

PME under the spotlight: a challenging approach in St. Vincent

by Katja Jobes

A fully participative approach to improving sanitation looked doomed when the community was 'angry, sceptical, and apathetic'. Could the situation be turned round?

THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT Division (CDD) in St. Vincent has recently moved away from one-off projects towards a multi-dimensional approach, which focuses on pockets of deprivation, through three-year participatory programmes.

Participatory monitoring and evaluation (PME) has recently been incorporated to complement other participatory approaches. One of the main reasons was to obtain qualitative information on project impact. But PME is much more than a tool, it is an ethos that encompasses notions of behaviour and attitude change on the part of the 'intervenor/developers', and enables community members to define and assess development according to their own criteria. PME seeks to build the capacity of, and empower, local communities.

CDD developed and implemented a simple five-step approach to PME:

- Set long-term goals based on the community's own indicators of success;
- create short action-checklists describing what needs to be done to reach the long-term goals;
- conduct participatory monitoring of progress to obtain community feedback on what has been done and what still needs to be done (using the checklists);
- conduct participatory evaluation to obtain feedback on the changes people have noticed; and
- produce a people-friendly record of the community's self-assessments, for example, a photo album, a video, role-play, songs, poems, or stories.

This approach grew into a very complex participatory process characterized by bursts of enthusiasm, followed by bouts of inactivity; by popular activities with broad participation, where people clearly enjoyed rising to the occasion, to the more prosaic activities that inspired little interest; by co-operation — but also conflict and disappointment. This process was a stop/start, backward/forward process; a process of projects within projects; a

programme that became, through necessity, flexible and responsive to the community.

Rose Place

Rose Place is on the outskirts of the island capital, Kingstown. Traditionally a fishing village, Rose Place men also found employment at the Kingstown wharf but, with the decline in the banana and fishing industries, unemployment is now high, literacy rates are low, and there is an alarmingly high school drop-out rate.

About 300 people live in Rose Place. Some of the families have lived there for generations; others are fairly recent migrants, attracted by squatting opportunities, drugs, and the rum shops in the 'no-go' ghetto area known as 'the Gulf,' which is in the heart of the community. There are no proper public water and sanitation facilities, only one stand-pipe, and four run-down public baths. With no toilets or proper garbage disposal, conditions have been unsanitary.

At an initial meeting organized by CDD to address this situation, local people were angry, sceptical, and apathetic. They wanted to see quick, visible results — especially in terms of new toilets and dealing with garbage disposal — but they were reluctant to volunteer for the self-help initiative. There was a feeling that the facilities would be quickly vandalized by the ghetto youths who were not present at



Community involvement in problem-identification in Rose Place.

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the meeting; people were more interested to hear what CDD was going to do to prevent vandalism, rather than what the community could do itself. Whilst the women had previously helped to identify particular problems, they tended to remain silent in the meeting discussions about maintenance and building which were dominated by a few vocal, better-educated and better-off men. The desire of the fieldworkers to take the time to create local ownership and to build community capacity to maintain facilities through participation, conflicted directly with the priorities of community members who wanted to see quick results.

Getting started

The principal task of the CDD fieldworkers was to break down barriers and continue dialogue with a broader section of the community. This involved spending time in the community, in the rum shops, on the streets, and in the ghetto, just chatting

to people informally, eliciting their opinions and grievances; observing, listening, gaining trust, and encouraging people to participate.

After an initial burst of enthusiasm from the community in taking part in latrine-building, numbers soon dwindled until only four men were doing all the construction work. The Christmas holidays came, and then there was a problem with the release of funds so that the physical work stopped altogether.

A break came when one of the ghetto-women suggested a community clean-up campaign to celebrate International Women's Day. Using tools

borrowed from the Public-Health Department, the ghetto became fully involved, including the women and children who, previously, had been on the periphery of the project; this initiative set in motion a whole series of events.

Defining goals

There was a general call for another meeting, this time with the public health officer for the area. Held outside on some steps, it attracted a broader cross-section of the community. Informal discussions about the community had already been held on people's long-term goals and success criteria. At

this meeting, it seemed appropriate to formalize these specifically for the toilet facilities. The agreed goals were typed up, laminated, and stuck up in the facilities themselves:

- 'Clean teams and an overseer to make sure the toilets are cleaned on a daily basis.'
- 'Meetings are held regularly to talk about maintenance of the facilities and to see how things are going.'
- 'Community members protect the facilities — people get "lick" [told off/hit] or are "locked up" for misuse and abuse.'
- 'Children practise good personal hygiene.'
- 'People take more interest in their surroundings and the facilities.'
- 'There is a sense of pride in the community.'
- 'Plants are planted in the surroundings in old tyres painted white to make Rose Place look nice.'

These goals were then used indirectly to guide further activities. For each one, a simple, short checklist was created. Several more clean-ups were held and oil-drums were made into garbage-bins. An event was held to raise funds to pay someone a token amount for overseeing the daily cleaning of the toilets and to buy the relevant cleaning materials. Local-radio reporters invited into the area to talk to people about their fundraising preparations, while kids and parents sold raffle tickets, asked for donations from local shops, and sold their own cakes, fish, breadfruit, and ginger beer.

Some of the most unlikely people started — spontaneously — to keep their surroundings clean. Rose Place had had various arguments with the sanitation workers for not coming to their area. The matter was resolved by community members — in particular, ghetto-dwellers — helping the sanitation workers.

