

## **Participatory approaches for environmental initiatives – community consultation in Samoa**

*Natalie Mitchell\**

Can participatory approaches be fully realised in Samoa given the formal village fono system?

Participatory approaches (PAs), or consultation where community input is a major part of the project, share a common emphasis on enabling local people to play an active role in their own development. Local people can and should appraise and analyse their own situation and look for solutions to problems.

Samoa has a strong tradition of respecting local knowledge and allowing village fonos (councils) to undertake the role of local governance. When projects arise that affect more than one village, outsiders are often brought in to facilitate discussion and consultation amongst villages and districts and to bring their expertise and experience to the project.

There have been several recent projects in Samoa that have undertaken community consultation and that have required community involvement and agreement for success. This includes the Coastal Infrastructure Management Plan project, fisheries reserves projects, various Samoan Water Authority projects and the establishment and development of the Planning and Urban Management Agency and some of these will be discussed here. Different approaches to consultation have been undertaken in these projects with different goals to reach. The findings show mixed results as to the extent and value of consultation tools used.

What options are there to widen the ‘net’ of consultation and community participation in projects that will directly affect village life and Samoa’s environment? Can community consultation in Samoa be more gender-sensitive? Must consultation be undertaken in a group format? How can the marginalised be assured of a voice?

This paper will examine the participatory approach theory and address these questions as they relate to Samoa.

Participatory Approaches (PAs) for environmental initiatives seem logical, sensible, humane even. It does make sense to listen to local knowledge. To allow decisions and plans to be made and undertaken by local communities who know their own environment intimately. Emphasis with PAs is placed on empowering local people to assume an active role in analysing problems and drawing up plans, with outsiders mainly acting as “facilitators”. Initially, participatory approaches were created as malleable and changeable approaches to project design and implementation in contrast to top-down imposed ways. It encouraged innovation and experimentation to mould the approach to suit the local conditions (Chambers

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\*N. Mitchell is a Planning Officer with the Planning & Urban Management Agency, Ministry of Natural Resources & Environment. "As a recent arrival in Samoa, I have limited direct experience but I bring to this paper experience from my studies in Australia and information gained through discussions with Samoan and expatriate counterparts and research articles. I hope this paper will encourage positive, ongoing discussion and reflection amongst those involved with community consultation and participatory approaches in Samoa"

1992). Empowerment, or the shift in power from the powerful to the powerless and helping people to recognise their own strengths and skills, requires a sense of humility and a humanistic approach. Many conventional (and perhaps top-down) development approaches view outsiders as experts and the beneficiaries as passive recipients of outsider's expertise. Participatory work aims to alter these power dynamics and challenges notions of outsider expertise.

Samoa has a strong tradition of respecting local knowledge and allowing village fonos (councils) to undertake the role of a decentralised 'local' government. It has been recognised that local people, or at least the matai (village chiefs), are normally in the best position to conduct their own appraisal and analysis of their circumstances and problems. Customary tenure plays a significant role in the preservation of traditional lands and local power over those lands. Samoan culture is based on the communal lands and title system where families can live on communal lands owned and managed by their forefathers (ADB 2001a). Customary land remains the main source of wealth for Samoa representing family, identity, history and security and not surprisingly attachments to and within the village are strong. The Village Fono Act 1990 recognises traditional law for maintaining law and order within the village and allows for the enforcement of the preservation of the village environment including land use and planning of development (Jones et al 2002). This fact bodes well for community consultation using a community development approach.

Participatory approaches can be undertaken in many ways and are encouraged as part of the principles of Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. In particular Principle 10 outlines the importance of participation of all concerned citizens in the handling of environmental issues and Principles 20, 21 and 22 espouse the vital role that women, youth and indigenous people play in environmental management and development and the achievement of sustainable development (WCC 2005). In the community development approach, people are assisted to identify their own needs and the means to address them, focusing on giving people choices that may lead to their empowerment. This approach asserts the notion of trying to ensure that communities maintain ownership and control over their own resources and is one of the more popular approaches used (Casey 1999; World Bank 2003).

