

Promoting Socially Inclusive and Sustainable Agricultural Intensification in West Bengal and Bangladesh (SIAGI)

The Principles and Practices of Ethical Community Engagement

Resources to support engaging for impact

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Document overview

This document is intended as a reference and resource document for engagement practitioners and researchers striving to engage communities for development impact. Developed by the SIAGI team in collaboration with the communities we work with in West Bengal, India and southern Bangladesh, this work taps into the rich knowledge of our NGO partners to distil the philosophy, motivations, values and practices of inclusive community engagement.

1 Introduction

Central to overseas development assistance (ODA) are the goals of economic development and poverty alleviation. As key development actors, engagement practitioners have multiple, interconnected roles and functions in achieving these goals. In the broadest sense, practitioners are ideally placed as facilitators of development services, often acting as intermediaries between the communities they work with and government services, the private sector and the research community.

In the context of research-for-development (R4D) and especially for programs aspiring towards sustainable development, engagement practitioners must assume roles and functions that are less transactional and instead engage in more deliberative and inclusive interaction with communities (SIAGI, 2017).

As the goals of development shift beyond project delivery to strengthening capacity, enhancing self-esteem and building lasting resilience, so must the attitudes and practices of development actors, including community-based organisations, government, financial institutions, the private sector, and researchers. Without constructive and inclusive¹ collaboration, research and development initiatives are neither scalable nor sustainable (MacLachlan et al., 2010; Mishra, 2016).

Inclusive or ethical community engagement (ECE) plays a pivotal role in the quest for more equitable and sustainable agricultural development. As a concept, ECE recognises that the very poor and marginalised, including women and the landless, are typically excluded from development processes and do not reap its benefits. As a process, ECE strives to facilitate the inclusion of individuals and groups in collaborative and participatory decision-making.

Funded by the Australian Centre for International Agriculture Research (ACIAR) – researchers, NGO practitioners and government partners – are working together with local communities to ensure development activities are more inclusive and equitable. Our project, *Promoting socially inclusive and sustainable agricultural intensification in West Bengal and Bangladesh* (SIAGI) is challenging the usual specialist-driven, top-down approach to understand how development programs can be designed, implemented and scaled through the use of ECE principles and practices.

SIAGI works closely with 2 other ACIAR-funded projects: (i) Dry Season Irrigation for Marginal and Tenant Farmers (DSI4MTF), which operates in West Bengal, Bangladesh and Nepal; and (ii)

¹ By inclusive, we mean equal access to knowledge, resources, opportunities and decision-making processes.

Cropping Systems Intensification in the Salt-Affected Coastal Zones of Bangladesh and West Bengal, India (CSI4CZ). While these two projects have different entry points of engagement with communities, ECE has been identified as a core component and driver for creating equitable benefits.

Our work builds on a rich history of development practitioners, scholars and communities agitating for different approaches to rural development. Such approaches have sought to reframe the approaches to development – putting local knowledge, aspirations and agency at the centre of efforts to shape rural development (eg. Chambers and Jiggins 1987), recognising that the communities targeted by development programs have the knowledge, wisdom and capability to be their own agents of change (Bandura, 1982). ECE shares many qualities with the methodologies behind participatory rural appraisal, which sought to empower local communities to take control of their development paths, partly through recognising the deep knowledge held in communities (Chambers 1994).

In many ways, ECE reflects the original intention of participatory approaches. However, overtime participatory approaches have become mechanistic methods for extracting data, rather than empowering communities to drive their own development pathways. ECE focuses on the quality and processes of engagement (that may include participatory methods), with the intention to build capacity as a way of enabling enduring change driven by the community (rather than projects).

ECE challenges the fundamental structure of how development projects are pursued, allowing for community-driven, inclusive, and more equitable participation and decision-making for programs aiming to improve the lives of the poor (Carter, 2018b). Described in Section 3, ECE acknowledges the entrenched institutional and historical influences on how communities perceive, participate and benefit from donor-driven development initiatives. The poor are given the opportunity to offer insights and perspectives from their own unique positions, unlike mechanical participation processes where community is not enabled to be reflective, proactive and self-efficacious. ECE helps build this capacity within individuals and the community, increasing the sustainability of interventions.

