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COALITIONS AND THE ORGANIZATION OF MULTIPLE-STAKEHOLDER ACTION: A CASE STUDY OF AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH AND EXTENSION IN RAJASTHAN, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Decentralization implies an increase in the number of stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of interventions. This paper draws upon the experience of a multi-stakeholder program in India which has sought to increase the contribution of rainfed agriculture to rural household's economic portfolios. The strategy has been one of enhancing government research and extension service provision through collaboration and coalition building between NGOs and government line departments. Evidence from the last four years demonstrates that coalitions are appropriate vehicles for managing interaction among multiple and diverse organizations. However, as fluid entities without permanent governance systems, coalitions require formalized support mechanisms to function effectively. The value to project designers and policy makers of this paper lies primarily in the description and analysis of the "nested" organizational support system which developed to fulfill the every day needs of the coalition in Rajasthan. Its secondary value lies in the discussion of conceptual and practical aspects of building and supporting coalitions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In India, current moves towards decentralization and devolution in local governance imply an increase in the number of stakeholders involved in decisions and control of resources. In agricultural research and extension these trends translate into the rhetoric of demand-driven policies and programs. However, practice often falls short of expectations, particularly in rainfed farming locations. Here, while poverty is commonplace and agriculture constitutes a major part of households livelihood portfolios, agricultural productivity remains low and cultural contexts militate against the farmers' voice being heard by research and extension professionals.

This paper draws upon the evidence of a multi-stakeholder program which has taken place in the predominantly rainfed areas of Rajasthan over the last four years. The principle objective of this intervention has been to increase the contribution of rainfed agriculture to rural households' economic portfolios. The strategy has been one of enhancing government research and extension service provision through collaboration and coalition building between NGOs and government line departments. The program has

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brought together over 50 organizations. These include state line departments, an agricultural university, non-government organizations (NGOs), national and international agencies and village level groups. Immediate gains in productivity were not anticipated and this paper does not attempt to evaluate impact. However, there have been measurable and encouraging outputs. Line department extension staff have been more successful in meeting their existing targets in project villages; farmer groups are now active and are making better use of government services; new composite varieties of maize are being grown; existing irrigation facilities are functioning again under collective management; and research is taking place under farmer conditions and with high levels of farmer involvement.

Because of the number and diversity of actors involved in Rajasthan the intervention was approached as a "process," rather than as a "project-driven," activity. Disparities in actors' perspectives coupled with limited experience of working together required this process to be one centered on building coalitions of interest. Evidence from the last four years demonstrates that while such coalitions are fluid entities without permanent governance systems they require formalized support mechanisms to function effectively. The value to project designers and policy makers of this paper lies primarily in the description and analysis of the "nested" organizational support system which developed to fulfill the every day needs of the coalition in Rajasthan. Its secondary value lies in the discussion of conceptual and practical aspects of building and supporting coalitions.

The remainder of this paper begins by briefly introducing current shifts in the policy and organizational context of the agricultural sector in India. The partial success of these

shifts is then used to justify the multi-stakeholder process-approach taken in the intervention. In section two the concept of coalitions is reviewed and their core functions — information sharing, creation of common knowledge, shared decision making — examined. This sets the theoretical stage for the description and analysis of the nested monitoring, information and decision making (MID) system which evolved in support of the Rajasthan coalition and which is described in section three. The concluding section summarizes the experience and draws out lessons for the design of multi-stakeholder interventions.

POLICY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Current agricultural sector policy and program design in India demonstrate a recent move away from traditional norms of agricultural research and extension to approaches which seek to be more responsive to farmers conditions and requirements. Evidence of this shift in research is found in the GVK Rao Report (Gupta 1988) and commissioning of the Johl Committee (ICAR 1996) both of which are concerned with potential improvements in organization, procedures and structure as they affect research organisations. Acceptance of this refocusing at a policy level, has also been reflected in the recommendations of workshops overseen by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) in May and September 1995 (Katyal and Farrington 1997).

Similar trends are discernable in extension. They are apparent in the new interpretation of the Training & Visit (T&V) system of extension, which now places much

more emphasis on: accessing a wide range of farmers for needs identification, problem solving and technology testing; building organizational links between farmers and government functionaries; allowing some decentralized decision making for financing specific activities; and, improving the relationship between research and extension (Rajasthan n.d.; World Bank 1992).

In operational terms, key policy shifts can be summarized as:

- recognition of an increase in the numbers and types of actors/organizations;
- a move from research station to farmers' fields as research sites;
- use of social science perspectives and skills in supporting changes; and,
- acceptance of the need for organizational and human capacity building.

Despite this policy recognition of the need to consider the organizational and human elements of technical change there is little evidence of its translation into practice. Policy initiatives, while providing a supportive context, have not yet managed to bring about the full range of change necessary for the paradigm shift from scientist- to farmer-centered agricultural development (Kerr 1996, 148). For example, policy changes have had little impact on the relationship between farmers and extension workers. Poor farmers do not feel empowered to make demands on an extension functionary in-spite of changes in the T & V system. Most are unaware that there has been a policy change. In addition to there being no incentive for extension functionaries to explain changes to farmers, it is unreasonable to assume, especially in a hierarchical culture, that a low paid government functionary will give up any opportunity he may have for rent seeking, investing in social

capital,[1] developing other income sources or consolidating his position of power. There is no reason why he (and it generally is a "he") should. The policy may change along with some structural reforms in organization, but little attention is paid to those factors which drive the system either from inside or from outside. Internally there is little evidence of changes in incentives or criteria and systems of accountability. Additionally there is little, if any, investment in enhancing the service providers' understanding of the need for interaction and the skills needed to do it. There is also little development of the client groups' ability to make demands on services and functionaries or of systems which could help them hold the service provider accountable for good performance.

The problems are similar but further compounded in research. Relative to farmers, especially poorer farmers, scientists occupy a high social position. This positioning is reinforced by an educational system which, in the wake of green revolution fervor, continues to promote the hegemony of science, its products and a deductive, positivist method of enquiry and analysis. This is exacerbated by the lack of opportunity that a farmer may have to either use or challenge a scientist's views or knowledge. As with extension, incentives for scientists to work with farmers are low. The scientific community is rewarded within traditional objectives, which predominantly focus on yield

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[1] Social capital is used here to indicate the stock of social relations in which people invest and from which are expected to flow streams of future benefits. The term is used as Coleman (1990) defined it rather than the more recent interpretation by Putnam (1993). Putnam tends towards a definition of social capital in which social relations produce desirable outcomes. Coleman recognized the horizontal relationships identified by Putnam but also included in his definition of social capital those hierarchical or vertical relationships which can have undesirable effects for some groups or individuals.

increases under controlled conditions. Additionally, any mechanisms of accountability which might ensure that existing platforms for scientist-farmer interaction (such as diagnostic team visits) appear to be either non-existent or un-enforced.

CHANGES NEEDED

"We hear sudden declaration of fashionable support for participatory approaches..(but)..under the cloud of cosmetic rhetoric, technocratic planning continues to rule" (Cernea 1991, 14).

It is perhaps unfair to judge the effects of policy shifts when they are still in process. However, it can be argued that unless greater attention is paid to the factors which drive the functioning of the organizations, institutions and human resources through which changes are to be enacted, those implementing change will continue to use the paths and behavioral patterns with which they are comfortable and for which they are equipped. These paths and patterns are rooted in professional, economic and social cultures and pose a formidable challenge to those trying to change them (Chambers 1993; Moris 1991). As the limited success of the new T & V system (World Bank 1992) and ineffective efforts to promote collegiate on-farm work demonstrate (Jiggins and Raman 1994), partial modification of structures alone will not bring about behavioral change.

While agricultural policies and programs have begun to address some organizational factors they have inadequately considered those which would address issues of social

positioning, power and institutions,[2] and have therefore missed out on aspects of change which could bring about paradigmatic and subsequent transformations on the ground. Current development discourse argues that, because of complexity and scale, these changes cannot be managed solely through the imposition of external conditions (Chambers et al. 1989; Howes and Chambers 1979; Reijntjes et al. 1992; Scoones and Thompson 1993). Hence, organizations involved in an intervention have to "buy in" or be committed to any changes which may be required in their perspectives and ways of operating. Essentially, they need to become stakeholders on terms which are acceptable and internalized.

Historically, projects and programs have adopted a different approach — one which has reinforced a top-down, supply driven perspective to development. This has largely suited the working procedures of national bureaucracies and donor agencies. However, analysis of the often poor returns to, or impact of, investments which take this approach indicates that change needs to occur in a more evolutionary manner allowing both the rationale for change to be understood and articulated by those whom it affects, and for responses to change to be defined as events unfold. Acceptance of this implies a shift in both the management of change (from blue-print to process) and the apportioning of resources (from primarily technical and physical towards more human and organizational investment).

In contrast to traditional "blue-print" approaches, process approaches recognize that

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[2] Rules governing behavior.

all projects have permeable boundaries and are influenced by their wider social and institutional environment. They take into account the unpredictable and idiosyncratic elements in interventions (which are central to success or failure but have been rarely considered explicitly by project management) and allow the freedom to define outputs and activities. This is the theory. In practice "process" interventions are very hard to implement and to manage. They imply a level of decentralization which, if the process is to be effective, depends on mutual understanding of priorities and purposes at all levels; high quality of performance by all actors; and a significant degree of trust among those involved. On a small scale this may be manageable. On a larger scale, such as that of government programs or large donor projects, the organizational mechanisms which can host the functions of decentralized process are rarely adequate. As donors and governments seek to cut back management and administration costs their ability to engage professionally in program formulation and development is also seriously impaired. This restricts their understanding to an administrative level and reduces the organizational learning of the funding agency.

