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**Participatory approaches to natural resource management and sustainable development:
some implications for research and policy**

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Introduction

This paper examines issues, opportunities and options for new approaches to development planning and environmental management in the insular Caribbean. It is based on the premise that planning is an essential requirement for development; it is an indispensable instrument to guide socio-economic development and govern the use of land and other resources.

Regrettably, planning has not delivered on its promises. As a result, the discipline of planning has lost some of its credibility, and the instruments of planning are not used to the full benefit of society. This paper contends that the region's experience demonstrates the need for an emphasis on policies, methods and arrangements which support participation and collaboration in planning and management to meet current conditions and requirements.

The need for participation

In the context of environmental planning and natural resource management, participation can be defined as a process that facilitates dialogue among all actors, mobilises and validates popular knowledge and skills, supports communities and their institutions to manage and control resources, and seeks to achieve sustainability, economic equity and social justice while maintaining cultural integrity. Participation is relevant to all aspects of development and environmental management. The challenge for policy-makers, planners and managers is to define the form of participation which is the most appropriate to a given situation.

The rationale for participation in development planning can be found in the following arguments:

- ▶ development planning must focus on priority issues. In the insular Caribbean, the most important among these issues remains poverty, and the fight against poverty requires the mobilisation of all talents and ideas, not only those of state agencies, but also, and perhaps more importantly, those that exist within local communities and civil society as

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a whole. Indeed, communities and users of natural resources are an important source of information about the natural systems they depend on directly to sustain their livelihoods, and possess knowledge and skills that can contribute to improved management;

- ▶ there remain many gaps and overlaps in the allocation of institutional responsibilities for environmental planning and management within and among the agencies of the state. Mechanisms for integration and horizontal cooperation are often lacking or deficient;
- ▶ legislative frameworks remain generally outdated and inadequate. Except in a few cases, they do not stipulate a requirement for consultation and public participation, they fail to provide tools for devolution of authority when desirable, and they emphasise coercion and control rather than self-regulation;
- ▶ too often, important planning decisions are made outside of the established decision-making processes and institutions. In the insular Caribbean, this is particularly true in the field of tourism development, because of the economic and political power of investors, and because of the desire of the political directorates to avoid real or perceived obstacles to investment and job creation;
- ▶ traditions of participation are weak, and civil society remains poorly structured, with many sectors still lacking mechanisms for participation and representation;
- ▶ there is an insufficient political will to transform this reality, possibly because many powerful forces in society do benefit from the *status quo*.

The insular Caribbean sub-region has however made much progress, over the past decade, and notably since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), in addressing these issues and establishing national policy and institutional frameworks which are based on the principles of integration, participation and effectiveness. The region's response to these concerns, which is somewhat fragmented but remains generally positive, has taken the following directions:

- ▶ establishment of national policy-making and coordinating bodies: the most notable experience in this regard is the establishment of national Sustainable Development Councils which, in the English-speaking Caribbean, has been supported, through UNDP's Capacity 21 Programme, by the Caribbean Centre for Development Administration (CARICAD);
- ▶ strengthening of existing, or establishment of new, environmental management agencies, as has been the case in Trinidad and Tobago;
- ▶ participatory review and formulation of policies and programmes: an important development in the field of participatory planning in the sub-region over the past few years has been the use of participatory approaches to review and formulate national policies, as has been the case in the forestry sector in Grenada;

- ▶ participatory development of land use and development plans: participatory approaches are employed in many land use and physical planning initiatives;
- ▶ involvement of non-governmental organisations: NGOs are playing an increasingly important role in facilitating and contributing to participatory planning and management processes.