2 Methodology

The ECE principles and practices were developed through an iterative process of engagement, data collection and thematic analysis. The focus was to understand inclusive (SIAGI) NGO practices, their processes and their challenges. A collation of project, workshop, and trip reports, presentations, written reflections and internal organisational documents including organisational policies and training manuals were combined with informal interviews and team discussions between 2016-2019.

Seeking this information was to gain insights into four areas of NGO practice:

1. Engaging with communities;
2. Philosophy or approach to engagement;
3. Modes of engagement;
4. Rationale for engaging in a particular way, using particular methods etc.

The process of reflection, learning and identifying changes in thinking and practice is an ongoing process and will inform successive steps.

Improving the research and practice of a range of development partners and actors (beyond NGOs to include research partners and donors) is the longer-term goal of this work. Improved program design, improved partnering and enhanced sustainability are among the perceived benefits from a deeper understanding of inclusive community engagement.

3 Principles of Ethical Community Engagement

Inclusive or ethical community engagement (ECE) plays a pivotal role in the quest for more equitable and sustainable development. Initiatives which meet the community where it is, with what it has, and with whomever is present is an ideal starting point for building meaningful relationships with communities.

As a concept, ECE recognises that the poor and marginalised, including women and the landless, can be excluded from development processes and do not automatically reap its benefits (Carter 2018a). As a process, ECE strives to facilitate the inclusion of individuals and groups in collaborative and participatory decision-making. ECE is about supporting community organisations to take control of their own futures to achieve enduring outcomes. It is an empathetic process which acknowledges and respects communities' perspectives and potential and cultivates trust that they can change their own situation (i.e. build self-efficacy). Over time, the process of community decision-making, learning and reviewing, leads to a greater sense of confidence and self-esteem so that the community manages its own aspirations, goals and achievements. As an outcome, ECE facilitates a rediscovery of hope in a community's ability to change their condition and influence their future.

The following six principles encapsulate the concepts, processes and values underpinning ECE.

1. **Individual and organisational values and cultures play a key role in ethical practice.** A deep commitment to intrinsic values about people, their 'endowments' and their agency are integral to inclusive (and effective) engagement. For some development partners, this may require a fundamental shift in attitude to acknowledge the centrality of people's wisdom, self-esteem, competencies, capabilities, cultures, values and aspirations in catalysing change. It requires treating all male and female farmers as collaborators and equal partners in the research and development process. ①
2. **Ethical engagement demands an empathetic attitude along with specific skills integral to the engagement process.** Highly skilled facilitators who are able to: communicate meaningfully; learn and practice non-judgemental and empathetic listening; practice sophisticated interpersonal skills and; who have awareness of local social and environmental factors. Facilitators and engagement practitioners work hard to make meaningful connections with others, and between individuals and groups. These skills are not innate and potentially require guidance to develop. Beyond the technical skill required of facilitation and analysis, a willingness to learn and experiment, and character traits such as sensitivity, empathy and a sense of justice are vital in ethical engagement with communities. ②

3. Situational awareness is paramount to building trust and achieving inclusion.

Communities carry with them embedded experiences of historical, social, cultural and economic contexts which have influenced their participation in development initiatives. Previous and existing poor experiences with research programs, unsuccessful government-led initiatives, perverse incentives by political factions, and empty promises of momentous change have led to a general sense of disempowerment and distrust among many communities.

Communities tend to be heterogeneous with stereotypes attached to different social categories – class, gender, age etc. Community priorities and roles need to be fully understood by researchers. For example, women have reproductive roles that practitioners must be aware of as they enter communities. Knowledge of these barriers and persistent effort and patience in engaging with communities despite these constraints is needed to achieve inclusion. This may require careful planning before field work commences.