Process approaches are potentially important but often require a higher degree of devolution of fiscal and managerial power than is currently usual. If decentralized, actor-centered development is to take place several things need to occur: first, an "enabling environment" has to be created through policy action and high level support; second, restructuring of existing organizations will probably be necessary; third, investment in the human capital which both staffs and is served by those organizations will need to be made; and finally, organizational mechanisms to host decentralized and multi-stake-holder

interaction will need to be encouraged or created.[3]

BACKGROUND TO THE INTERVENTION

The events described in this paper are of the first stages of a process seeking to enhance the performance of government agricultural research and extension services in the State of Rajasthan. Set against the changing background of agricultural policy in India the intervention benefitted from past experience with attempts to change professional agriculturalists' perspectives and behavior through "project" interventions. The concept of process was important in determining the approach of the donor (the Ford Foundation). In attempting to create a stakeholder owned and driven set of activities the funding pattern attempted to be predominantly responsive (though on occasion pro-active) and fragmented, not in terms of strategy, but in terms of timing and actors. In this way the boundaries and executive management normally associated with a "project" were more difficult to apply — something which proved important when responsibility for impact was questioned.

The intervention strategy focused primarily on the organizational and procedural issues which have persistently undermined past efforts to improve the productivity of farmers working in the predominantly rainfed environments of Rajasthan. Its purpose was to increase the functionality of linkages between agricultural research and extension services and their clients. The development of debate and action involving government

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[3] "Organization is essential to the achievement of effective agency...It is the stabilizing and fixing factor in circuits of power" (Clegg 1989, 17).

agencies and NGOs has been critical to both strengthening farmers' capacity to articulate demand, and assisting government functionaries to respond. In order to make this collaboration effective particular attention has been paid to the channels and mechanisms of interaction.

2. CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

Many current policy and project efforts emphasize the role of NGOs as development agents and encourage interaction between them and government departments or agencies. As in some other sectors, in agriculture NGOs are seen to play a useful link role between the technical services and those farmers most poorly served by, and in the worst position to make demands on, research and extension. However, while supportive of the enabling environment created by such policy initiatives, this intervention sought to broaden the conventional interpretation of NGOs role and way they related to government.

Acknowledgment of NGO's ability to reach disenfranchised groups and to work effectively in a participative mode has increasingly led government agencies to "contract" with NGOs to undertake rural development work (PRADAN 1996). While this has yielded tangible benefits for some rural inhabitants, serious questions of scale, efficiency, technical capability and power can be raised about this form of relationship. First, many NGOs tend to be small organizations working in a restricted geographical area. This limits the spread of new ideas, approaches and improvements in productivity. Second,

there are many occasions when the development administration has staff in place responsible for precisely those activities which NGOs are contracted to undertake. Certain conditions militate against sharp divisions of labor, but the scale at which the duplication of manpower and services often occurs is inefficient. Third, many NGOs do not have the scientific or technical skills necessary for certain aspects of agricultural development. Finally, many NGOs are concerned that contract relations lead to a lack of control over the design and implementation of procedures and activities. Their staff indicate a strong preference for collaborative arrangements which lead to cooperation and collegiality with government staff but which do not threaten the autonomy of either party. This does not invalidate contractual working relations in specific situations, rather it demands a paradigm shift from those issuing the contracts to allow early consultation and negotiation over both the form of work and the decision of whether or not contracting out is the best option.

Collegiality is not easy to establish among actors who often operate with very different rules governing behavior and from very different organizational backgrounds (Arya et al., forthcoming). When the requirements of process approaches to development are added, the problems of working together are exacerbated. The demands of process approaches on organizations and people staffing them are such that most are unable to respond adequately. Many, especially larger, NGOs and all government departments are structured along hierarchical lines. In such contexts the concept and practice of a "learning organization" (Burgoyne 1992; Senge 1994) is very new. Smaller NGOs may demonstrate an ability to be more flexible and immediately responsive to changing

situations. However, because of limited capacity, track record and legal status these are seldom considered appropriate partners for government. Where they are it has been shown that their ability to respond to process requirements is usually frustrated by the government's inability to operate in a similarly dynamic manner (PRADAN 1996). It is unrealistic to expect representatives of organizations struggling with new ideas, approaches and responses to work together, to resolve differences in understanding, to disregard issues of status and to operate as equal actors unless the intervention within which they are working provides an environment supportive of consensus and "team" building.

COALITIONS TO HOST INTERACTION

In Rajasthan the effectiveness of new working relationships largely depended on the degree to which NGOs and government perceived themselves as a group sharing a collective interest for at least part of their work. This took the form of a collective identity centered around improving the demand-response relations between government agricultural services and poorer farmers. This collective identity defined a broad coalition. It is argued that the idea of "coalitions" provides a useful construct for the management and interaction of disparate stakeholders.

Coalitions refer to joint action by two or more interest groups against another subgroup in an organizational context (Bacharach & Lawler 1982).[4] They provide a

[4] Biggs and Smith (1995) argue that agricultural research coalitions are: (1) thematically based, i.e., they focus on a particular issue or interest; (2) have informal and

framework within which interaction occurs.[5] Interaction can take several forms which are useful to describe in order to identify which are appropriate to a coalition. Three forms, adapted from the earlier work of Biggs (1990) are referenced: **Consultative** relations are those where the views of some actors are solicited by others but not necessarily taken into account by final decision makers. The degree of formalization is usually controlled by one party, which may choose to offer remuneration for the "services" of consultation. **Contractual** relations are formal and ones in which one party accepts to carry out specified tasks, usually in exchange for financial remuneration, and with specified performance criteria and time schedules. In a contractual relationship, disputes can be brought to a court of law. The third form of relationship is **collegiate**. As this form of interaction requires that power equations between parties are equal or irrelevant it is the only one appropriate within a coalition. The collegiality can be acted out in number of settings. It may sometimes imply financial exchange, but more often than not is one where actors trade information and ideas.

Coalitions differ as entities from organizations. In addition to hosting different

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often diverse membership; (3) have open boundaries, i.e., boundaries are not spatially or socially circumscribed; (4) are time specific, i.e., they refer to the experiences of one point in time; and (5) provide common ground for people/organizations whose involvement may be motivated by very different reasons. While agreeing in general with this characterization, experience from Rajasthan demonstrates that coalitions may be spatially defined and that time-specificity is not always a feature as coalitions do display an ability to evolve in character over time and as the focus of collective interest shifts.

[5] Interaction is used here to refer to situations where the actions of one organization, person or group is influenced by, dependent on, or oriented towards the actions of another (adapted from Farrington and Bebbington 1993, 127).

forms of interaction a coalition represents an informal affiliation of individuals and/or organizations. It is neither subject to legally binding agreements which imply collective responsibility nor does it have a permanent system of governance. Coalition membership may correspond to a formal organization but may also comprise sub-groups within and across organizations. Coalitions can also cut across the normative and more explicit boundaries of everyday life, such as social grouping or political party. This does not imply that coalitions are not *organized*. For effective interaction to occur there need to be accepted forms of interaction.

Coalitions are fluid forms of organization, but any form of organization implies agreed modes of operation, or rules of engagement. It is useful in this discussion to distinguish between those rules of engagement which govern formal organizations and those governing coalitions.[6] Rasmussen & Meinzen-Dick (1995) classify rules of engagement for formal organizations as being of three types: operational rules; collective choice rules; constitutional rules.[7] The first and last category are not a part of the institutional framework of a coalition, and thus help define the differences between a coalition and organization. It is an adaptation of the second type — collective choice

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[6] Rules can vary in their degree of formality, from written lore to shared understanding.

[7] They define the first as comprising: boundary and access rules; allocation rules; input rules, penalty rules and conflict resolution rules. The second, taken from Tang (1992) and Ostrom (1990) "give guidelines for formulating, changing and enforcing operational rules (which) define who is eligible and how future rules will be made" (Rasmussen op. cit., 14) The third, constitutional rules, are those relating to how an organization interfaces with groups, issues or entities beyond its collective boundaries.

rules — which helps the understanding, building and management of coalitions. Collective choice rules are those which determine the boundaries of collective decision making and action by defining and supporting forms and channels of interaction. In a coalition they are defined and refined by the collectivity who thus often feel greater identity than do members of an organisation, for whom rules are often prescribed, with the norms which determine their collective behaviour.

A key rule of engagement for coalitions is that interaction must, even if it goes through a conflictive stage, eventually arrive at consensus if collective decisions are to be made, or joint action agreed upon. Interaction at this point may represent "approximate consensus," that is, where parties agree to differ on principles but agree on outputs. Another key rule is that within coalitions interaction should be collegial.

Because they have neither constitutional nor operational rules coalitions cannot engage in contract relations. Contracts can occur between individuals or organizational entities who affiliate themselves with a coalition but, because of lack of formalized accountability, coalitions as a collective entity cannot enter into contracts.

