Fundamentals of Ethical Community Engagement

Compiled by

SIAGI Partners

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Credits: Text sourced from Mishra, R. (2016). *Community Engagement: Perspectives, Processes and Practices*. Software application sourced from http://www.wordle.net/create

Background and approach

"To stimulate or facilitate change, one has to begin where the community is" (PRADAN)

There are both practical and ethical goals of engaging with communities in the conduct of development initiatives. These are fundamentally interconnected. The more effective the engagement with communities, the more likely project goals will be met. Ethical engagement is a feature of good research practice and demonstrates respect towards the capacities and aspirations of fellow human beings.

Effective engagement is first and foremost a collaborative endeavour where successful implementation and impact are made more likely through ethical practice. While ethical community engagement is a justice issue, for this purpose, the discussion is particularly concerned with *how we [SIAGI partners and our affiliates] engage with communities in the conduct of our work*.

Purpose and scope

This brief discussion paper is a compilation of internal partner communications, SIAGI workshop presentations, written working papers, and published papers on ethical and effective community engagement in South Asian development settings. A key motivation for this piece is to collect, distil and share best practice with other practitioners working in similar settings.

An influential reference for this compilation has been Rajeshwar Mishra's (CDHI) *Community Engagement: Perspectives, Processes and Practices* (2016) written for the DSI4MTF project. The paper brings key points of that work together with existing (formal and informal) resources that describe the fundamentals of community engagement in the development context.

The administration of a typical development project occurs in stages as illustrated in Figure 1 below. This paper focusses on the stages between orientation and action. Elaboration on the procedural requirements of entering communities, the specific features of communication, dissemination and exit strategies remain gaps in the paper at this stage.
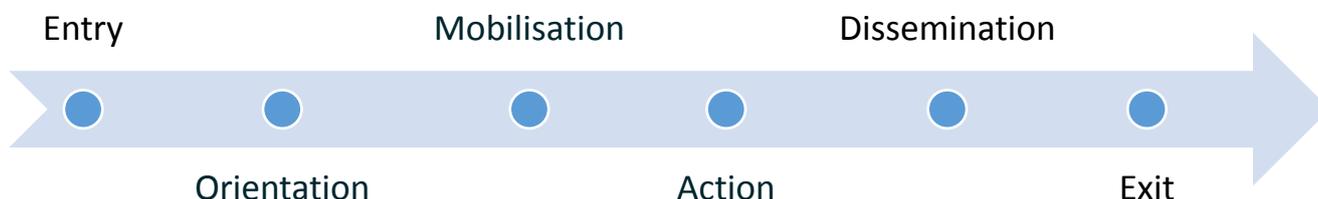
Figure 1. A typical development project cycle.

Engagement at a glance

The goals, values and practices of community engagement are highly complementary across Bangladeshi and Indian partners. Shushilan, CDHI and PRADAN all bring a range of experiences and deep knowledge to the SIAGI project. All partners believe that communities have a wealth of knowledge and share Chambers' view that farmers "have far greater capabilities than most professionals have supposed" (Chambers, 2010, pg. 45). Generally, a community's "understanding of context is realistic and relevant. Their inclusion can create a strong sense of ownership and therefore contribute to sustainability."(Mishra, 2016a).

Farmers are typically very proficient in practicing quantitative skills such as measuring, counting, estimating, ranking, comparing and scoring (Chambers, 2010) – making them ideal research partners and agents of change in agricultural development initiatives.

Effective engagement demands participatory approaches where skills, attitudes and behaviours are acquired and practiced by highly skilled facilitators. Facilitators require specific skills and should be in possession of sophisticated interpersonal skills including active and empathetic listening, sensitive inclusion of less empowered community members, and broad awareness of environmental factors that can impinge on the quality of engagement. Facilitators work hard to make meaningful connections with others, and also between other individuals and groups. These skills and connections require substantial time and effort to develop.

Engagement is multifaceted. Effective engagement involves more than a consideration of the expectations and behaviours of visiting researchers to communities. An important aspect of effective engagement is the *quality of participation* generated by engagement. A useful 'typology of participation' is offered by Agarwal (2001) below.