When each activity had finished, the fieldworkers and the community had informal discussions, often on a one-to-one basis, about what had been done and what still needed to be done. After several months, the author spent a week asking people what changes they had perceived in the area, referring back to the original success criteria — some of the most interesting comments are listed in the box opposite (on page 25).

The challenges of participation

In Rose Place there seem to be two distinct forms of participation events: performance participation and 'prosaic' participation. Performance participation is a high-profile, popular type of



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Preparing for the fundraising event organized by the committee to help maintain the new toilet facilities.



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Constructing Rose Place's toilets — with full community involvement!

event that inspires interest and allows short-term commitment, making it easy for community members to want to participate. The event momentarily becomes the main focus, for example the fundraiser. This contrasts with prosaic participation, which is the mundane, everyday reality of constantly being involved. This is the messy bit, organizing and mobilizing behind the scenes; it inspires little interest, requires commitment and taking responsibility, and tends to be very low on people's list of priorities. Meetings are cancelled, people talk instead of doing, other things take precedence — things move very slowly, according to the community's pace and mood.

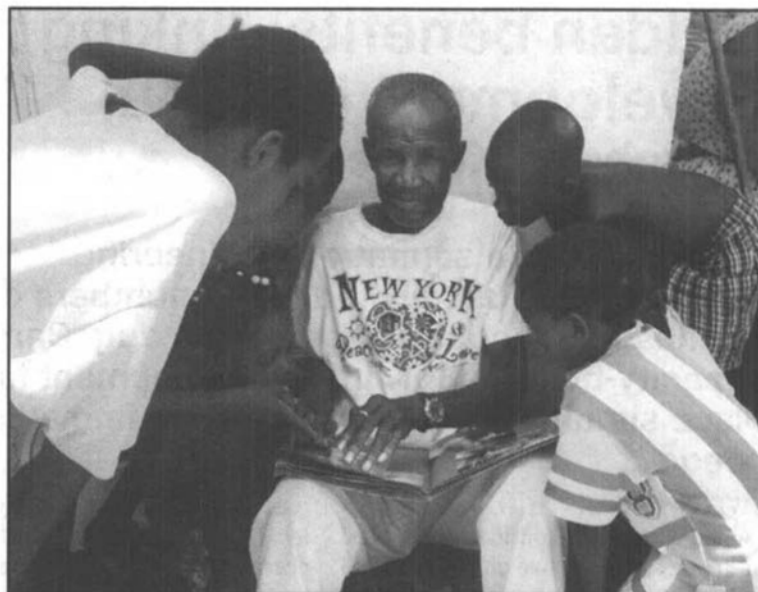
This has implications for both fieldworkers and the community. It becomes clear how interventionist any project is, even a participatory one. However much a community says it wants a project, events in people's lives often take precedence, slowing down the whole project process. Also, most participatory activities over the long term will be 'prosaic'. It often means being present at meetings even when nothing is happening directly with the project so that opportunities can be seized as they arise. It means constantly having to maintain momentum and participation when it would often be easier to do the job oneself or make the decisions for others. This requires a

huge amount of time, energy, motivation, and flexibility on the part of the fieldworkers, who may not always be prepared to give such commitment, particularly where their status is low, and wages are poor.

What is more, participation raises expectations, and a community such as Rose Place is in a vulnerable position. There is a danger that, without the necessary continued support from field

staff and donors, the momentum could die. Continued work is essential if the benefits of participation are to be sustainable.

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Old and young look at the community photo album covering the history of the Rose Place project.

Pride of place

Many of the Rose Place people's comments illustrated people's increased sense of pride in their community, now that greater care was being taken of the surroundings. The issue of maintenance was also high on the agenda. One 16-year old male said:

'Ah change plenty man! Yeah the project make a difference to me. Ah used to play cards and gamble down in the Gulf but then instead, ah helped with the clean-up and then ah decided to stop all this stupidness and start cleaning up. Outside ah told plenty people when they try talking to my face [putting me down] because we're from Bottom Town [Rose Place] ah put them in their place. Ah tell them ah help contribute to my community and ah clean for my community while they don't, so don't come to me with all this. They can't react they gotta dig it! This make me feel confident in my community and it affected me in other ways too. It made my time useful. Now ah don't gamble. It's how you choose to live you live.'

Someone else commented:

'I've seen a number of positive changes because of the project; for example, the interest of the younger ones. When it started they didn't think it was any-

thing to do with them. And now they are really getting involved. But it is the women who are the most enthusiastic; they have really dominated the meetings. And in the Gulf, based on the vibes I'm getting, this thing is too big to stifle with their negativity. It is out of their hands and there is nothing they can do about it. It's taken off. And this is because of the compilation of people from different backgrounds. Let's take Krab who has just come out of prison, and then there is Suekie the nurse and Ann Marie who is a family person, and Gilbert who is one of our older community members — and this trickles down to the youth. The positive forces are so strong, all these negative people are leaning towards it but they don't know how to join in — but they are starting to get sucked in anyway!'

Another local pointed out one of the dilemmas of community-based processes, that expectations were raised faster than the project's ability to meet them:

'You have to make them see to believe. With them ladies, you got them to do what in 50 years they haven't done. You motivated those ladies. But you will not see that security and protection of the facilities until they see them in place. You see before it wasn't a problem to them not having toilets, now it comes like a problem to them. I want those toilets before Carnival.'