identity climate change-related problems and solutions in concert with others, including other communities. Unlike other trans-

[1] Funded by the British Academy, I visited the Upper North Region of Ghana in April and August 2008, where I worked with the Water Resources Commission and a local NGO. I interviewed 19 men and seven women, including project coordinators, regional ministers, civil servants of the Ministries of Agriculture and Forestry, community representatives, and ordinary villagers. Because of time constraints, my research focused on two communities in Ghana, Mognori, and Sapaliga.

boundary water governance arrangements, for example, in the Mekong or Nile river basins, this project demonstrates an attempt to include community members in the decision-making process. It also insisted that both genders were represented on the transboundary water committee. The article discusses the successes and limitations of the participatory approach used to involve communities in transboundary water governance and climate change adaptation activities.

Transboundary water governance project in Ghana and Burkina Faso

The IPCC report (2008) predicts that a 2°C increase in global temperature will make South Ghana wetter and North Ghana and South Burkina Faso drier. This has a far-reaching impact on the use of water and land resources in the region. Ghana and Burkina Faso share 85% of the Volta River Basin. How they manage water is crucial to the development of the region.

The World Conservation Union (WCU) and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) carried out a participatory appraisal exercise (PAE) with communities in North Ghana and South Burkina Faso in 2003. During the exercise, Ghanaians raised concerns over the 'widening and shallowing' of the rivers, blaming Burkina Faso for building dams in the upper course. People in Burkina Faso, in contrast, expressed their worries over higher occurrences of drought in summer seasons (PAGEV Annual Report, 2007). After the participatory exercise, the two donors initiated the Improving Water Governance in the Volta Basin Project (PAGEV) in 2004. This three-year project aimed to develop dialogue between Ghana and Burkina Faso over the transboundary use of water. It also intended to build resilience and strengthen the capacity of local communities to cope with climate change.

The PAE was consultative in nature. Local people were not involved in deciding how the PAGEV was designed and implemented. The project governance structures and the climate change adaptation policies were subject to negotiation by the donors, project coordinator, and the NGOs. Local people were expected to engage with the project by sending community representatives to the meetings and following the agreed policies.

The donors appointed a Ghanaian project coordinator based in the capital of Burkina Faso. They also selected two local NGOs (from north-east Ghana and the south of Burkina Faso) to manage the ground work. The NGOs selected eight communities (four from each side), using the following criteria:

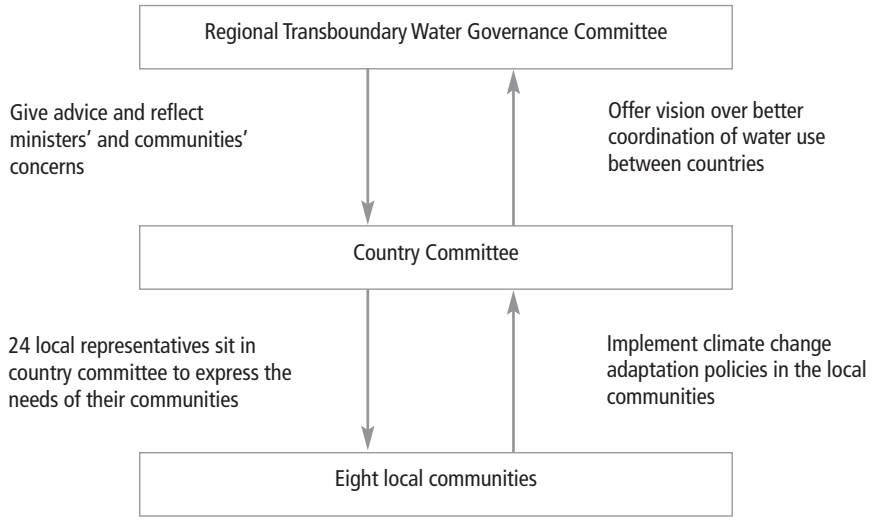
- adjacent to the White Volta River;
- close relationships with the NGOs;
- scale of the problems; and
- diversity of the region, in terms of language and faith.[2]

If the project was successful, the aim was to encourage more communities along the White Volta River to get involved. The NGOs acted as a bridge between the transboundary water committee and the local communities. They negotiated with local leaders about the activities implemented in their communities, monitored the project's progress, organised training workshops for local representatives, and called local meetings.

Diagram 1 shows the participatory governance structure of the project. A Regional Transboundary Water Committee was established. This 14-member committee, with equal representation from each country, comprised regional ministers, district chief executives, civil servants from forestry, agriculture and water ministries, NGOs, and two community representatives. It provided a mechanism for better coordination of water sharing between the two countries. It also had the

[2] Source: interview with Water Resource Commission officer, 20th August 2009.