The main lessons learned from the experience of the past few years in this domain can be summarised as follows:

- ▶ institutional arrangements and processes of institutional reform must be tailored to the specific needs and conditions of each country;
- ▶ the process of policy formulation is as important as the content of policy. Experience has indeed shown that “good” policies have often failed because the process leading to their formulation had itself omitted to involve all stakeholders and to build the necessary conditions for implementation;
- ▶ participatory processes take time, and do not provide simple solutions to specific issues. They often raise more issues than were considered at their initiation, and they cannot succeed if they fail to encompass all legitimate issues and concerns;
- ▶ participatory approaches require radical changes within the culture of organisations, notably those of the state. From a culture of enforcement and control, state agencies need to move to the new attitudes which are required of facilitators and supporters;
- ▶ they also require changes in the way organisations are structured, to facilitate decentralisation, to allow for more rapid and effective decision-making and implementation, to guarantee transparency, and to enable formal and informal linkages with other organisations;
- ▶ countries of the sub-region have not yet been able to ensure that environmental decision-making is fully integrated within their main policy-making institutions and procedures. Environmental issues are not yet part of the main concerns of economic and social development, and development policies are often formulated without due consideration for environmental matters.

New institutional arrangements: towards partnerships

New approaches to planning and management require a new institutional and legal basis, founded on the concept of partnership. In order to achieve quality, fairness, sustainability, efficiency and equity, institutional arrangements must provide for the sharing of authority, rights and responsibilities among a wide range of public and private sector actors.

In the context of environmental and natural resource management, an institutional arrangement can best be defined as the manner in which rights and responsibilities over the use and management of the resource are distributed, regulated and applied.

The manner in which rights are distributed and managed often creates conflicts. Issues of rights are at the heart of environmental concerns in the Caribbean region, because a large number of people do not enjoy a recognised right of use (as in the case of squatters and landless farmers), because communal rights are frequently ignored or denied, and because modern management regimes often erode established rights of individuals and communities.

The goal of participatory planning is to manage these conflicts and to establish institutional arrangements where rights and responsibilities are distributed in the most effective and equitable manner, but the current discourse on participation often presents the naive proposition that authority simply has to be devolved and transferred to communities in order for management to be effective.

The experience of the Caribbean has shown that the challenge is not simply to devolve authority. It is to find the most appropriate management regime, given the specific conditions of each case, and to share and distribute authority accordingly. It is also to transform the conditions through advocacy, policy reform and capacity-building.

In some cases, it may be preferable for most of the management authority to remain in the hands of central government agencies. In other cases, it may be more opportune to decentralise important planning and management functions and to vest them in the hands of local communities and non-governmental agencies. In all cases, however, it remains the responsibility of the state to animate and lead processes of policy making, and to arbitrate when necessary.

Defining new roles in participatory planning and management

Contradicting the dominant discourse which implies that the state has a diminishing role to play in development, the participatory approach to planning and management proposes that key partners (the state, civil society and market forces) all have important functions.

With specific reference to the state, recent experience indeed suggests that it should not have a reduced role, but a different one. In these new institutional arrangements, the role of the state is that of a facilitator of policy formulation, a catalyst for implementation, and a mediator and arbitrator in cases of conflict.

Environmental and natural resource management agencies are therefore faced with the challenge of transferring some of their authority, without weakening regulations at the expense of the environment and the people who depend on it. At the same time, these agencies have to strengthen their capacity for facilitating policy processes, linking environmental management with all sectors of society and the economy, and providing the information basis for sound decision-making.

Meanwhile, the role of organisations in civil society is becoming broader, as they are asked to assume more management responsibilities. Functions of community-based and other non-governmental organisations are many, and include: research and monitoring, as they provide valuable information and are in the best position to monitor the effectiveness of management and the emergence of new issues; enforcement, as community actors can help guarantee that people comply with existing measures and regulations; implementation, as many resource use and development activities rest in the hands of local actors; and advocacy, as non-governmental organisations are in the best position to demand change and to ensure that policies are compatible with community interests.

While there is need to increase the role of civil society organisations, it must be recognised that they do not always represent adequately the interests of all stakeholders, particularly the poor and the powerless. The process of creating participatory institutions and multi-stakeholder partnerships is therefore faced with two converging challenges. The first is to ensure that civil society organisations reflect the interests of their constituents and serve them effectively. The second challenge is to design and create institutions which leave space and opportunity for the participation of people who do not belong to formal organisations, and who are not always visible in collective community action.