The building of trust is a process which needs to allow for: the verification of agents' credentials and any inputs offered; repeated visitation to create rapport between researchers and communities and; the creation of space for conversations and interactions. This may include spending time with communities to understand their needs and aspirations. It may also mean ensuring that physical spaces for conversations are created to encourage the participation of less powerful individuals and groups. This requires presence on the behalf of the researcher, commitment and time. Without these effort, trust-building is made more difficult and the potential for additional burdens to be imposed (and harm done) is placed on communities. ③

4. Qualitative methods are a key technique for inclusive engagement. The use of storytelling, day-to-day observations, participatory planning, scenario analysis, individual and community level dialogues and conducting multi-stakeholder meetings requires skill in qualitative methodology. The monitoring and evaluation of such engagement processes demands the use of novel indicators which seek to measure quality and value in favour of quantity and frequency. ④

5. Participatory monitoring, evaluation and learning enhances the facilitator's and the community's ability to reflect, collaborate, co-create and adapt to situations as they arise. A commitment to continuous learning and experimentation is required to successfully engage. Ongoing learning increases self-efficacy and agency, as well as building the skills to support the scaling of initiatives. For some communities, the need for NGOs to facilitate a realisation of human potential, to empower individuals and groups, to build their capacity, etc., sets the foundations for inclusivity and unity. ⑤

6. Scaling initiatives without beneficiaries driving the desired change is unsustainable.

Without sufficiently deep commitment and ownership, (for example, those achieved through a process of ECE), initiatives are less likely to sustain over time. There needs to be

a unity of purpose, as well as planning, leadership and discipline to achieve the desired changes. In addition, purely externally-imposed agendas deplete the resources and capabilities of communities and over time, erode trust and diminish energy for participating in new programs. This presents considerable risk for the wider development community. ⑥

These six principles are considered by the SIAGI team to be fundamental to ECE approaches at the time of writing (April 2019). We expect that over time, as we learn and capture new information, these principles will evolve experientially and as such may be amended or clarified in future versions of this document.

4 Ethical community engagement practices

ECE is a process that seeks to support community organisations to take control of their own futures to achieve enduring outcomes. The six ECE Principles outlined in Section 3 describe the key concepts, processes and values that underpin ECE approaches – essentially, the philosophy of ECE.

To articulate how these principles function in practice, the SIAGI team has created a compendium of ECE Practices which serve to guide the field practitioner in the planning and management of interactions with communities. For this purpose, ECE Practices are defined as the intentions, behaviours and actions that underpin an ECE approach.

The Table of Key ECE Practices below was compiled in collaboration with our NGO partners through several rounds of reflection and discussion. Communities from Sidagora and Komo villages, Bankura district, India were also invited to share their views. General feedback from communities currently working with CDHI is also included in this compendium.

The Table is organised into five Practice categories, each containing a set of Practices generally aligned to a broader theme. A brief explanation of the Practice is included, along with a reference to the corresponding ECE Principle (eg. ❶). Community perspectives are also included in the table where available and appear as direct quotations.

Key practices of an ECE approach

PRACTICE CATEGORY/THEME	PRACTICE (the intention, behaviour or action that underpins ECE approach) incl. the corresponding Principle	EXPLANATION (and link to ECE Principles)	COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE (quotations from FGDs)
Overarching general practices of ECE	Treat community members as equal partners in a collaborative process. ① ③ ⑥	To insist communities pursue activities they are uncomfortable with erodes trust and can be damaging.	<i>Everyone is equal. Walking alongside us, in our fields and communities, eating our food, experiencing our lives, this will help us to build trust with you.</i> <i>We should not be forced to do things we are not comfortable with.</i>
	Respect community cultures and social norms. ① ③	To treat every interaction with integrity, honesty and openness demonstrates respect and helps to build trust.	<i>Respect our language. It is our mother tongue.</i> <i>We require time to talk to you because sometimes we are scared to speak. Please have patience while talking with us.</i>
	Wear dress that respects local custom. ① ③	Pay attention to your dress, remaining sensitive to local social norms.	
	Avoid aggression, violence and negative or confrontational postures. ① ③		<i>Rude behaviour from outsiders is not acceptable to us.</i> <i>Do not be aggressive or violent in our community.</i>

Entry, permissions and building rapport; establishing relationships

Be courteous when organising visitation with communities – the community's time is as precious as yours.

① ②

Communities are not always able to see you at short notice. Working with communities directly to organise a mutually agreed schedule is best practice.

When requesting meetings with villagers, providing information prior to your visit helps communities prepare for your visit. On arrival, introduce yourself and explain the purpose of your visit and interaction.

Any meeting called by the outsider must have prior information available. This helps us in our own preparation.