Diagram 1: Transboundary Water Governance Structure in Ghana and Burkina Faso



Source: author's own diagram, from interviews.

ultimate power to decide what adaptation activities would be implemented on the ground.

A country committee was also set up with 30 members from Ghana and 31 from Burkina Faso. It included eight regional coordinators, six district coordinators, 15 technical service staff (in charge of food and agriculture, forestry, and water), eight NGO representatives, and 24 members chosen from the eight participating communities (eight women and 16 men). This committee advised the Regional Transboundary Water Committee, but possessed no decision-making powers.

The NGOs asked each community to nominate three people to represent their communities. The NGOs set a number of criteria: the nominees should be 'well-respected' in the community, 'educated', 'committed', 'willing to learn' and, to promote gender equality, at least one of the three local representatives must be female. These local representatives were expected to reflect their communities' concerns during meetings and to monitor how the agreed policies were implemented at the local level.

After discussions in both committees, a series of climate change adaptation activities were carried out. A 10 metre-wide buffer zone was formed and trees planted to stabilise the river bank, in order to reduce soil erosion and strengthen flood protection. Farmers were asked to stop farming within the buffer zone (Photo 1). Most land in these communities was owned by chieftains and *Tindana* (religious leaders), so farmers had no choice but to give up the lands. Free mango seedlings were offered to compensate for their loss. Organic farming was also introduced to improve soil fertility. To dissuade poor people cutting down trees within the buffer zone, fuelwood crops were cultivated at its edge. The project also tried to cater for specific community needs. For example, engineers helped the Sakom community repair a leaking reservoir while pumping facilities were provided to Sapeliga and Mognori in the dry seasons (PAGEV Annual Report, 2007).

To improve communication between communities in Ghana and Burkina Faso, workshops, training, and site visits were organised. Community representatives met

Farming along the White Volta River caused serious erosion. The buffer zone was built in order to stabilise the river banks.

Photo: Sam Wong

at least twice a year. They shared both successes and frustrations in implementing adaptation activities in their own communities. Ghanaians developed skills in mango tree pruning from representatives of Burkina Faso while community members from Burkina Faso learnt how to resolve conflicts between farmers and animal owners from their Ghanaian partners.

The NGOs stressed that local participation in the project was crucial to tackling climate change. Villagers needed to develop a sense of project ownership and a deeper understanding of the interdependence of communities in water resource management.

Project successes

Although the participation of local people in the project was limited, and determined by the project designers, the participatory governance structure set up by the project did have a number of successes. My focus here is on three aspects: promoting understanding of the interdependence of communities, embracing diversity, and gender inclusion.

Interdependence of communities

The project was effective in making villagers aware that water-related problems in their own communities were not unique. Through intercommunity meetings and sharing, community representatives and participants had a deeper understanding of the interdependence of communities. The idea of sharing a 'common fate' was mentioned in interviews with local people. One Mognori representative said he had seen the river getting wider and shallower, but that he felt powerless to change the situation. To his surprise, during the country committee meetings, representatives from Sapaliga raised similar concerns. He then realised they shared similar problems. The sense of 'togetherness' was also generated by a constant comparison between communities over the project's progress. During country meetings, the chairperson would report how many new trees had been planted in each community buffer zone. In order not be seen as 'lazy' or 'not progressive enough', one representative said she would ensure her community did not lag behind other communities. This gave a strong sense of self-motivation for rule enforcement.

The project also offered a new channel for local people to express their concerns. Instead of waiting for chieftains or *Tindana* to resolve problems or to provide services, community members could now talk to their village representatives and hoped they would reflect their needs in the country meetings. Signs of success in resolving conflict between Ghana and Burkina Faso over water use have also boosted local people's confidence in the institutional set-up. After a series of negotiations in 2007 and 2008, Burkina Faso finally agreed to make an early warning announcement to the Upper North Region of Ghana before opening the dam gates to release flood water.

Embracing diversity

Social differences of language and faith can be seen as an obstacle to public participation. According to Putnam (2000), trust and cooperative norms are built more easily within homogeneous – rather than heterogeneous – groups. This project, however, demonstrated that, with the right institutional designs and adequate support, embracing diversity can make public participation in transboundary water governance more effective. For example in Ghana, three religions were represented in the four selected communities: Muslim, Christian, and Pagan. While the 'official' languages in both committees were English and French, languages such as Bisia, Kussasi, and Kussal were spoken in their communities. To facilitate communication, interpretation was provided during meetings. This made the meetings lengthy, but village representatives welcomed this initiative since they felt they could engage in the discussion. Christian and Muslim participants were given equal opportunities to open the meetings with prayers. These socially- and religiously-inclusive policies helped build trust and good working relationships in the committees.