ROLES OF COALITIONS

The anthropology of organizations has increased our understanding of competing interests in the process of social and economic development. From this body of thought comes the "actor-oriented" approach of Long and Long (1992) which perceives communities and development organizations as political actors pursuing different agendas yet negotiating development outcomes. This holds true for coalition members as does the

Longs' recognition that these entities may not be homogenous in their broader interests or approaches.

Coalitions often bring together a wide range of interest groups — each making its own decision on who to interact with and how. Coalitions in Rajasthan were observed to function at both an aggregated and disaggregated level. The aggregate coalition was the largest group of stakeholders involved in the effort to bring about agricultural change. Disaggregated coalitions were those which involved alignments of smaller numbers of actors from within the former. Choices of alignment depend on judgements of which grouping best serves the member's purpose.

At the current stage of events in Rajasthan coalitions, both aggregate and disaggregated, perform the following minimal functions[8] for members:

- information sharing
- creation of common knowledge
- shared decision making

While coalitions are characterized by structural fluidity, the services they perform for members require regularized channels for information transmission and fora for debate and decision making. Without these "enabling mechanisms" the good intentions and space

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[8] Additional functions, which have often been at the center of analysis of coalitions in the past, include advocacy and lobbying (Bates 1980; Gaiha 1993; Lipton 1989). These are beginning to emerge as important issues among coalition members in Rajasthan. However, as there is as yet only limited experience of these functions they do not center in the discussion of what mechanisms are important to initially support a coalition they do not form the focus of a particular section in this paper. Rather they feature in the later discussion on the performance of the coalition found in section 4.

generated through policy change (referred to earlier as the creation of an "enabling environment") is unlikely to be used to its full potential.[9]

Each of the above functions has particular attributes. These shape the form which each mechanism takes. Therefore, before describing the system which has evolved in Rajasthan, it is useful to examine these more closely.

INFORMATION SHARING FOR MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS

Development implies change. Effective decisions about change and the means of achieving it, whether at an individual or societal level, are dependent on information being available in a timely manner and appropriate form. The smaller the universe in which information is used, the easier are information systems to manage. However, as rural development programs become increasingly participatory the range of actors involved also increases. Along with this increase in scale come new demands on information systems.

A set of activities in which there are several stakeholders requires a system or complex of systems for both continuously handling information and using it for multiple, diverse and different levels of decisions about action. For example, a farmer involved in a watershed development program needs a different set of information for farm management decisions than does an external change agent, who may need fiscal, impact or management data, or a Secretary to government who is making decisions about watershed development

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[9] Given the extremities of inequality in India enabling mechanisms have to be robust enough to withstand attempts of appropriation by stronger members of society who might either see them as a means of increasing their power or as something which could undermine their position of strength or status.

policy and programs. All have equally valid information needs and make decisions which exert a strong influence on each other in terms of activities, responses and relationships. Certain parts of each other's knowledge base can therefore be hypothesized as useful to the other.

Information systems which service single individuals or groups of decision makers can be fairly simple. However, even in simple systems access to information is conditioned by the physical, social and economic positioning of an actor. In multiple stakeholder situations, where different people have different needs and where circulation of information depends on the contributions of a number of individuals and organizations, the situation becomes more complex. Information systems also often do not function fully because of a lack of incentive to circulate information. Therefore, if multiple actors are to work together there is a need to ensure that (a) a common accessible information pool is available, and (b) potential contributors value it enough to feed information. The Rajasthan case shows that vehicles to host flows and pools of information can be created. The experience also demonstrates though that unless there is enough pressure put on members of a coalition to contribute by other members, some potential contributors can become sitting partners and simply extract and use the information that others supply without reciprocating. Therefore, not only is there a need to put in place systems for hosting information, there is a need to ensure that people both value what is available to them and have the means whereby they are able to pressure members of a coalition considered to be under-contributing.

CREATION OF COMMON KNOWLEDGE

A further problem in designing systems which can assist in information sharing is that even where information is circulated or available it does not necessarily mean that it (the information or raw material[10]) will become knowledge (that is, information which has been assimilated and re-expressed). In addition, in a multiple actor situation it cannot be assumed that circulating information will result in knowledge which is common to all members of that group or coalition. But common knowledge is critical for consensus within a coalition and consensus, even approximate, is necessary for collective action.

The belief that knowledge has to be common in multi-stakeholder situations is rooted in the idea articulated by Foucault (1971) that knowledge is power. For a coalition (implying a high degree of equity among members) to function effectively each member has to be equipped with the same knowledge of the subject being discussed or about which decisions are being made. This avoids the possibility of actors using knowledge in either the behavioral sense (using knowledge to their own advantage at the cost of others) or structural sense (to reinforce their position) (White 1993). Either may undermine or cause the breakdown of coalitions.

Scoones and Thompson suggest "While we cannot escape the strictures of our own language...or our own ways of reasoning..., we can acknowledge that these provide us

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[10] The concept of "raw material" is also contestable as, to become information, it needs a vector and that vector screens the "material" through his or her socially constructed epistemology. However, for the purposes of this paper the issue is approached pragmatically. The concept of "raw material" is used to denote the first or lowest level of extraction or interpretation.

with only partial views of our world and that there is a multiplicity of other equally valid ones" (Op. cit., 9). In addition, however, diverse actors within a coalition have to accept that each other's interpretation of phenomena is qualified by existing knowledge bases.

This can work positively as it implies that as a knowledge base is expanded the explanation of phenomena, and subsequent response, may change. For example, a farmer may state that his/her maize crop has failed because of witchcraft — something which is perceived as beyond his or her control. A scientist may see that the crop has failed because of either drought at tasseling time or pest attack and that the solution to either may be under the control of the farmer. If both the farmer's and scientist's points of view can be explored and validated it is possible that in future the expanded knowledge base of either party could lead to avoidance of future crop failure.

The building of common knowledge is therefore not without problems. Not only do bodies of knowledge differ but epistemologies also vary amongst diverse actors (Bebbington 1992; Chambers 1992; Evans 1993; Harding 1996; Habermas, Lyotard, and Rorty in Cahoone 1996; Scoones and Thompson 1993; Shiva 1988). This is problematic when trying to create common pools of knowledge. There is little experience to guide modes of operating under these conditions. However, these situations exist and, as decentralization gathers momentum, the number of situations in which multiple stakeholders come together looks set to increase.

In practical terms, to exchange information and to use that exchange to create shared knowledge requires development of mechanisms to host discourse and innovation. As Scoones and Thompson note, "It is within a context of contestation that, through a

process of dialogue and exchange, innovation and knowledge creation has and will always operate" (op. cit., 10). However, as pragmatists, coalition members will sometimes need to accept ways of moving forward which may imply compromise, although not systematic disregard, for certain group's knowledge. A coalition must also ensure that those mechanisms for creating common knowledge are as free as possible from appropriation or misuse by particular parties.

DECISION MAKING FOR COMPLEMENTARY ACTION

Recent statements world-wide indicate that the state will seek to roll back its boundaries and promote greater levels of common participation through group representation. However, the organizational mechanisms which enable information transfer for creating shared knowledge which will lead to informed, collective decision making tend to be ill-defined and often only partially functioning in many interventions. In decentralized and participatory development each actor is a stakeholder and by definition, at some level, has the right to be a decision maker. However, often stakeholders will be from diverse institutional backgrounds; have dissimilar frames of reference; use disparate vernacular vocabularies and knowledge bases; and aspire to different agendas. The creation of a system for sharing of information can help in creating a common knowledge base for decision making, but creating a forum for equal participation in decision making presents other problems. In multi-stakeholder situations decisions are made by different people and interest groups at different times. Where government, NGO, farmers and other interest groups all have strong stakes in a decision it is not too difficult to establish

platforms for joint decision making. Ensuring that issues of status and power do not impinge on its functioning is another matter. Where coalitions are to be established there must be careful analysis of power relations among members and procedures put in place to ensure equality.

Decisions concerning only one or a sub-set of all the stakeholders in a given process present two further problems. One is ensuring that the fora in which these decisions are taken are open so that other members of the aggregate coalition can choose whether or not they participate. The other is the effect on pools of shared knowledge. Any of the interactions which occur between sub-sets of actors may give rise to new knowledge which is common only to themselves. Exclusivity of knowledge is not just a question of power--although it can be important, it is also one of practicality. The costs of dispensing information can be high to the point of discouraging sharing.

It is perhaps by focusing on outputs that solutions can be found. Most decisions result in some form of output. This can be strategic, i.e., relating to policy or concepts, or practical, i.e., relating to action. The boundary for informing the common knowledge pool could be when outputs relate to the common interest, or the process in which all stakeholders are vested. Similarly, decisions would have to be made by the sub-set of actors about informing other stakeholders of the fora in which outputs were to be discussed. If others were seen to have or expressed a stake, then the fora should be open.

Practical outputs include tangible action. This action can be collective and involve the entire group of stakeholders; bi-or tri-lateral, involving a sub-set of actors; or it can be discrete and involve only one sub-set working on its own. However, if that action furthers

the interest of the whole, or aggregate, coalition then it and its effects are useful to the collective knowledge. Information about the action should therefore be fed into the common information stream. Effective feedback loops and beneficiary participation in decision making can be found under the simpler conditions of two-party dialogue, time-bound agendas and pre-determined objectives (Checkland 1989) such as in some agricultural research projects (Pretty 1994). The difficult but important task faced when dealing with larger numbers of actors, is to apply similar principles to more complex situations of information flow, use and decision making (Bawden 1992).