Participatory approaches can and should also be used to consider gender issues and impacts of a development intervention if appropriate conditions are created. The potential for participatory approaches to be a catalyst for significant changes and improvements in gender relations and equity is immense. The reality is that a lot of work is required to ensure gender-sensitive participatory approaches are used in development interventions and there are many limitations standing in the way of achieving this, not the least being the traditional culture of many countries.

### **Issues with participatory approaches**

There are concerns about many of the approaches used for community consultation. The use of the community development model can result in priorities that may arise during a workshop or meeting being skewed towards the more powerful people's opinions. Gujit and Kaul Shah (1998) relate concern that the myth of community cohesion underlies many participatory exercises. Such a reliance on communities and households has meant that much participatory work has failed to take account of inequalities and power dynamics that occur within communities and households. There is often a failure to be aware of conflicting interests between and within groups (Akerkar 2001).

Many authors lament the simplistic or mythical notion of 'communities' as homogenous and cohesive groups and the somewhat unchallenged assumptions of community harmony (Cooke & Kothari, 2000; Gujit & Cornwall, 1995; Gujit & Kaul Shah, 1998; Stadler, 1995; Mohan 2000). There is, possibly intentional, ignorance of the fact that people living in the same area do not necessarily share similar opinions nor have the same priorities. Working with the idea of a homogenous community can conceal power relations and hides a bias that favours those with more power (Cooke & Kothari, 2000; Gujit & Kaul Shah, 1998; Mohan 2000).

Some authors feel that failure to deal with the complexity of community differences, such as age, economic status, religion, caste, ethnicity, employment status, political affiliation and gender, can render much participatory work defective (Gujit & Kaul Shah, 1998; Stadler 1995). Using groups rather than individuals can ignore the hidden conflicts in social life and research results in some projects often assume consensus where in reality a dominant group may bias the results (Stadler 1995; Mohan 2000). The majority of tools and methods of participatory development are based on group gatherings, which may cause facilitators to miss out on obtaining possibly valuable individual knowledge and risk the non-participation of certain individuals. Manifestations of power, and the subordination of women, embedded in social and cultural practices are often difficult for an outsider to determine. Local control of the process can often serve to exacerbate existing forms of exclusion and cement existing relations of inequality with the voices of marginalised individuals and groups barely being raised (Cornwall 2003).

When women are present at village meetings alongside men it is often assumed that their issues are being included but some authors feel this may ignore the dynamics of gender relations (Gujit & Kaul Shah 1998; Sarin 1998; Cornwall 2003; Akerkar 2001). There may be much information that cannot be shared in a 'public' environment. The reasons for this are manifold and may include the fact that women are uncomfortable about discussing certain issues with men present, or that traditional custom gives preference to men in group discussions. This reticence to share knowledge in the public domain is not restricted to women, as many community members, particularly the marginalised, may also feel private information cannot be discussed publicly. Knowledge that is restricted to the private sphere is missed when concentrating on the public domain. Many people will not say important and relevant things in public or to strangers they don't trust, so much of what is important is left unknown (Bevan, 2000; Stadler 1995; Mohan 2000).

In many developing, and even some developed countries, marginalised people, particularly women, tend to have less access to knowledge and information and are said to have less power in knowing what knowledge and information is useful. The less powerful often accept the superiority of the knowledge of the more powerful and, according to some authors, in many cases women are not even aware of their subordinate position (Leurs 1996; Murthy 1998). The participatory process should encourage people to accept the worth of one's own knowledge and empower the marginalised to proffer all information they have at hand. Particularly important is the empowerment of women who hold vitally important information about their local area and social customs.