Table 1. *Typology of participation*	
Form/Level of participation	Characteristic features
Nominal participation	Membership in the group
Passive participation	Being informed of decisions *ex post facto*; or attending meetings and listening in on decision-making, without speaking up
Consultative participation	Being asked an opinion in specific matters without guarantee of influencing decisions
Activity-specific participation	Being asked to (or volunteering to) undertake specific tasks
Active participation	Expressing opinions, whether or not solicited, or taking initiatives of other sorts
Interactive (empowering) participation	Having voice and influence in the group's decisions

Table 1. Typology of Participation. Agarwal (2001), *World Development,* **pg. 1624.**

Our NGO partners work hard to achieve a degree of interactive (empowering) **participation** in the conduct of their everyday work. Where, participation is intrinsically valued as a "measure of citizenship and a means of empowerment, and for its potential effects on equity, efficiency and sustainability" (Agarwal, 2001, pg. 1624). It is this level of participation that the SIAGI project as-a-whole aspires. Yet, this aspiration is not always amenable to constraints presented by traditional research approaches and organisational demands.

Values underpinning effective and ethical community engagement

There are specific *values* which are the building blocks of engagement processes. These are grouped in Figure 2 below. These values can guide interactions and processes during engagement. They require fostering and integration into planned activities.
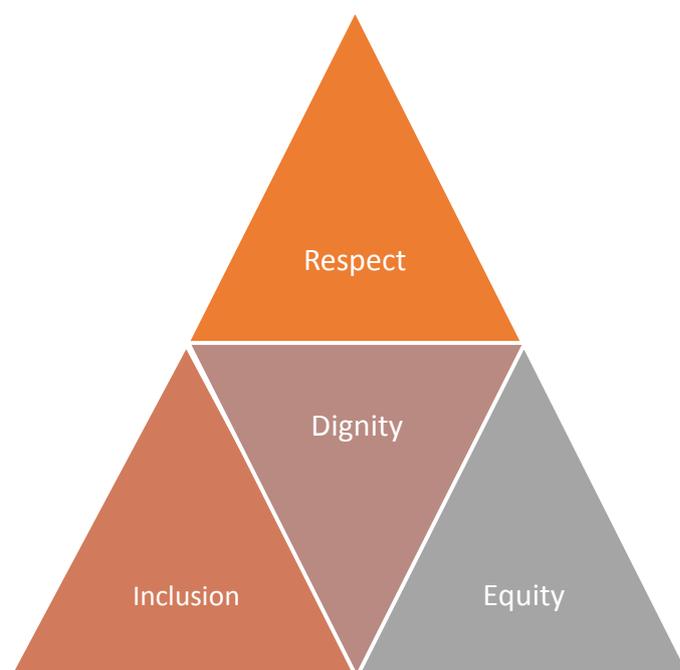

Figure 2. The values that drive and nurture ethical community engagement

Applying these principles to practice is rarely straightforward and can pose challenges to the practitioner. For example, respecting local customs may entail exclusionary practices based on traditional and entrenched social rules and structures (IIED, 2014; Agarwal, 2001).

The values listed above guide the way SIAGI partners interact with communities, and with others in the partnership. The values also influence the selection of approaches for participatory activities.