3. COALITIONS IN PRACTICE

The following section first describes events in the process of coalition building in Rajasthan. Next it outlines and illustrates a set of mechanisms that have evolved and which are enabling the coalition to manage flows of information, create common knowledge and support collective decision making.

EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES

The first moves in this program were made in 1992 when informal discussions were held by the Ford Foundation Program Officer with senior government officials in the state and districts; with NGO representatives from large and small organizations; and with farmers. There was consistency in defining the problem among these groups but much diversity in opinions of what to do about it. While there was general agreement on the

need for participatory development, debate on the potential of collaboration between NGOs and government indicated very different perceptions of possible working relationships, particularly regarding decision making power, accountability and fiscal responsibility. Despite these differences of perception over the form that new working relations might take, government and NGO staff expressed interest in further interaction and met formally to discuss strategic options at a state level meeting in May 1993 supported by the government but organized and funded by the donor.

During the first year of discussion three grants had been made by the Ford Foundation to NGOs of different sizes and with different capabilities who were willing to attempt bringing farmers and government staff closer together in villages. Initially these actions were not so important for what they achieved physically, but because they served to focus the debate on the practical matters of what to work on and how to work together. They also gave NGOs who did not need or want donor support the opportunity to observe and discuss the opportunities and cost-effectiveness of involvement in the agricultural sector.[11] All this was documented informally by the donor through circulated letters and notes which reported and commented on visits, discussions and issues.

Initially, there was no prescribed structure or pattern of activities. While there was agreement on the primary goals and objectives, there were no "project" boundaries, no

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[11] Few NGOs in Rajasthan had at this time focused on agricultural production. Where they had been involved in natural resource development both their technical and organizational work had concentrated in environmental restoration and forest or wasteland management. The Ford Foundation initiative was timely inasfar as much of the physical work completed as part of these earlier efforts had created the preconditions for improving agricultural output.

script and no limits on who participated. Three factors determined this. First, it was considered essential that stakeholders themselves developed and defined the activities and relationships which they thought appropriate. Second, a more structured or pre-determined approach would have needed more informed actors. Collaboration in the agricultural sector had been extremely limited. Thus there was no experience on which to call in formulating new action. Third, the Ford Foundation could not finance exploratory planning processes or field experimentation on a large enough scale or, in the final stages of project definition, was in the business of negotiating structural change within government. It was anticipated that the emerging evidence of clients efforts to interface with government services would provide both evidence of the need for structural change and offer ideas of how this could be done.

The donor organized a further formal State level meeting in February 1994. NGOs and government reported on the collaborative activities in which they had been involved over the past months and the Ford Foundation Program Officer put forward a working strategy paper. This paper was intended as a thought piece and did not represent an attempt to offer actors a "blue-print," but a framework on which to hang the different activities which were beginning to take shape. It was anticipated that this meeting would serve as a point of consolidation and the strategy paper would offer a rationale and structure for the various activities. Additionally, it was expected that the meeting would help participants recognize a collective purpose and sow the seeds of a future coalition.

The program has included efforts to both expand perceptions of the various parties of how to work together and to ensure that collaboration has not become reduced solely

to contracting. The strategy pursued sought to develop balanced working relationships which drew on NGOs' participatory and organizational skills and built on the government's technical capabilities, geographic coverage and funds — without setting up organizational boundaries which would undermine collegiate interaction. In addition to government and local NGOs there were strategic inputs and support from external agencies, particularly for training and initiating process monitoring. The donor role in this has been mainly a facilitator of process rather than a monitor or administrator. As with all exploratory work, the development of experimental action was to be part of the process and while hypotheses about outcomes could be made, they could be proved wrong or modified.

Over the two years following the initial state level meeting the donor made a series of grants for both direct field action and process support. Four additional grants were made to local NGOs to work collaboratively with government extension staff in villages on agricultural and related natural resources development. Funding was made available to an NGO managed Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) to establish a local information exchange unit. A client-driven research fund (managed by the KVK) was established. Additional background research was financed separately focusing on: user groups; research-extension linkages; women's role in Rajasthani agriculture; and NGO-government experiences and options for collaboration. A farmer-based extension media needs survey was also undertaken. At the request of a Deputy Director of Extension an international organization (the International Institute for Environment and Development, United Kingdom) was brought in for recurrent participatory planning training and follow-up for

farmers, NGO staff and government functionaries. This team was also to document how the existing research and extension system dealt with the demands and needs of farmers which emerged from the seasonal participatory planning exercises. They were then to make recommendations for structural changes necessary if the system was to become more client driven. Partial funding of an international meeting on farmer participatory extension enabled representatives of both government and NGOs involved in the work in Rajasthan to participate.

In addition to the increase in donor financed action a number of other actors engaged in the process without external funding. Five non-grantee NGOs are currently working or involved in discussions with extension services. There has been a program of exchange visits to government's, NGOs' and a bi-laterally financed project's field sites. NGOs are now permanent invitees to the Zonal Research and Extension Advisory Committee meetings which are held seasonally to determine research and extension strategies. At the state level the Government of Rajasthan has broadened their definition of the role NGOs can play in the participatory development component of the World Bank funded Agricultural Development Project. It has also helped establish an organization (ARAVALI) to act in a liaison and coordinating capacity for government and NGO interaction, and has embarked on a major effort to decentralize agricultural research and extension services in an attempt to make them more cost-effective and responsive to the needs of resource poor farmers. GoR has also used resource people from the exercise to help in the formulation of proposals for 'Community involvement, farmers' participation

and NGOs', in the agriculture sector chapter of the IXth Five Year Plan.

MECHANISMS TO HOST COALITIONS

The narrative description of events in Rajasthan anchors earlier conceptual discussion but does not explain the processes or the mechanisms which have developed to support those processes. These factors, which both host and drive change, are often given insufficient attention in project design and analysis. However, they were critical in a situation involving multiple stakeholders who were entering a new mode of operating and new ways of relating to each other. The mechanisms which exist now in Rajasthan are ones which have developed alongside growing field action and state level interaction. It is assumed that they will continue to evolve as both the actors and the context in which they work change.

The need to focus on interactive mechanisms in Rajasthan was apparent from the early days of the initiative. It was clear both during the second state level meeting (1994) and in smaller meetings that had taken place over the preceding year that while oral information relating to the organizational, procedural and behavioral problems of working together might be shared informally, formal presentations and reports on activities repeatedly skirted these critical issues. Several reasons, which needed addressing if collective action was to succeed, underlay this:

- Direct individual and public reporting can personalize issues and jeopardize relations;
- These were not issues or topics which the actors were used to considering or

felt would change as a result of articulation in public; and

- No locally controlled or institutionalized mechanisms for inter-organizational information exchange, debate or decision making existed.

It was apparent that collective activities would not be effectively undertaken, understood or modified without channels for monitoring, information exchange and decision making. If issues of process were not shared and understood mistakes would be repeated, lessons lost and dissatisfaction would rise to dysfunctional levels. Information flow and its use needed to be enhanced. Without this, shared knowledge would be uneven, understanding of events and opportunities disparate and the likelihood of achieving the degree of consensus necessary for collective action very limited. As collegiate collaboration, particularly in agricultural development, was unfamiliar to all actors, on-line learning and response was considered to be as crucial during the formative stages of work and negotiation as when activities began to take shape and occur. Process monitoring (PM) was therefore initially identified as a key informational aid as those involved in the initiative sought to first understand what was happening and why, and then use this knowledge to take informed decisions about changes.

By the time of the second state level meeting, and after a fruitless search for a national agency which was both available and had the capacity to undertake PM activities, an international agency (the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), United Kingdom) was brought on line by the donor. ODI was to both assist local organizations develop PM systems and to undertake monitoring of inter institutional interaction as the process of improving agricultural extension and research service provision developed.

While there was early awareness of the need for both inter and intra organizational process monitoring (PM) the manner of operation and the way that this activity would be linked to the other coalition service functions (creating shared knowledge and enabling collective decision making) were not initially clear to the donor, the actors in Rajasthan or the organization undertaking process monitoring. The mechanisms through which this PM information was to be used by the emerging coalition were thus not prescribed at the outset of the program, but emerged and were supported by the donor — either practically or strategically — as the actors and context evolved.

In the following section the multi-purpose and multi-level information and decision making system which has emerged in Rajasthan is described and conceptualized.