Promoting participatory planning: instruments and agents of change

The definition, dissemination and adoption of new approaches to planning and management require a concerted strategy which should rest on five main elements. These suggest an agenda for action at the regional and national levels.

Testing, demonstrating and documenting the value of participatory and integrated planning

The region's progress towards more appropriate forms of planning and management will depend, to a large extent, on its ability to develop concrete cases where policies, approaches and methods can be tested and documented, and from which experience and lessons can be extracted and disseminated. A regional strategy should therefore incorporate the following activities:

- ▶ the strengthening of innovative and experimental experiences in participatory planning and management. Such experiments already exist in a number of countries, and new projects should be initiated in order to offer a complete range of issues and conditions;
- ▶ the development of case studies. These experiments must be properly documented, in order to extract lessons and guidelines;
- ▶ comparative analysis of cases, and formulation of tools and methods.

Against this background, there is also a need to develop and implement a research agenda, focusing on a range of issues, including:

- ▶ identification of the environmental, social and cultural conditions that favour and constrain participation;
- ▶ definition of the approaches and steps required in the participatory planning process;

- ▶ elaboration of planning and management approaches that can link participation, economic benefits and environmental sustainability;
- ▶ study of the desirable roles of the various partners in participatory planning and management.

In order for these changes to occur, there is also a need for advocacy work aimed at demonstrating the value of these approaches to planning and management. This requires, in particular, that organisations involved in testing innovative approaches be allowed to disseminate the results of their work, while retaining an independent and flexible research and advocacy agenda.

Changing the policy process

The second element of the strategy involves a determined effort to transform the process of environmental policy formulation in the region. In this regard, three directions appear essential:

- ▶ the focus of environmental policy making in the region should be shifted from international and bi-lateral agencies to national and regional institutions and processes. The region needs to take full ownership of the contents and processes of environmental policy making;
- ▶ there should be a concerted regional programme aimed at reviewing environmental policy and ensuring its proper linkages with, and integration, into the main processes of national and regional development;
- ▶ in their efforts to improve the content of environmental policy, governments and regional organisations should employ participatory methods, involving all stakeholders in the process and allowing for on-going monitoring and review.

Identifying the policy implications and reviewing policy

The regional review of environmental policy should focus on a number of priority issues. With respect to participatory and integrated planning and management, the following questions deserve particular attention:

- ▶ a review of the role and impact of multi-lateral and bi-lateral agencies in environmental policy making in the region;
- ▶ the identification and removal of legislative constraints to participation and decentralisation;
- ▶ the design of legal instruments to support organisational and institutional development in civil society.

Building capacity

The fourth element of the strategy must deal with targeted actions aimed at building the region's capacity for participatory planning and management. In order to facilitate processes of cultural

and structural transformation, organisations interested in institutional change should initiate processes of visioning, strategic planning and reform. Mechanisms should be identified in order to provide financial and technical support to such processes.

Priority training themes include:

- ▶ facilitation skills for personnel of governmental and non-governmental agencies;
- ▶ skills in stakeholder identification and conflict analysis for these facilitators;
- ▶ research and monitoring techniques for community-based and non-governmental organisations;
- ▶ advocacy skills for community-based and non-governmental organisations.

With respect to financing, priorities include:

- ▶ the strengthening of linkages between the private sector and planning agencies;
- ▶ the establishment and growth of independent and flexible financing mechanisms such as small grants funds and environmental foundations;
- ▶ the inclusion of these financing concerns in the programmes and policies of multi-lateral and bi-lateral agencies.

Strengthening regional cooperation

The strategy outlined above would be greatly enhanced by improved mechanisms and programmes of regional cooperation, notably

- ▶ the involvement of regional academic and research institutions in activities aimed at identifying and promoting the most suitable approaches to planning and management;
- ▶ the strengthening of functional cooperation activities within regional organisations, notably the Caribbean Community and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States;
- ▶ the design and conduct of research and training activities which cut across linguistic and political barriers;
- ▶ the design and implementation of regional programmes and projects in support of participatory planning and management.

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