It has been suggested by some authors that 'local knowledge' and the decisions made by locals are actually structured by what the locals perceive the visiting agency or organisation can and might offer or deliver (Cooke & Kothari, 2000; Leurs 1996). In support of this view, Townsely et al (1997) points to the case of a customary marine tenure project in Vanuatu where many responses of the villagers were influenced by fact that researchers were taking

notes. They stress that the presence of outsiders must be taken into consideration as it can significantly alter that outcome. As Townsley et al (1997, p.39) argues, “[t]here is a risk that decisions reached by local people are aimed more at the outsiders and their assumed objectives, than at the real needs and priorities of local people”. There can also be seen in many pacific countries, a sense of cynicism due to the myriad of projects involving consultation that have come and gone without any real ongoing, sustainable effect (Tellus 2005).

### **The Samoan experience with community consultation**

In Samoa, the village system appears to present a ‘community’ that is homogenous and cohesive, with close ties between families, the church and the village fono. This is a long-standing tradition that has helped to ensure the longevity of the Samoan culture (Macmillan 1998). Such close community ties has seen Samoan’s deal with cyclones, droughts and other natural disasters with impressive resilience. The strong leadership of the village matai, the use of extensive discussion to reach consensus and extended family commitment cements the community group, and its leaders, as the main consultation audience. This community based model can encounter difficulties as Taule’alo (2000, p3) argues, “[i]t is extremely difficult to reconcile the public interest against the family interest... the co-existence of both modern and traditional authorities is rather complex and not readily conducive to the application of conventional planning methods and concepts”. Further there is strong respect for authority in Samoa often leading to less democratic practice which tends to exclude the lowly ranked from consultation and decision making (Taule’alo 2000).



Photo 1: Traditional village meeting in Savai'i

Samoa has many women in powerful positions in government and commerce, as well as women with matai titles and advanced educational degrees. However, the traditional role of women, particularly in rural villages, has largely remained<sup>†</sup>. This aspect of village life helps to preserve a rich culture in Samoa and the village women’s committees have an important role to play in village affairs, social organisation and discipline, including village

<sup>†</sup> The traditional role of women in Samoan villages, according to the Encyclopedia of World Cultures, includes looking after the household, raising children, plaiting fine mats and fans, collecting edible wild plants and foraging the lagoon and reef for small sea animals (Macmillan 1998).

beautification and the appropriate entertainment of, and accommodation for, visitors (Grattan 2005). Many consultation activities undertaken in Samoa have made efforts to involve the women's committee such as in the examples outlined below.

The CIM (Coastal Infrastructure Management) Plan<sup>‡</sup> project is undertaking extensive community consultation using participatory approaches to ensure that villages and districts themselves formulate and therefore 'own' the plans being prepared. Each village and district will have an historical knowledge of the effects of natural disasters in the area, and will also intimately know the location, state and use of any important infrastructure.

However the formality of Samoan village culture, with dominant matai leaders, has the potential to lead to a process whereby only the already powerful members of the village have a part in the discussions. The project team's attempt to respect local culture and undertake the consultation activities through the traditional village meeting format sometimes results in little involvement of village women, untitled men and youth. It has been found in participatory approach exercises elsewhere, that where marginalised groups are identified, the local political structure may obstruct their empowerment despite all opportunities presented by the project team (Gujit & Cornwall, 1995). However, some villages in Samoa are very encouraging of the involvement of the wider community as witnessed during recent field trips.



Photo 2: A village meeting for the CIM Plan project in Savai'i

In Samoa, there are communities that ensure representatives of different demographics are a part of the consultation activity, even if only for a short time. At a recent village meeting for the CIM Plan project, a few women and a young man attended parts of the meeting. They did need to leave the meeting at different times in order to arrange and serve the food and drink to those of us in the meeting, however. Some other women and young men sat in a small fale behind the main one but it is unclear whether they were listening in or had the opportunity to actively participate in the process. At one point during the meeting, one of the women, one

<sup>‡</sup> The CIM Plan project is a component of the wider World Bank funded SIAM 2 project aimed at disaster risk reduction.

who had spent the most time in the meeting fale, took the map being used as part of the activity out of the fale, perhaps to show the others in the smaller fale. So while there was the formal village meeting with matai and a select few others, there did seem to be some opportunity for others in the village to be involved – or at least to know what was going on.