Enabling conditions for collaborative participation

Project activities which meet the community where it is, with what is has, and with whomever is present is an ideal starting point for building meaningful relationships with communities. Figure 3 illustrates some key enablers to effective engagement.
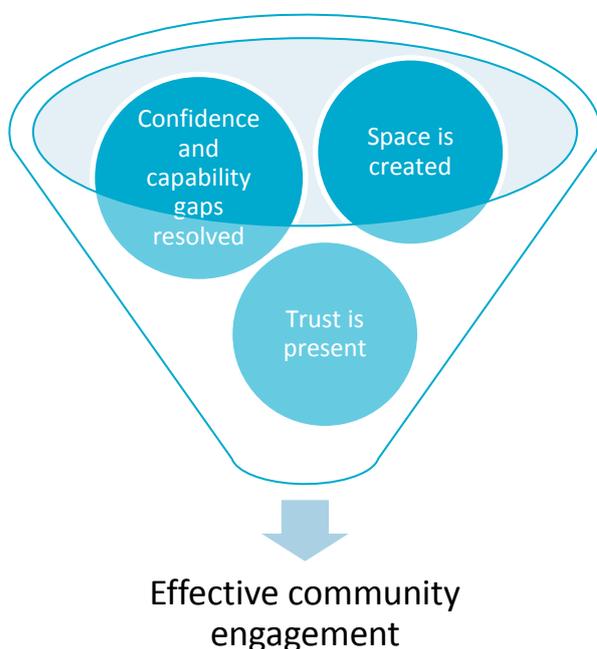
Figure 3. The enabling conditions for effective (and ethical) community engagement

SIAGI partners have all described the presence of what might be termed a 'confidence gap' – where, community members lack: either the belief they can contribute meaningfully to initiatives; the confidence in the value of their current knowledge and/or; the social standing that allows them free participation. Time constraints, relentless labour demands (especially for women), physical fatigue and collective apathy can widen this gap considerably. Bridging this 'confidence gap' through creating agency, building capability and careful facilitation are often the first priorities in community engagement.

Shushilan and PRADAN have communicated extensively about the importance of creating sensitive, inclusive and comfortable spaces for engagement. These spaces are both social and physical in nature (e.g. sitting position, suitable attire, language use, awareness of social power, use of appropriate research methodology, etc) and can work to hamper or foster effective engagement.

A number of factors build or diminish the presence and quality of trust in communities. These are outlined below and include previous poor community experiences with participation, unfulfilled promises by governments and other organisations, unrealistic expectations (of all sides), and conflicts in the agendas of R4D (research-for-development) partners. Substantial 'internal housekeeping' and careful planning is required before field work commences – without this, trust-building is made more difficult and the potential for additional burdens to be imposed (and harm done) is placed on communities.

Keeping in mind that communities are dynamic and unique entities and that they exist independently of project ambitions helps to build respectful and sustainable relationships (Mohindra et al. 2011).

Multiple barriers to overcome

Rajeshwar Mishra's reflections (2016a; 2016b), PRADAN's previous workshop presentations and Shushilan's communications have all highlighted the multiple and interrelated barriers to effective engagement. Participation fatigue, widespread suspicion and distrust, and at times a mix of indifference and dependency are regularly encountered dispositions in communities (Mishra, 2016b).

These conditions are exacerbated by several structural obstacles such as illiteracy and a lack of confidence in pursuing government entitlements, as well as previous experiences participating in overambitious research agendas. Past ineffective attempts at engaging with villagers, government-led incentives aimed at securing political support, and empty promises of momentous change have led to a general sense of disempowerment and distrust. These conditions can hamper new efforts to build relationships and mobilise participation.

The material demands of day-to-day subsistence affects physical and emotional energy levels, general motivation and appetite for yet more work (in participating). These conditions need careful consideration and management by project implementers and administrators.

Weak institutions, often made weaker by poor governance, limited capacity building and long-term neglect, present additional challenges for building collective action.

Cautions, tensions and potential pitfalls

Engagement practitioners are faced with multiple **tensions** in the course of engaging with communities. Existing research governance requirements, general resource constraints and the challenges raised by multistakeholder partnerships compound the task.

Communities are not homogenous entities. There is often heterogeneity in terms of caste, class and other social indicators (Mishra, 2016a; Mohindra et al., 2011). There may be conflicting agendas and interests present in communities. There may also be attempts to exploit potential benefits for individual or group advantage. Without a deep understanding of the social landscape, effective engagement will not be realized and can potentially harm existing relationships.

The task of mobilizing genuine participation from all community members is complex. Existing exclusionary structures and practices may be deeply entrenched. Power and the lack of it plays an influential role in group dynamics (Mishra, 2016a). The recruitment of 'ghost' leaders of Panchayats controlled by menfolk is an example of existing inequity and false representation.

