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A Facilitated Prioritization Process: An Application in the Forest Sector in Honduras

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Abstract

This article describes an application of an Extension-oriented facilitated goal prioritization process conducted for national forest sector development in Honduras. The process can be employed in many settings that require stakeholder input. This article describes the consensus ranking of priority actions and generation of most doable actions. The results of this project will be used as an input in national forest-sector strategic planning in Honduras.

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Introduction

This article discusses a case study application of a nominal group recommendation prioritization process. The end-result of the process is a list of issues prioritized by importance and the likelihood of progress being made. Although the process was used in generating a set of prioritized recommendations for industry growth in a developing country, the process is generalized and can be operationalized in a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes.

The Recommendation Prioritization Process

The recommendation prioritization activity discussed in this article is the first step in a long-range strategic planning process for the forest-sector in Honduras. The strength of any strategic planning process of this nature is premised upon having representation by individuals from key stakeholder organizations and agencies. The goals of the prioritization process described in this article to: a) identify the most critical needs and issues of the forest sector and b) prioritize the issues that are most likely to be effectively addressed.

Participants in the recommendation prioritization session identified needs and issues that are important to their future as stakeholders and that of Honduras in general. Each person identified and prioritized a list of items generated at the meeting.

Overall, this process involves forest-sector stakeholders in identifying needs and concerns in their community and then together, with experts from other local and state agencies, in planning and

implementing a response that is realistic for the next 3 to 5 years.

Nominal group techniques were used as the facilitation technique during the recommendation prioritization session. Some participants had attended many planning sessions of one sort or another; others had never been a part of any kind of strategic planning initiative. Some had collaborated often; others had never had to think alongside anyone else in their lives. All of them were interested in the content of the meeting.

Typically, group meetings allow extroverts to dominate the discussion, and often high-quality thinking introverts do not have a chance to participate. The Nominal Group Technique is designed to be more democratic. It allows all participants an equal chance to have their ideas considered, and it generates a prioritized list at the end. It allows absolutely any idea to be introduced. Every single idea anyone presents is preserved. When attendees engage in discussion, participants are totally free to think in any direction whatsoever. This freedom of content requires that the process be carefully structured.

For example, each participant is offered the opportunity to make a short, timed speech to defend or discuss the recommendations that are most important to them. Then voting takes place. Verbal voting or a show of hands is subject to peer pressure and other group influence effects. Written balloting gives the most privacy but takes longest and requires tedious computation. The visual voting method described here lets people see results almost immediately while also giving a good measure of independence. It does require some preparation of materials ahead of time.

Participants are asked first to record which five items they consider most important for their desired future. Then they are told to distribute 10 votes among those five items to weight the relative importance of each of them. (Each item must have at least one vote.) After having done their thinking privately, they are asked to post their votes publicly using colored dots on the items posted on the sticky wall.

The private recording is necessary to prevent following popular sentiment by noticing which items are getting the most votes and switching allegiance during the posting phase. The public posting makes computation much easier, and it validates the integrity of the process since the results are so clearly visible to all.

Extension faculty at LSU have been trained on how to run the events effectively and efficiently. They facilitate in a uniform manner so that the results can be reported consistently. Michael Dunn, a trained facilitator, managed the nominal group process discussed in this article. The process contains a number of guiding elements that were adhered to by the LSU AgCenter facilitator and support team including:

1. To actively participate in the process and look for ways to add value to the process.
2. To seek to ensure that the process will be representative of the forest-sector stakeholders.
3. To trust the process and have faith in the people invited to give their input in the identification of needs and areas of concern.
4. To maintain the integrity of input throughout the process.
5. To protect the integrity of the process by ensuring uniform application of procedures.
6. To report results consistently across all participating stakeholder groups.
7. To strive to keep the dialogue and decision making related to the core issues.
8. To actively involve individuals from agencies and community organizations to offer input to potentially strengthen programs and services that reflect the needs of the forest-sector.
9. To communicate effectively throughout the process.

LSU AgCenter Forest Sector Development Support for Honduras

Due to the significant impact of Hurricane Mitch in October 1998 on the entire agricultural sector in Honduras, the LSU AgCenter part of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, contacted Honduran President Flores to offer assistance to and collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (SAG).

In February 1999, the LSU AgCenter was invited by the SAG to send a team of faculty for assessment purposes. This team's visit resulted in the LSU AgCenter submitting a comprehensive report to the Minister. Concurrent to these activities, the LSU AgCenter joined the Louisiana/Honduras Alliance, which was formed in April 1999. The Alianza Louisiana/Honduras is a comprehensive economic development partnership that brings together the resources of LSU, Tulane, Loyola, UNO, and the Honduran public and private sectors in a united effort under the coordination of MetroVision to rebuild Honduras.

