

Database provides link between **rural groups and policy makers**

A district-based information system in Ghana is opening up the policy process to debate, dialogue and consensus building. Previously, rural communities had often been indifferent to policies, meaning they were often not put into practice. The new system is a simple, participatory geographic information system (GIS) for data on natural resources and livelihood activities that builds on the knowledge of the community. Local networks of producers are encouraged to develop and state their demands for policy change and for information, and to organise platforms to put these demands to policy makers. The system is in use at the North Kintampo district assembly. The district agricultural department is also interested in using the method to develop its own district-wide surveys.

The database

How do ordinary people get a say in managing their environment and the natural resources on which they often depend to make a living? More often than not, these communities know a great deal about the natural resources that surround them but this knowledge has never been collected and considered when it comes to making policies.

Working with a community in Ghana, researchers developed a geographic information system to hold information on the natural resources of a district. Members of the community, through for example local groups, committees or social networks, decided what issues were important and what information they needed to collect that would help them decide what needed to be done.



District administrative staff and community volunteers carried out the survey and entered data into the database. They learned how to manage the database and analyse data themselves so that the main role for the district administration was in coordinating the datasets of the sub-districts and maintaining a central database.

The facts, figures and information in the database provide a solid foundation for discussing, debating and building agreement as to how natural resources in the district could be managed. It's a new way of doing things but it's not costly.

The links to the policy process

The next step was to organise ways of putting demands to policy makers, in other words, to find ways to take part in policy discussions. In this district, groups such as charcoal burners and yam farmers faced problems but didn't know how to get them addressed. For example, charcoal burners were being blamed for deforestation and yam farmers felt that there were no services to support yam farming or help with advice. So, as well as setting up the information system, researchers set up platforms for these groups to get together to articulate their needs and frame their demands for changes in policies.

To do this, they arranged workshops for farmers and charcoal burners from different areas within the district to come together to discuss their problems and perspectives, and to develop a programme of demands to place before policymakers.

Two different approaches were used. In the first, the user groups were encouraged to research their needs and develop their own agenda for the policy changes they thought were important. In the second, the help of intermediary organisations, such as NGOs, agricultural extension services and research institutes was enlisted to find ways for end users to organise and solve their problems. But, for these groups, just as important as generating solid evidence and deciding what policy changes to ask for was knowing how or where to approach the people or institutions that are responsible for policies - how to get an entrée into the policy process. So, the yam farmers and charcoal makers met with local government staff at workshops where they talked about policy and policy needs. The workshops helped them explore ways to create pressures for policy dialogue and change, ways to ask government services for information and support, and ways to inform development services of their needs.



Photo: NR International

The simplicity of the methodology and its low transaction and financial costs has attracted the interest of the district agricultural department which plans to develop it further.

A turnaround

Rural communities and local government offices are frequently indifferent to rules and regulations governing natural resource management. This is not surprising given that policy is often imposed from on high - driven by needs perceived by central state organisations. This means that natural resource management policies are rarely implemented effectively.

Involving communities in collecting data about actual conditions on the ground as they see them and in showing them how they can be part of the policy process begins to turn things around. Local government too, once they see that they can play a key role in coordinating, facilitating and managing information and encouraging the exchange of information feel valued. All this boosts dialogue and civil society participation in policymaking. When this happens, natural resource policies are more likely to meet the needs of local communities and user groups. Policies are also more likely to be creative as they draw on a wider range of inputs from diverse sources.

Where else could this process be used?

This process doesn't focus on any particular commodity. It could be applied to a wide range of other commodities and sectors. Although the information system in Ghana was developed for natural resources (including agriculture), it could just as easily be applied to health, education, and social welfare and infrastructure. The emphasis is on setting up a system and processes that draw on information from a wide range of sources and link the various players to create workable policies.

For more information

For further technical information go to the RIU online database at www.researchintouse.com/database and type in **NRSP19** or email riuinto@nrnt.co.uk

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