Aligning research priorities with community priorities can be a significant challenge (Mishra, 2016b). These trajectories are not always complimentary and can hamper trust-building and participation.

The manner in which traditional research organisations organise and conduct field work can be a real source of tension. The primacy of quantitative methods and scientific knowledge, the demands of rigorous research methods, the constraints of academic calendars, and the pressures of generating high-quality research publications influences research approaches to engagement. Existing disciplinary biases and hierarchies can also compound multidisciplinary work. As can assigning a hierarchy of value to knowledge types where local knowledge is of lesser value to knowledge acquired from expert sources.

These tensions can affect the quality of R4D partnerships and how partners work together.

The extent to which participation can offer tangible returns to communities is a matter for debate. While promises of benefits which are unlikely to be realized should be avoided, communicating the value of longer-term advantages of collaboration and participation requires reflection and careful planning on the part of facilitators. Carefully designed engagement processes have the potential to deliver communities capacity building opportunities, new ideas, and new connections.

There are two significant points of difference when comparing Western approaches to ethical engagement with those practiced by our SIAGI in-country partners. The important role that mobilisation/collectivization plays in community engagement (and the building of capacity required to realise this) is one point of difference. The second point of difference is the intrinsic belief in the strength of individuals and groups to change their life course for the better.

These starting points for engagement are in stark contrast to Western models of research where, marginalized and poor communities are almost always labelled as disempowered and vulnerable. Where, their participation as research subjects rather than partners automatically triggers a risk-averse approach to engagement which protects rather than empowers. This is despite those very same vulnerable individuals and groups being the intended beneficiaries of development initiatives. The Western practice of minimising research risks by ascribing vulnerability (which affects participation) can have a disempowering effect on women who might benefit from a process that creates legitimacy and ownership.

Finally, there are dangers in treating engagement as simply a means (data collection) to an end (project delivery). A key goal of ethical community engagement is to partner with farmers to help create the conditions for change. Engagement is a complex and ongoing process requiring forward planning, adaptive management, skilled facilitation and shared ownership of the process and outcome (Mishra, 2016; SIAGI partner presentations, 2016). For development practitioners this process inspires transformation. For researchers working in traditional settings, this approach creates many challenges. Despite these tensions, ethical engagement can bring multiple co-benefits to R4D partnerships and ultimately improve the conditions for impact.

An effective engagement methodology will need to consider the points raised above and balance these with resource availability, skill capability and alignment with broader political agendas (Mishra, 2016a).

Next steps

Given this learning, SIAGI is now planning to rebalance its original methodology to better reflect these principles. Our approach will strive towards placing community empowerment and ongoing

capacity building at the forefront of engagement to strike a better balance between what the project provides to community partners, and what the project received in terms of data and information.

This commitment will require specialist skill and coordination so that the needs and expectations of all partners, including the community, are met. Two working groups have been established to design and implement the revised methodology in Cooch Behar and Bangladesh.

In February 2017, PRADAN hosted a small group of colleagues on a field trip to Bankura, India, to learn more about community engagement in the context of inclusive value chain approaches. For both villages visited, strong women collectives either drove or significantly contributed to on-farm and household decision-making. The insights gained from this trip will be incorporated into planning for other sites.

Resources used in the compilation of this Discussion Paper

Agarwal, B. (2001). Participatory exclusions, community forestry, and gender: An analysis for South Asia and a conceptual framework. *World Development*, 29(10), pp. 1623-1648.

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Mishra, R. (2016a). *Community Engagement: Perspectives, Processes and Practices*. Centre for the Development of Human Initiatives (CDHI).

Mishra, R, (2016b). *Embedding collaboration: Uttar Chakwakheti (UC) readies for action*. Centre for the Development of Human Initiatives (CDHI).

Mohindra, K.S., Narayana, D. and Haddad, S. (2011). Towards ethically sound participatory research with marginalised populations: Experiences from India. *Development in Practice*, 21(8), 1168-1175.

SIAGI NGO partners' (CDHI, PRADAN, Shushilan) presentation slides on Community Engagement from both Kharagpur (March 2016) and Kolkata (October 2016) meetings.