Gender inclusion

To ensure fair gender representation, each community was asked to select at least one woman as their representative. The male project coordinator highlighted the role of women in water management: women are responsible for fetching water and collecting firewood in most communities. Successful adaptation policies needed to recognise the contribution of women to, and involvement in, water management. In addition, the intrinsic rights of women to make decisions affecting their lives were clearly underlined in the joint proposal by WCU and SIDA (PAGEV proposal, 2003). One female representative said she felt empowered because she could raise questions during the meetings and challenge decisions that she thought were unfavourable to her community.

Limitations

Despite these successes, the project paid inadequate attention to the issues of poverty and power in developing and implementing adaptation policies.

Poverty insensitivity

The project proposal suggested that the committees and NGOs should use participatory approaches to understand the needs of each community and develop appropriate adaptation activities. However, in practice the process was largely top-down and insensitive to the needs of poorer farmers. The creation of buffer zones on the river banks, for example, hit poor farmers disproportionately because river banks are usually fertile, and the river water makes free irrigation possible. Although the project organisers provided pumping facilities to make long-distance irrigation possible, poorer farmers were often excluded from the pumping groups because the organisers thought they could not afford the fuel costs.

Free mango seedlings were also distributed to provide an alternative farming practice. Cash crops such as mangoes have a high market value, potentially boosting farmers' incomes. The farmers, however, complained in interviews that it would take three years to get the first harvest. They also worried that when everyone switched to growing mangoes, the price would drop and impact on profits. Although they had expressed their concerns to their community representatives, they had been ignored. As a result, some farmers stopped participating in local meetings, believing them to be of no benefit.

Reinforcing power inequalities

The NGOs played a dominant role in organising the nomination of community representatives. Whilst they did ensure gender representation in choosing local

representatives, the NGOs failed to ensure the inclusion of poorer farmers. This was because the NGOs worked closely with local chieftains and *Tindana*. They argued that the support and approval of these traditional authority figures was important to the success of the project. Also, since most land was owned by the chiefs or *Tindana*, their support would ensure a smooth confiscation of land from farmers to create the buffer zone.

However, Laube's research in Ghana (2007) argues that the chieftains and *Tindana* are blamed for causing poverty. He suggests, for example, that the chieftains prefer to lease land to less-poor farmers because they own cattle and can provide a free ploughing service. To safeguard their own interests in the transboundary water project, the chiefs and *Tindana* influenced the process of selecting community representatives, ensuring that members of their family were chosen. In this way, the project has helped consolidate their authority, and the voices and interests of poorer farmers have been marginalised in the decision-making process (Wong, 2008).

This case study offers a good example of the 'paradoxes of participation' identified by Cleaver (2004). The project attempted to set up new institutions for participation, but these new participatory spaces were easily captured by local elites.

Conclusions and policy implications

Climate change affects people both locally and regionally, and participatory approaches need to take a regional as well as local perspective, and provide for better coordination between communities. Expanding the focus beyond an individual community can create a common vision between communities and help local people be more aware of the cross-border impact of climate change.

The project described had some success in setting up transboundary water governance structures and embracing social heterogeneity with regard to gender, religion, and language. However, the participatory space was so restricted that community members were largely ignored in developing strategies for climate change adaptation and water management. Although local people indicated their awareness of the changing climate and river flow, little effort was made to incorporate local knowledge into adaptation strategies. Local people were expected to adopt the policies they were told to.

Local people also had no say in the institutional arrangements and the composition of the regional transboundary water and country committees. Heavy reliance on the support of local chieftains, for the sake of efficiency, risked reinforcing power and gender inequalities in communities, and marginalising poorer parts of the community in decision-making processes.

A preoccupation with setting up the 'right' kinds of institutional arrangements led to inadequate attention being paid to analysing power and poverty when devising and implementing adaptation policies in communities. The confiscation of riverside farmlands and displacement of poor farmers was caused by a lack of genuine farmer participation from the outset. This raises concerns about the implicit preference for long-term ecological sustainability over the short-term livelihood interests of poor people. No matter how well-intended the adaptation policies may be, a focus on long-term ecological sustainability can pose a real threat to the livelihoods of poor people, and worsen poverty. Finding alternative sustainable livelihoods in order to meet poor people's current needs and to protect long-term ecological sustainability is a matter of urgency.

If adaptation polices build on – and help reinforce – existing unequal social structures, poor people will become the victims, rather than the beneficiaries, of adaptation efforts. We need to raise awareness of the potential dangers of working through existing social and political hier-

archies. Learning from the poor and providing them with sufficient support should be considered the first steps to achieving social justice.

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