Under the umbrella of the Alianza, a comprehensive set of proposals addressing planning, export crops, forestry, aquaculture, animal husbandry, human resource development, and related agricultural and natural resource management areas were developed by the LSU AgCenter. Two projects, agricultural reconstruction and forest sector development, were selected by USAID for funding through MetroVision.

The forest-sector project, primarily a technical-transfer effort, is focusing on areas including forest products utilization and processing, economic and rural development, marketing and business development, and value-added wood processing. To accomplish this, the LSU AgCenter assembled a team of specialists to work with counterparts in Honduras in each of these areas. The primary objective of the forest-sector projects is to empower people from many stakeholder groups to better utilize forests and associated areas impacted by forest in Honduras.

In May 2001, as part of the Alianza project, the forest-sector team began working with the Fundacion para la Inversion y Desarrollo de Exportaciones (FIDE) to help craft a set of strategic recommendations for forest sector investment and development. FIDE is a private, non-profit institution. It was created in 1984 to promote investment in Honduras and encourage development in the export sector. The Foundation also works closely with the government to create and advocate new legislation aimed at improving the Honduran business climate. Today FIDE's mission is to promote sustainable development in Honduras by strengthening investment and exports through constant improvement of the international competitiveness of the country and its companies.

In the activity conducted jointly by FIDE and the LSU Forest-Sector Team, the first step was to review all forest-industry-related documents that had been generated by FIDE over the past 5 years. These documents were generally consulting studies that examined different aspects of strategic and investment opportunities in the Honduran forest industry. The recommendations and major conclusions contained in each document were translated into English and compiled into a comprehensive list. The next step was to remove duplicate recommendations. The resulting comprehensive list was further categorized by major area or issue.

FIDE members reviewed this list with an interest in the forest sector and with the intent of narrowing the recommendations down to the top 25 priorities. Using this list as a starting point, the facilitated prioritization exercise was conducted.

Figure 1 shows the top 25 recommendations that were compiled by FIDE members. They run the gamut of issues, including financial, social sector, industrial processing, technical assistance, training, information management, and government support areas.

Figure 1.
Top 25 Forest Sector Priorities Submitted by FIDE on October 18, 2001

- Creation of a database of Marketing Information. Monitoring of volumes of imports and exports, prices, type of products, quality, international markets

- Identification of market opportunities on the demand side through market research.

- Identification of opportunities on the supply side. Look for market niches in international markets that can be supplied with products that can be produced in Honduras

- Change marketing strategies to get access to different markets

- Set up logistic procedures for exporting

- Reduction of delivery time, inventories, production cost, freight, handling and inspection cost.

- Implement incentives programs to forest owners to compensate risks.

- Implementation of training programs for public education on forestry management, production and to the industry to increase productivity

- Create appropriate lines of credit for the forestry sector to finance the investments in the improvement of competitiveness.

- Develop collaboration among entities of support in the United States and Europe to train in quality control, support technical, and other training.

- Development of a national strategy for training, extension and applied research in order to solve the technical and human resources problems facing the forestry industry

- Promote a technical assistance and credit program for the modernization and improvement of the industry and search for special niches for the forestry products derived from thinning.

- Promote the use and training of domestic market norms that generate competitiveness in the primary sector.
- Strengthen the competitiveness of the enterprises through an investment in productivity improvement.
- Create a Forest Information Center (CIEF), as a spin off of the existing CIEF, which could operate in the private sector.
- Create an incentives framework for the forestry management of natural forests in production, for the industrial reforestation, and the modernization of the forestry industry.
- Development of strategies for guarantee foreign and national investment.
- Create direct incentive instruments for the owners of forest plantation owners, so they can take on the risk of waiting 20 or more years to harvest the plantation. These incentives must be long term with the objective of creating an efficient and competitive plantation investment that can compete at a global level.
- Development of financial programs for the forestry sector including long-term financing options for capital investment.
- Promote new participants in the industry, especially foreign investment to promote rivalry among the industrial sector that leads to a continued improvement.
- Development of a government plan for research/extension in the forestry sector
- Develop a national structure for manufacturing products with higher value-added and more differentiation Development of training programs and technical assistance according to the organizational level of the companies
- Development of an strategy to involve rural population located at the forest in the production activities of the industry and sustainable management of the forest
- Establish a high-level national forest sector council with representation from key stakeholder groups

As mentioned earlier in this article, the next step was to conduct the multi-stakeholder prioritization exercise facilitated by the LSU AgCenter team. The top 25 recommendations submitted by FIDE were the starting point. However, participants at the meeting had the opportunity to add recommendations to the list.