A representative of the women's committee will often attend a village meeting set up for the purposes of consultation on an environmental project. The CIM Plan project utilises a formal village meeting approach, followed by more informal 'walk through' of the area and efforts are also made to talk to the women of the village separately while this is occurring. Although the matai of the village work hard to represent the community as a whole, it is important that those who will be required to assist with the implementation of project outcomes are involved at the outset also. Meeting with the women in a more informal setting can result in important information being gained that may have been missed during the meeting or walk through with the male members of the village. Sometimes the information is simply an expansion or clarification of issues already raised but often there are points raised that are particularly relevant to the women, and children, of the village.



Photo 3: Informal meeting with village women for CIM Plan project in Savai'i

The Samoa Fisheries Extension and Training Project discovered that the best solution for controlling fishing activities is not the enforcement of national regulations, but to allow fishing villages to manage and control the fishing activities themselves (Chesher 1998). Limited funds also mean fishing regulations must be enforced at the village level and matai are encouraged to ensure that their village fishes in an ecologically sound way. Villages across Samoa requested assistance from the government's Fisheries Division to assess reef health and improve the reef to ensure ongoing fish stocks (Mollica 1999). The Fisheries Division undertook to provide advice and support to those villages willing to undertake the development of a management plan.

The Village Fisheries Management Plan project saw extension officers undertake meetings with villages based on status – separate matai, untitled men and women's groups – aiming for less inhibited discussion. These groups sketched out the key problems and recommended

solutions and it was found that most village groups knew the conditions of their fisheries, what might be causing problems and what the likely solutions would be, sometimes better than the fishery agents did (Mollica 1999). “By asking questions, everyone learned and the villagers gained a feeling of ownership of the program” (King 1999). Once the Management Plan was finalised, the Fisheries Division offered to provide any required technical assistance to the village provided the plan was adhered to. According to Mollica (1999, p27) “Samoan fishers are involved in making decisions to change their fishing grounds as well as their methodology, moving away from the reef in order to harvest some of the relative bounty of the deeper ocean”. This project successfully utilised participatory approaches to involve the whole village community and result in improved environmental conditions.

### **Questions for future community consultation in Samoa**

How can you ensure all members of a community have a chance to participate in projects that affect them? Can consultation in Samoa be more gender sensitive? Is the group meeting the most appropriate consultation tool? Is the input of communities truly participatory? How can you ensure the community feels a sense of ‘ownership’ over the project and its outcomes?

A mixture of approaches may be appropriate in Samoa, not just formal village matai meetings, but also small group and one-on-one interviews, workshops and household surveys. There is a need to ensure that all members of a community are represented. This will require knowing the make up of the constituency and appropriate ways to reach the most marginalised members of the community. Ensuring that women are consulted appropriately and are empowered to contribute and take some ownership of the project is important, particularly if they are to be involved in the subsequent implementation of any plans. This may be difficult in some cases due to the presence of traditional cultural norms, so imaginative approaches will be required.

A sense of ownership will help to ensure the longer-term sustainability of projects but must be accompanied by a concerted change in behaviours to ensure ongoing and measurable improvements in the environment. For instance, the fisheries project encouraged a change in behaviour of the fishers in order to improve the health of the reef and fish stocks.

### **Conclusion and the way forward**

Participatory approaches are meant to empower local communities to research, decide on and implement projects to improve their livelihoods and environment – a reversal of many past practices. The basic idea behind participatory processes is simple. When people co-operate to find answers to common problems, they come to understand the issues.

To ensure appropriate participation and consultation we need to take advantage of the natural tendency for Samoans to work together and solve conflict by negotiation and unanimity. The traditional village fono system can indeed be utilised effectively during participatory action as an important focal point for all communities. A focus on changing the physical behaviour of people is required to ensure that environmental projects are effective. That is, there needs to be a change in day to day habits and not simply a raising of awareness.

Ultimately, environmental initiatives will be more successful and sustainable if the people affected by them are intimately involved in their analysis, design and implementation and feel a sense of ownership and obligation. This requires effective participation of all community members and the limited influence of outside ‘facilitators’ where appropriate.

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