A NESTED SYSTEM

Gathering information as events occur, undertaking rapid analysis of that and using the new knowledge to inform future action falls within the domain of what is commonly described as process monitoring. While definitions of this term abound (see in particular Korten in Veneracion 1989) it is useful here to define both that term and its sister activities. **Process monitoring** (PM), strictly speaking, is a set of activities designed to collect longitudinal information on a dynamic set of actions. PM focuses on not only inputs and outputs, but also on what drives a process. It examines human, social and organizational dimensions of events, as well as the outcomes, as part of an analysis which seeks to understand causal factors and effects. **Process documentation** is the act and art of recording that information. **Process analysis** uses this documentation to enhance

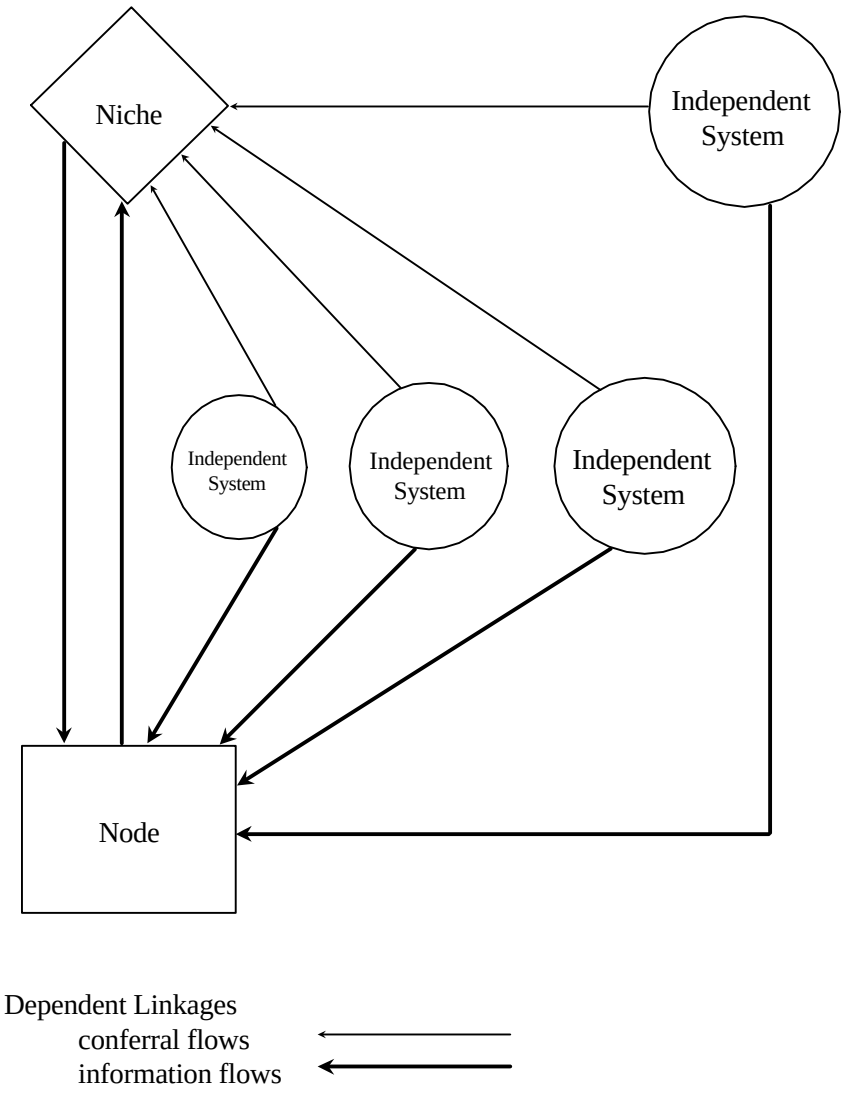
understanding of why events and actors are taking certain courses. The next stage is to translate that new knowledge into informed action. In this paper PM encompasses all three of the above. It is an activity particularly suited to multi-stakeholder situations where continuity of interaction and learning demand regular review of relationships between actors, the institutional and organizational mechanisms which govern relationships, and, the outcomes (decisions, activities, debates, disagreements) of interactions.

If PM is to function effectively either within or between organizations there must be linkages between the PM system, its users and decision making, or conferral, fora. What has evolved in Rajasthan is described as a "nested" system. This is one comprising multiple discrete but selectively linked information sets. In such a system each actor maintains an independent information system which is useful in informing the activities in which they engage. In addition, actors also open channels for inputting and accessing information to and from a common system. They can be lobbied to provide certain information, but not be forced to conform. However, effective users have to be contributors in some form and need to state their claim, that is they buy in or out, at regular intervals and accept responsibility for that claim. To become an effective tool in the use of knowledge, a nested system needs to be supported by nodal agents (“nodes”) — for PM information synthesis and management, and joint platforms (“niches”) — for debate and decision making.

In the rest of this section a monitoring, information flow and decision making (MID) system is described and its application illustrated through a selection of examples

from Rajasthan. The nested MID system comprises four components: independent monitoring systems; information management nodes; decision making or discussion niches; and dependent linkages. These are schematically outlined in Figure 1, and described below.

Figure 1 Schematic representation of a nested system



Independent Systems

At the heart of a nested system are functioning **independent monitoring systems**. An independent "system" may vary in its degree of formality but will always consist of flows of information between individuals or groups who share a common interest in an activity, information or decision. Independent monitoring systems become more useful to a coalition when they are part of a shared system of monitoring, information flow and decision making (MID). Those sharing a common interest might be groups of farmers — who may have a relatively informal system of monitoring and information exchange; an NGO and a group of farmers--who may have a more formalized system of meetings and record keeping; or a government extension system — which depend principally on a formalized system of reporting and information exchange.

The independent system is the lowest level discrete system[12] which can be identified. It will be recognized as an entity by participants and will often be dependent on stocks of social capital. Each independent system may use information for different purposes and makes decisions in different fora. There will be probable variance in ability and willingness to collect, analyze, record and make available information. However, if organizations are to be contributors to and users of a nested MID system they have to satisfy their responsibilities to the shared system. This may involve formalizing their information management systems and the form in which they contribute to the common information pool.

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[12] A system is defined as a set of elements, the linkages between which are stronger than linkages with other elements.

A number of independent monitoring[13] systems exist among the actors involved in the Rajasthan initiative. Each varies in its purpose and performance. They are, to varying degrees, currently in operation for: the government extension services; the agricultural research agency (a campus of the state agricultural university); non-government organizations; funding agents; and an international agency (ODI). Each uses its own monitoring system for its own purposes. Until recently, much information exchange or conferral[14] between independent systems (other than that of ODI) tended to be informal and *ad hoc*. Organizational size, organizational ethos and costs of monitoring appear to be key to the diversity observed in different systems. Thus efforts to link and/or modify these into a "nested" system concerned with process demand a deeper understanding of the mechanisms used in existing systems and their operational rationale.

Examination of the various organizations in Udaipur suggests a continuum between "open" and "restricted" MID systems. Open systems are typically those in which information is informally managed and accessed. Restricted systems display the opposite characteristics. It is apparent that, while MID systems service different organizations in different ways, along the spectrum independent MID systems perform three principle functions: they feed back into action; they inform about performance; and they constitute the basis for strategizing by executive interests. Prior to the recent collaborative initiative, small NGOs were typically found to be located towards the "open" and government

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13 As distinct from process monitoring systems.

14 Conferral is used in this paper to describe debate or decision making.

agencies towards the "restricted" end of the MID spectrum. For internal purposes small NGOs tended towards informal, *ad hoc* monitoring systems which depended mainly on oral information transmission. Their small size often allowed for democratic decision making and the processes and fora were informal. Links to external information systems tended to rely on individual contact and interest, and centralized knowledge systems were rarely initiated or accessed. In contrast, monitoring in the Department of Agriculture's extension service was highly structured, institutionalized in pre-determined formats, and dependent primarily on written records such as diaries, records of demonstrations, inputs supplied and fortnightly meeting attendance by farmers. Internal information access and flows are formal both between the service and its clients and within the Department. Examples include, fortnightly meetings between a Village Supervisor and a farmers' group; monthly meetings of Village Supervisors with Agricultural Extension Supervisors; meetings with Subject Matter Specialists; seasonal visits by diagnostic teams of "experts" to assess research and extension needs; and seasonal Zonal Research Extension Advisory Committee meetings. Decision making is highly centralized and mainly undertaken by administrators and managers rather than practitioners. Between the two extremes illustrated here fall NGOs of different sizes and government offices working under special schemes or projects.

Monitoring systems in Rajasthan have until recently concerned themselves only with matters important within the organization, with the singular exception of reporting to the paymasters. This latter type of monitoring tended to be formalized and dependent on documentation for all groups principally because of the similar interests of their "external

clients." Donors' and senior bureaucrats' needs centered mainly on financial, managerial and primary impact information. Differences in monitoring systems for external purposes were therefore small among organizations at different points along the spectrum.

When ODI joined the intervention in Rajasthan it was confronted with a task which initially few actors were able to understand or appreciate as a non-judgmental and constructive part of the process they had embarked upon. Many of the participants were unclear as to the purpose of process, as opposed to conventional project, monitoring. The donor and ODI agreed on broad objectives. PM information would:

- ensure multi-stakeholder learning which would lead to more effective collaborative activity,
- enhance individual organizations' capacity to assimilate knowledge and inform action,
- assist in the institutionalization of learning organizations capable of evolution, and
- monitor the donor's own operational efficiency.

While several participating organizations already had monitoring systems in place it was rare for these to focus on process, particularly the human or institutional dimensions. Most were concerned with outputs and products rather than how and why particular points or achievements were reached. Additionally, in Rajasthan it was rare to find a system which used information for decentralized or on-line, rather than end-of-project/phase, decision making. Where this did occur systems were usually very informal; only useful in small organizations; and produced information which was not robust enough

to withstand external scrutiny. The only system for inter-organization exchange which did exist was *ad hoc* in the extreme, prone to information distortion, and not usable for collective decision making.