This process had two components. First the group prioritized the recommendations and, second, ranked them in terms of which had the highest probability of being doable. The figures that follow convey the results of these two meeting components.

Following introductions, short presentations by meeting organizers and additions to the FIDE list of recommendations, participants submitted their ranked priorities for activities that need to take place for forest sector development in Honduras.

The top two ranked priorities both have to do with marketing. The top ranked recommendation is to conduct market research that can help to identify market opportunities for Honduran wood products producers. Second ranked is the need to develop a comprehensive national marketing strategy and implementation plan.

Next ranked is the need for government involvement in forming the foundation for industry development at the national level. This is followed by the recommendation to form a national forest-sector development council that would have representation from all key stakeholder groups including industry, government, academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international consulting support.

Beyond identifying priorities for forest sector development, it is also critical to identify which recommendations are feasible and have a high probability of implementation success. After completing the prioritization activity, participants ranked the recommendations that were most doable in the current economic/political/social climate in Honduras.

As seen in Figure 2, there is general agreement between what is a priority and what is doable. The recommendation with the widest gap is "Identification of market opportunities," where implementation potential exceeds priority (although this was first ranked for both). On the other hand, there is a perception that "Marketing strategy development" is more easily implemented than it's ranking in the prioritization exercise.

Figure 2.

Top 10: Priority vs. Doable Forest Sector Development Recommendations

Number of Responses



Next Steps in the Process

When people participate in the recommendation prioritization session, they are most likely to express their concerns as problems. The first important step for action planning, then, is to convert problems that are complained about into goals that can be worked toward.

Therefore, the second step in this strategic planning support process for the Honduran forest sector will be to break the overall goal into smaller objectives that are reasonably achievable and measurable. Going through the hard thinking of breaking a goal into an objective is worth the effort in the long run. Participants are likely to miss an important aspect of the issue if they name objectives first, and they're more likely to generate many alternative strategies if clear objectives are established first.

Structured planning procedures should produce working plans for addressing issues by goals, objectives, action steps, resources, timeframes, and contacts. These working plans should become the foundation of a forest-sector strategy for the next 3-5 years. They are also the foundation for cross-agency collaboration.

In order for collaboration and cooperation to work between agencies and organizations in the forest sector, there needs to be a sincere desire to work together. Collaboration requires extra effort and energy, especially for the group that is trying to build a bridge to others. Many times, it takes more energy on the front end because stakeholders have to do most of the initial construction. In the long run, the forest-sector will have more support, better utilization of resources, and better access to different resources (which includes funding and leadership).

It takes a higher degree of emotional intelligence to band and work together, either in a corporate setting or across corporate cultures. It also requires continually moving forward with education and training. It creates an environment whereby all feel positive about what is done together. Collaboration and cooperation leads to a potential for benchmarking. Once a sense of trust is present, there is a tendency to compare ideas, as well as best practices. Adopting best practices raises the level of the bar for the forest sector.

Specifically, the activities in the next phase of this facilitated process are:

1. Distinguishing between undesired problems and desired goals.
2. Converting problems into goals.
3. Breaking goals down into objectives.
4. Ensuring objectives are measurable and achievable.

The primary goal is generating solutions. Goals and objectives that don't have specific action steps with deadlines and resources are just wish lists. Often, the discussion of an issue will begin with suggested action steps. You can use the action steps as the basic element for planning, with resources, timeframes, and contacts associated with them.

Finally, key end-results from the next phase in the planning process are:

1. Describing action steps as strategies to achieve objectives.
2. Describing timeframes.
3. Describing resources (financial, material, facilities).

4. Describing contacts as key relationships.

Summary

Regardless of the underlying motivation (rural development, adding value, employment enhancement, etc.), the recommendation prioritization process described in this article is but the first step in a planning framework that can help develop sustainable strategies. For success to be achieved, many stakeholders, including local development organizations, industry members, academic institutions, and state and local economic development agencies must be involved to move from baseline analysis to program implementation.

At the end of the day, we hope that the information generated in this first step in forest-sector development planning will be used by legislators and other policy makers in Honduras to provide resources to develop programs that will further forest industry stability and sustainable growth.

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