Speak modestly about your qualifications, official position or institutional affiliation.

②

Make effort to understand the communities' history, natural resources, socio-economic conditions, needs, deprivations and visions for the future.

① ② ③

Improving your understanding of the social, environmental and economic context of the community you visit has many advantages including building stronger relationships and better-developed initiatives.

Avoid dismissing community views irrespective of how these views fit with your value sets – this demonstrates equity and respect.

Seek permission to engage with communities.

①

Securing initial permission to engage is pivotal to an ECE approach. Periodic and ongoing reaffirmation of willingness to engage is advised.

Before initiating any interventions, the outside should seek permission and agreement from us.

Make effort to build trust immediately through direct, honest interaction.

② ④

There are several ways to begin creating rapport and building trust. Actively listening and empathising with community about their previous experiences and; avoiding discontinuity of engagement are two examples.

The outsider must be introduced to as many of us as possible and visit frequently to gain our trust. The purpose of the visit must be explained to us clearly.

Process of participatory engagement; planning and decision-making; learning

Ascertain the most effective and inclusive way of communicating with communities about your purpose.

2 3

The use of multiple languages may be required to communicate with community. Not everyone will be fluent in the language used and patience is required to assist understanding.

Assist the community to understand meeting agendas according to the context and language.

The outsider must help us to understand the agenda according to our context and language.

No intervention should be taken without helping us to build an understanding or significance of the proposed activities.

Avoid bringing and eating packaged food from outside the villages when visiting.

2

Accept local offerings such as tea or local produce with equanimity.

2

Showing appreciation of gifts on occasion helps to build relationships. However, care must be taken not to enter into a frequent practice of gift exchange – this may lead to shifts in social power and perceptions of injustice.

Ensure open and transparent financial dealings.

1 5

Establishing proper systems of accountability is essential in this regard. It is important to maintain clarity about capacity and manage expectations about delivery.

Create an enabling environment for mutual interaction.

4 5 6

Interacting with children and elders, walking with farmers to view their farms and yards will assist in learning about people's lives and livelihoods.

Frequent visitation, showing interest in matters of importance to community (but perhaps periphery to your own agenda), and a willingness to assist with pressing community concerns in order to create space for other discussions, all offer opportunities for deeper engagement.

Never negate anyone's views without understanding.

Encouraging joint decision-making and building on communities' strengths will also help to create vision and commitment among members.

Assist communities to initiate action using their own efforts and decisions.

4 5 6

Proposing initiatives that do not support the community to achieve their own goals can create dependency.

Remain sensitive to gender roles, responsibilities and gender relations.

2 3

Engaging women facilitators for women's groups, organising crèche facilities or engaging in door-to-door visitation are examples of applying a gender lens to engaging with communities.

Pay attention to group dynamics, ensuring inclusivity in group situations.

2 3 4

Ensuring equal sitting positions during meetings and treating every idea expressed by an individual as equally worthy as the next promotes inclusion and discourages dominance.

Engage multiple stakeholders and government and non-government service providers.

5 6

Accompanying authorities, introducing them respectfully, taking time to facilitate interaction between visitors and communities is advised.

Avoid influencing communities' impressions of other stakeholders/individuals/organisations by remaining neutral.

Plan to spend time answering questions, elaborating on concepts, listening to communities' reactions.

2 3 5

Participatory engagement takes time and effort especially during initial visits.

Handling conflict

Maintain transparency and neutrality when handling conflict.

On occasion, conflict may emerge in the process of engagement. Conflict is a normal and natural feature of complex interactions. Diffusing conflict

1

by making unrealistic promises or showing favouritism will likely be disruptive in the long-term.

Exit and ensuring sustainability

Plan for and openly discuss milestones and exit strategies with communities, early.

Communities have their own goals and insights for continuing project outcomes. Avoiding aid dependency should be a priority.

Past experiences have on occasion breached our trust and caused us suffering.

5 6

Initiate long-term planning with key stakeholders throughout the project cycle.

Maintaining quality relationships with key stakeholders from the very beginning of the project to the end will help to ensure sustainability of outcomes.

5 6

Avoid perpetuating false hope with promises of project extensions unless certainty exists around resourcing.

3 5 6

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