More recently however several NGOs have begun to approach monitoring in a different way. They have been experimenting with PM and linking outputs to new or modified channels of information flow and new forms of decision making. This has changed not only the purposes of information handling but also how they do it and what kind of information then is available to clients. To give some specific examples: one large NGO uses PM in a very focused way to primarily record and understand the effects of project intervention. While the information this system deals in parallels more traditional monitoring systems which focus on inputs and outputs, it differs in the use it is put to and in the people that use it. This organization was one where interpretation of PM as a conventional survey activity initially led to data overload in both collection and analysis. Since that initial learning period the collection of information has become far more focused. One example of this is tracking the adoption of composite maize varieties over several years. This represents an attempt to understand the processes of information transfer, particularly between farmers. In terms of how it is used and by whom, the information is gathered by project field workers and has been used by them, at a decentralized level, to make decisions on the most effective mode of information transmission. This understanding, along with several other factors, led the NGO to develop a cadre of community elected agricultural para-extension workers who interface closely with the government extension functionaries for technical referral and training.

PM is thus becoming an integral part of the management, information and decision-making (MID) system of that organization.

Another large NGO has taken a much more holistic approach to PM and has dedicated a special team to understand the processes by which development does or does not occur. This information is fed back to all within the organization at regular monthly meetings during which the observations are discussed and decisions taken or tabled for future consideration. The organization refers to this effort as one which seeks to establish a joint management and information sharing system. Transition and change generally result in some conflict and there has been tension between field staff and those engaged in PM with the inevitable accusations of "policing" and other misinterpretations occurring. However, the organization's management and those involved in PM have been largely successful in changing the perception of the purpose of information gathering and the uses to which it is put. There are signs that this experience has influenced the way that the organization communicates internally and reaches decisions, making it now an organization more concerned with internal learning and decentralized decision making than previously.[15]

Other NGOs have used PM and linked it into MID systems in different ways. In brief two smaller, but operationally very different, NGOs have used PM in a case study

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[15] Used within organizations PM can therefore assist in the evolution of "a new type of organization. It will be able to deal with the problems and opportunities of today, and invest in its capacity to embrace tomorrow, because its members are continually focused on enhancing and expanding their collective awareness and capabilities. You can create....an organization which can learn" (Senge 1994, 1).

mode to understand the factors underlying changes in farmer's behavior in order to improve the design of their own interaction. Another large NGO has also used PM to understand scientific research processes and effects of collaborative efforts with farmer participatory adaptive research and testing on farmer's fields.

Each system varies in both the degree of formality with which information (oral/written;[16] loose/highly structured) is handled and the decision making processes it informs. The tools and techniques of information handling are as varied as the actors, but the use of conventional social science methodology is rare. No trained sociologist or anthropologist has worked specifically on PM with the organizations concerned. None of these systems attempts to arrive at an "objective reality," or to apply analytical techniques with academic rigor, but seeks to understand from within and to use that information to make adjustments to their everyday work. This feature, while functional within organizations which it can be assumed have a high degree of shared culture and vocabulary, poses interesting issues of interpretation when information becomes a public good.

Dependent Linkages

This is highlighted in the second feature, or set of features, of the MID system — the **dependent linkages** between independent systems. The nested system will comprise similar but more formalized features than an independent system. It is argued that this

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[16] In many smaller organizations process information is transmitted orally. Because of this term process monitoring **documentation** is avoided.

formalization, or investment in organizational capital,[17] is a pre-requisite to sustainable, multi-stakeholder processes and that investment needs to be continuous as the greatest value organizational capital continually responds to exogenous and endogenous change or pressure (Burgoyne 1992; Alsop and Rosser 1994).

In the nested system the dependent linkages are of two types — informational (passive) and conferral(active). A passive link is one that is undemanding of those it touches, and active link is one implying reaction or involvement. It is important in terms of this model to distinguish these information linkages from service linkages, which although carrying information are the **subject** of PM rather than the vehicle for PM.

Both information and conferral linkages can be characterized in terms of their

(i) direction; this can be one or two way dependency; in Figure 1 the arrows depict where information is drawn from or who confers;

(ii) temporal character; this is of three types --

  (a) continuous, conducting a regular and recurrent flow

  (b) periodic, conducting intermittent flows

  (c) conditional, dependent on particular events or issues to provoke a flow

(iii) the type of information; this again is of three types --

  (a) managerial, concerning fiscal, procedural and applied activity

  (b) organizational, concerning inter stakeholder relationships

  (c) material, concerning inputs and outputs. This covers both actual or

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[17] Organizational capital defined as structures and procedures (stocks) which host and enhance the functioning of collective action (flows).

concrete inputs/outputs and options such as new activities, projects, programs or funds.

One or more of the above characteristics may be manifested at any time. Each may also change type or combination as a result of external factors or internal transformations in an institution, organization or group. The degree of strength of dependent linkages in Rajasthan reflects the early stage of the nested system there. Linkages are beginning to establish themselves, unevenly but surely. To illustrate:

- Current information flows between NGOs and farmers in villages which can be typified as two way, continuous and both managerial and material. The extent to which they can be described as conferral links varies according to the operating style of the NGO. Some organizations are hierarchical, a characteristic which militates against participation in decision making, others demonstrate a flatter, joint decision making structure.
- There is a continuous information link which deals mainly in material information and includes that from government extension staff to NGO staff and farmers. At present the return flow is limited, and continuous conferral links are nascent.
- Recent periodic information and conferral flows include those emerging from participatory agricultural planning exercises involving government extension staff, farmers and NGO staff. The type of information is mainly managerial and material and currently the quantity of return conferral is reduced as it

progresses up the hierarchy of government. This is frustrating for field level actors and highlights one of the problems of trying to operate in a decentralized manner when the referral and decision making structures which implementors have to interface with are insufficiently process oriented.

- Managerial and material information have flowed in a mainly one way direction regarding a new government supported extension project and its financing options. The conflict between hierarchical structures and conferral linkages has again been apparent as opportunities for return flows of information, particularly those of an organizational nature, have been extremely limited.
- The inter organizational PM outputs now constitute a two way, periodic information link concerning mainly organizational issues but having some material content. ODI's relationship with other stakeholders is rarely of a conferral nature, as its role is not primarily concerned with decision making.

In Rajasthan the most prominent multi-organizational linkages have been a quarterly publication (Recent Developments) and bi-monthly meetings (the GO-NGO-Research Forum — "the Forum"). There have also been numerous informal exchanges of information and working papers produced on specific issues emerging from this collaborative experience. Recent Developments, to which contributions are made by individuals and organizations, has served as the key vehicle for information about collective interests and experiences. The Forum has been used as a mechanism for information exchange, discourse and collective decision making.

Using the temporal characterization introduced earlier, information flowing through these dependent linkages has been dependent on the timing of publications or meetings (an example of a periodic flow) although there is also evidence that the organizations involved are beginning to use these channels more strategically and to respond to specific events or opportunities (an example of a conditional flow) — such as a non-functional interaction between government and NGOs, or visits by senior bureaucrats. The most active supporters of these dependent linkages have been the NGOs — although a small number of government staff have also demonstrated a commitment to sharing information and debate. The relative inactivity of government staff is partly attributable to apathy but also to shortcomings in the public sector's routine procedures for information sharing. It is also probable that NGOs perceive greater benefits from MID systems of an inter-organizational nature than do the government. In a situation such as the one found in this intervention, where the financial support from the donor to national organization has been minimal for PM, it is apparent that any group, organization or individual will only invest in activities which have benefits perceived as outweighing the costs. Costs include finance, confrontation, workload and loss of power.

Nodes of Information Management

The third formalized feature of a nested PM system is a **node of information management,** i.e., a point or agent used as a gatekeeper to filter, analyze, document and circulate information. This can be a rolling responsibility or a task assigned to specific

actors. It is a difficult role, as much mechanistic as visionary. In mechanistic terms, the nodal agent needs to be able to design and manage a system for accessing and sharing information on both a regular and intermittent basis from independent systems. An uneven information set, which can arise from the failure of independent systems to contribute, can be problematic and can affect the use which coalition members can make of the output.

In terms of visionary roles the agent also needs to know what information is needed especially when the need arises from new or unforseen events. This implies, in addition to regular information gathering, a continuous and often informal search of sources to assess what information needs to be collected and what new actors are emerging. The search should also identify and discard redundant information and its collection.

A PM nodal agent in a multi-stakeholder situation needs to collect information on:[18]

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[18] This is further articulated, with some differences in modeling, for early PM activities in Rajasthan in Gilbert and Khandelwal (1995) in which they note that " Changes may be qualitative or quantitative" (ibid, p. 4) and identify the following criteria for assessment as ***1. Assessments of Impacts on Organizational Linkages and Performance:*** (i) the manner of interactions between GOs and NGOs; (ii) nature of collaboration; (iii) the performances of collaborating institutions; and (iv) attitudes. **Qualitative** indicators include: (i) procedures and modalities of planning and implementation of agricultural activities; (ii) adjustments in research themes; (iii) adjustments in the manner of interactions with village groups; (iv) changes in research themes and technical messages in response to feedback; and (v) improvements in reporting, monitoring and accountability in relation to services provided to rural communities. **Quantitative** indicators of performance changes may include: (i) area coverage; (ii) frequency of contact with farmers; (iii) resources available for development efforts; (iv) number, size and scope of collaborative agreements; (v) frequency of contacts between organizations; uses of these additional resources; (vi) frequency of interactions/contacts with other organizations (GOs or NGOs); (vii) extent of information flows (within and between organizations)..... ***2. Impacts in Livelihoods in Rural Communities:*** (I) impacts in the form of improvements in productivity and livelihoods, (ii) Changes in tie degree of dependence in other sources of income, migration and non-farm activities. (ibid, adapted from page 5)

(i) the dynamics and changes of inter-agency and group relations, i.e., how they work together; in what areas; the power balance and contribution to the relationship. The last would cover physical and service inputs.

