Community empowerment and participatory village planning – PRA tools and processes

The Rural Development Strategic Framework developed by the Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries and Rural Development along with its partners clearly appreciated and encouraged the participation of all people from various social and economic groups accepting the idea that everybody has capability no matter whether one is rich or poor, educated or uneducated. If they are in group they gain some cumulative strength that is physical in nature. But, if they are conditioned to have access to the knowledge and skills and work together, then there will be tremendous achievement.

Skill, knowledge, attitude and organizational management are fundamental to capacity building. Village Development Planning process works on this idea in a strategic manner. The most important factor is attitude and it is the very first step to make the community people aware of their own situation and then reflect it and gradually change the mind-set that they themselves are the key persons to make their lives better. They are mainly responsible for and also capable of making a change. In short, nurturing of ownership-sense is to be developed first through application of participatory reflection and action (PRA) tools and processes.

In the Village Development Planning process, people are sensitized through the use of PRA tools realizing that they have the capacity and knowledge with regard to their village and their families. In the very first day of PRA session, we opened the session with a very simple but effective tool. That is **village history** and this is simply recollection of their memories of their village, their achievements, successes, stresses, disasters, coping mechanism, social capital and so on. The tool motivates them that "we know" more than other people do with regard to our village and provides the sense and confidence of "we are able". Simultaneously, the tool makes the outsiders (facilitators) to learn from the villagers about the village and villagers with whom they have to work with.

After that, **village map**, comprising the social and natural resources conditions of the village, follows. It reveals the assets or wealth of the village. As for villagers, they know the conditions very well but do not see it as opportunities on which they can utilize effectively and efficiently. The tool provides analytical lens through which villagers could see potentials with regard to their assets and opportunities.

Seasonal calendar tool provides general information about the village as a whole and the households throughout the year. People know it well but not noted as an important thing. Although it is simple it tells us a lot of information such as busiest period, lean period, disaster period, festivals, water shortage, animal disease outbreak, illness, better income period etc. It indicates critical periods and gaps where possible interventions are needed. By noting such information villagers can arrange their activities with regard to the village development planning and it also reminds the outsiders to be mindful in working with villagers in certain periods.

Institutional relationship tool (using a variant of venn diagram) gives information regarding the people, organizations and groups working in relation to the village. The tool highlights the local governance situation and clearly identifies the areas of improvement. It also suggests whether there are requirements for strengthening of existing groups and associations and formation of new entities that suit the current efforts for village development.

Wealth ranking is particularly important to have information on the determinants of wealth or economic inequality among the village households and in the identification of beneficiaries for a certain project. It is a bit sensitive one as it depends on the individual people's emotional and personal aspects. This tool totally depends on the local knowledge. The villages have their own system of categorizing the wealth ranks but do not yet have systematic criteria and documentation. The tool helps the villagers in setting the criteria in a systematic manner and the achievement comes out from their wisdom. This tool provides decision-making skills, as well.

Focus group discussion is the most important part of the participatory planning process. All the households are invited to attend **mass meeting** where Government or Township staff members and their consultants explain on the village development planning process and method. There are four groups formed such as 1) occupational group 2) village elder group 3) women group and 4) youth group. Then economic, social, environmental and cultural matters are discussed group-wise and come up with the group's view. This tool (or working method) creates an environment where all the participants are encouraged to participate so that all the voices are taken into consideration. This also provides opportunity to the villagers to think, reflect and articulate their thoughts and ideas. This process also empowers that village community groups especially the women.

The data and information generated from PRA along with the required secondary data collected from various sources as suggested in the Guidelines on Village Development Planning in Myanmar are further structured in the form of "planning tables" amenable to development analysis. Again the problems are critically reviewed and root causes are identified along with the potentials that favour the development interventions and barriers that hinder the achievements arising in the use of potentials. The knowledge piece will be translated into strategy which will appear in the "development chain: from problem analysis to possible solutions" with the projects being the nuts and bolts of development strategy implementation.

The proposed projects in the development chain are those that are prioritized by the villagers using a **preference-ranking** tool. The operational process is to elect the representatives of various groups and they will score the projects. The results are then presented to the mass meeting and get approval from the village community.