(ii) the effect of the process on both the clients and the service providers. This encompasses physical and service outputs; changes in behavior and attitudes--including farm management practices; and organizational responses.

This function has proved critical in ensuring that there has been inter-organizational information sharing — of a managerial, institutional and material nature. The amount of time it takes to provide this service to the 50-plus organizations involved in the work in Rajasthan is such that it does require a dedicated service provider. As noted earlier in this paper, initially an external agency (ODI) was asked to serve the collective interest and perform this role. A local agency was brought on line about a year after activities began. This organization currently assumes the responsibility as an information node with minimal help from ODI.

The system now in operation is functional but suffers from certain factors which impede tight synthesis, analysis of information and presentation of results. The publication of Recent Developments remains relatively trouble-free as the local agency explicitly minimizes editorial powers and re-prints contributions in a form as close to the original as space and language allow. Working Papers, which require identification of issues and analytical writing are more problematic. These problems include shortage of specialized skills, but also acute awareness of the differential sensitivities of the multiple actors to interpretations of the information being contributed or collected. These problems were

relatively minor during the time ODI played a nodal function. ODI was financed to undertake this work; it had many of the requisite skills for synthesis and analysis; and very importantly, as a short -term and external actor, local sensitivities did not affect its behavior as much as they might in the case of a local agency. This problem would have arisen primarily during the time when the purpose and performance of PM was being first introduced, but also has shown signs of affecting the local agency as it assumes this role later into the process. There has been at least one incidence of suppression of possibly contentious information by those "managing" information.

Niches

The fourth critical feature of a nested PM system are the **niches**, or platforms, for multi-stakeholder reviews and decision making. Within a nested system there may be one or more niches. These can be multi-level, but need to retain a capacity to evolve. However, at all stages they must be recognized by the majority of stakeholders as legitimate entities, even if they do not regularly attend.

Niches represent a particular place, or point in time, where specific matters arising from PM or other information sources can be tabled and discussed. They are the place for inter-stakeholder debate on line issues and for putting forward new proposals or ideas. As such they represent the resting place of conferral linkages. While participation in niches will vary with events and agendas, it is debatable whether niches should be open to all stakeholders. In principle the transparency which comes with open access is desirable.

However, the resultant debate can be cumbersome as multiple agendas clash and vernacular language inhibits understanding. A pragmatic response is that records of niche events (meetings) are made publicly available and that response channels, or conferral linkages, are open to all.

Several niches currently operate in Rajasthan. Each has a slightly different function and is therefore favored by different groups of stakeholders. These include: regular meetings in villages of NGO staff and farmers; increasing occurrences of village and block level meetings of government extension staff, NGO staff and farmers; the Extension Department's own set of regular closed meetings; twice yearly research and extension planning meeting managed by government staff, to which NGOs are now invited; a quarterly district level meeting of NGO and government staff (the Forum); at the state level there is a relatively inactive State Level Advisory Committee, but more encouragingly an organization (ARAVALI) has emerged whose specific business is to assist NGO-GO interaction.

In Udaipur, the Forum is the most obvious example of a collective decision making niche and the most apparent manifestation of an aggregate coalition. Its early life was typified more as an arena for information exchange and discussion than for decision making. It was initially a gathering where broad organizational groups presented their work and stated their position. While the research establishment has, with some exceptions, generally not moved beyond this, the extension department and NGOs have begun to make more creative use of this platform. There are examples of creativity which

include the discussion of contracts for extension under the World Bank supported ADP and the formation of a working group to discuss future strategies for interaction. Information is shared in the Forum and subsequent discussion moves this towards "common knowledge."

Evidence suggests that the Forum is beginning to be used to reach decisions on allocation of money and to determine the future of GO-NGO interaction. A Working Group also emerged from a district wide workshop — which was attended by the most senior sector bureaucrats in the state. This group has recently presented its recommendations about the collaborative initiative which the Forum ratified.

Interestingly, however, while shared decision making for strategic action takes place,[19] there are very few examples of where practical action has emerged as a direct product of the Forum. In practice the Forum provides a platform on which members can present their own positions and meet others having similarly, or complementary, interests. From this actors identify partners with whom they feel inclined to work. Discussions however on the specifics of this action take place bilaterally or as disaggregated coalitions, not within the Forum itself. The Forum thus also plays the role of broker.

A further useful role of the Forum is that positions have been publicly defined to the point that it is apparent that some forms of potential interaction do not at present warrant continued discussion. An example is interaction with the mainstream formal research

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[19] For example, the request by coalition members that the convener should write to the heads of department in the Rajasthan Agricultural University to urge stronger participation in the Forum.

establishment. While individual scientists may demonstrate interest in collaboration and on-farm work, the organizations within which they work do not encourage or support this. Changing the mainstream research environment is not a cost effective task for the Forum.

While proving to be critical in increasing the feeling of collective interest among the various actors, niches have suffered from certain constraints. In addition to those associated with challenging normative modes of interaction with "senior" people, decision making niches have also had to contend with people arriving unprepared or not briefed for discussion despite circulation of documentation beforehand. Both sets of problems are in part culturally rooted but have to be confronted if collective interests are to be openly debated. Many multi-stakeholder meetings have ended either inconclusively or with a dominant party making a decision on everyone's behalf. Behavioral norms represent enormous difficulties for a single chair-person, especially one who is part of the same culture. A short term solution has been on occasion to use an external person to chair meetings, but alternative approaches which place the responsibility on the collective are more useful. In Udaipur these are gradually evolving and include agreeing on: agendas at the beginning of meetings; which items will be taken to conclusion; time limits for voicing opinions and for coverage of a particular topic, and implementation of "secret" voting procedures.

4. DISCUSSION: COALITIONS AND MID SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The trend of government decentralization and higher levels of popular participation in governance and development leads to expectations of increasing demands for collaboration, joint learning and decision making by diverse groups of actors. This increasing inter-dependence paradoxically comes at a time when individualistic behavior has become overtly recognized, accepted and often encouraged. These conditions demand new or remodeled systems and investments in the social and organizational capital which drive and maintain the systems. This paper reports on events in progress in one specific location. Frustratingly, but pragmatically, it is thus difficult to draw more than qualified conclusions.

The introduction to this paper stated that this initiative did not expect to generate immediate productivity gains and the paper itself did not attempt to evaluate impact. There have though been measurable outputs. These include improvements in line department staff village level performance, increased activity of farmer groups, better use of existing government programs, adoption of new maize varieties, on-farm research and re-activation of irrigation facilities. Further benefits include the impact of experience on the design of state agricultural policy and programs.

In Udaipur the coalition continues to develop and at present is involved in a decentralized planning process for a new intervention in the agricultural sector supported by a bilateral donor. This new project will take place in three additional districts. In one there is a history of collaboration and a project office upon which a less organized

coalition of NGOs and government departments center their interests. In the two other districts there has been no history of regular, or even particularly effective, GO-NGO collaboration. There is a marked difference in the manner in which organizations in these three districts have set about their planning exercise in comparison to those in Udaipur District. In the latter, although the process has been complex[20], it has been much more streamlined. Existing "nests, nodes and niches" have all been used fully to exchange, debate and make decisions on activities and plans. The needs of decentralization are thus better met where organizational mechanisms supportive of collective action exist. While initial transaction costs have been high the benefits are now being demonstrated through more efficient action.

The remainder of the paper summarizes and examines further some of the important and outstanding issues if these concepts and structures are to develop in Rajasthan or to be used in other situations.

COALITIONS FOR PROCESS INTERVENTIONS

In Udaipur the coalition does appear to host the three functions of information sharing, creation of common knowledge and collective decision making. It could not have done this if the mechanisms, or four components of the nested MID system described above, were not functional. The collective interest and the usefulness of the support

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[20] This complexity is a function of the number of organizations involved, their familiarity with each other, the existence of channels of communication and fora for discussion and the emergence of power-plays.

mechanisms become more explicit over time and as have actors become increasingly familiar with each other.

Genesis, Dynamics and Support

Coalitions, because of past experiences, have not until recently enjoyed common currency or support in Udaipur. The level of cynicism about collective action among organizations has been high and there have been frequent questions over the cost-effectiveness of the people coming together and attempting to collaborate. Despite this, the collective interest continues and far from such challenges being considered problematic it is suggested that this ability is an important aspect of a coalition. Because of its nature and forms of interaction a coalition is open to constant questioning of purpose. This enables it to respond and evolve in ways that a formal organization would not be able to do. Ownership of a coalition is unspecified (so in this respect no-one loses "position" from change); all parties are decision makers (each, rather than a manager, has a right to articulate their opinion); information and knowledge, as they relate to the shared interest, are common (no-one's individual knowledge base is challenged); and it is structurally fluid.

Coalitions, as unstructured and loosely governed ways of organizing people, offer useful guidelines for policy makers or project designers concerned with multi-actor practice or intervention. However, the genesis and dynamic of coalition building are critical. Interventions cannot be designed to included coalitions as organizational elements in multi-stakeholder contexts unless participants in that potential coalition agree that they are an appropriate and valid form of organization. The implications of decentralization are

thus that not only should stakeholders be party to decision making during implementation, they also need to be party to the design of interventions or programs and to openly debate the various forms of their organization and interaction. Greater stakeholder power in design is a costly and time consuming business and is not one which sits easily with the current trend of reducing preparation costs or manpower inputs. Neither is it an easy activity to introduce to those such as government line department staff who have never been encouraged to be conceptually creative in their own work or to take responsibility for designing future action. Decentralized planning is a challenge that program designers need to have patience with and assist potential stakeholders initially in doing.

One of the positive aspects of the Udaipur coalition was that no-one, or no particular organization, assumed ownership. Yet initial stimulation and continued support originated from one source. In Rajasthan the various actors initially came together at the behest of a donor. It was also the donor who provided funds for those who assumed responsibility for each of the functions. However, apart from a lone voice of disagreement, neither the aggregate coalition nor any of the satellite/two-party spin-offs are regarded as donor owned or driven. While the Ford Foundation may have increased the profile, provided added impetus and helped create organizational and human resources to assist increased interaction, all it was doing was giving life to existing government rhetoric. It therefore appears that while an external party may promote and support a coalition, a coalition is an entity that is dependent for survival on internal validation. Program designers must therefore allow time for iteration between the development of human capital, the expression of collective interests and the evolution of

support mechanisms. They must also provide financial and professional support for the needs of collective action (such as training or organizational cost coverage) as they emerge.

The questions of initial stimulus and continued external support both relate to scale. Where the partners in coalitions are few, the issues thematically and geographically focused, and the costs of arriving at a common knowledge base and joint decisions low, then coalitions might be expected to initiate, sustain and change themselves. Larger-scale interaction among organizations or interest groups is likely to be more demanding of a wide range of resources (including finance, skills and consistent and strong but not dominant, leadership), and so more difficult to initiate and support. Alternatives, in terms of self-support via coalition partners' own contributions, to external financing appear very few, at least in the context of low-resource agriculture.

Post planning implementation of process development demands that all actors are equipped to respond to on-line information. This is unfamiliar territory for many line department officials and to a degree for some NGOs. It is also as difficult for donors as it is for many others involved in process programs. Operationally it begs a change in the way that both policy makers and those responsible for everyday management in donor and government organizations have traditionally behaved. A different set of skills and communication processes are called upon. The donor (and this includes senior government officials) is not simply a source of funds or directives, it has to become a partner in debate and decision. In place of being an administrator, it needs to become a

facilitator of interaction and vision development.

In addition, planners need to recognize that funding cannot be simple and uniform. Process approaches require opportunistic, responsive and multi-purpose financing. For example, grants made by the Ford Foundation in this Rajasthan initiative have supported one or several of the following components: collaborative field action, studies, meetings (State, District and international), process-monitoring, short and long-term training and follow-up, organizational development, and documentation. Organizations supported chose what they wanted funds for and retained their autonomy at the same time as recognizing the interest they shared over some issues with other groups.

Another difference in the demands of process projects relate to the importance of ensuring that senior policy makers and bureaucrats are not only informed of events, but also participate in debate and decision making. It is also critical to bring district level staff into the same processes. To do this fora and information flows, independent of their traditional roles and free from the laws of hierarchy, need to be established and made equally accessible to all. A donor, free from the obligations of local and national social capital, can transgress traditional boundaries and gain access to actors of all social and bureaucratic strata. In Rajasthan this ability has proved important in initially opening channels between levels of government hierarchy as well as between government and non-government agents. While it has not be possible to completely shake off the bonds of tradition, there are signs that investment in appropriate organizations and mechanisms — especially those such as process monitoring outputs and joint fora which de-personalize relations and enable collective recognition and responsibility — are an efficient way of

channeling changing human capital.

If donors, be they external agencies or national governments, are to accept process development and to accept that they are members of a multi-organizational coalition, they thus need to reform their management of change and how they allocate finance. Currently both donor and government procedures are usually driven by expenditure targets that have to be met within financial years. These have to become considerably more flexible if they are to meet process requirements. Increased support for process interventions also requires an enhanced capability among donors to understand how processes are evolving, and to make adjustments to the specifications or levels/flows of finance attached to funding agreements. Process monitoring is one activity which can assist understanding. Another, suggested above, is deeper involvement by the staff in the activity being financed. Both requirements run counter to current pressures to reduce the size of administrations relative to each action financed.

Additional Functions: Advocacy and Lobbying

There are two further roles that coalitions can play in addition to providing the vehicle to explore and build upon complementarities of organizations and performing the three functions of information sharing, knowledge creation and collective decision making. They are those of advocacy and lobbying. Coalition members have to decide whether or not they can withstand the stresses which lobbying and advocacy may entail. To bring about change in favor of the rural poor — those most disadvantaged by the economic and social environment in which they live — the existing hierarchies and systems upon which

they depend often have to be challenged. For coalitions interested in poverty alleviation a major decision at some point is going to be what strategy they pursue, and to what extent the tactic they employ will be confrontational. Designers of interventions will need to assess possibilities of confrontation and devise mechanisms which allow discussion and defusion of contentious and potentially disruptive issues. At a project level such mechanisms can include regular opportunities to "unfreeze" project purposes, outputs and activities. Debate at this point may lead to re-focusing or restructuring. It may also lead to defusion of an issue by simply giving it public space for airing and discussion.

Coalitions, or organized groupings of individuals, offer the opportunity to confront power by giving agency to previously powerless actors or groups of actors. Evidence from elsewhere demonstrates that it is necessary to create critical masses if previously disenfranchised groups are to enter into a situation of negotiation as legitimate and empowered actors. [21] In Rajasthan, coalitions are largely formed by cross-organizational groups interested in improving rainfed agriculture and in identifying and negotiating their respective roles. **Within** the aggregate coalition three broad groups can be identified-- the research establishment; the extension professionals, and the NGOs. Bringing together those broad groups has been important for empowering each in their negotiations with another broad group. Examples of this include NGOs' tacit agreement to live with their differences and to openly debate, as a single interest group, the opportunities for

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[21] This evidence runs through development literature as well as through examples of labor and union movements. The 'critical mass' argument is one that justifies developing interest groups, in particular in our case, farmers' groups.

interacting with the Department of Agriculture and the research establishment. The support of NGOs also assisted the extension department to publicly challenge the research establishment over the appropriateness of their research method and outputs. Where the aggregate interest is strong enough a coalition provides a useful unit for exchange of views of sub-groups. Where the aggregate interest is fragile coalitions, having no formal agreements to bind them together during a period of internal dispute, will fragment. In terms of managing change, or a specific intervention, designers thus need to ensure that there is a back-up or trouble-shooting mechanism in place. This can take the form of a professional support organization mandated to only become active during times of dispute or when arbitration is needed.

Another function of the aggregate coalition in Rajasthan has been the presentation of a unified front to parties. Examples of this have included a meeting with a Director of Agriculture during which his suggestions for contracting NGOs (on government terms and for conventional T & V activities) were unanimously rejected as unacceptable by NGOs. While research and extension staff assumed a neutral position in the debate, their mere presence during discussion added passive weight to the coalition's position. Other examples of collective identity include presentations made to the Secretary of Agriculture, variously through letters, during workshops/meetings and through process monitoring outputs.

One of the most striking examples of the shift in negotiating power created by Recent Developments was in a conflictive mode. In January 1996 a number of smaller

NGOs were invited to Jaipur at short notice to discuss with senior Department of Agriculture staff their proposals for agricultural extension activities under the ADP. Government staff were poorly prepared for the meeting, which ended inconclusively. A representative of one of the NGOs subsequently wrote an open letter in Recent Developments to complain of this poor treatment. This, in turn, prompted a rapid response from the Secretary for Agriculture. There can be little doubt that this one example of the way in which a PM vehicle gained a better hearing at State level for the complaints of an NGO that might normally have difficulty in asserting itself even at District level greatly enhanced the regard in which Recent Developments was held. However, this letter would not have been prepared without external support to an organization unfamiliar with expressing itself at an appropriate level.

While this mutual support and cohesion has demonstrated the coalition's effectiveness there have also been examples of in-fighting and fragmentation. Cohesion will always tend to break down if the issue in hand either concerns smaller groups or collective interests are satisfied. Groups demonstrate a tendency to divide internally as soon as external challenges are withdrawn. Coalitions can only be useful when members are operating in circumstances where their collective interest is stronger than their individual differences. When the collective need is met or the balance between collective and individual differences shifts towards the latter the coalition will break down. Designers of interventions have often failed to recognize this tendency of group behavior and thus design formal organizations which often become redundant. This can be because

the organizations in question have fulfilled their mission and are incapable of evolution, or because a more fluid and temporary entity such as a coalition may have been a more suitable unit for issue-based collective action. Formal organizations may not be appropriate mechanisms for managing collective action. Coalitions may be, but if they are to be used their limitations and transience needs to be factored in.

It is a complex balance. The examples above of unified articulation demonstrate the beginnings of effective advocacy and lobbying. It would have been impossible at their earlier stages for the coalitions which have emerged to align themselves in this way. They were too diffuse and had developed no collective agenda or concern over particular issues. While the gathering of collective forces has been shown to be effective -- events and issues arising out of them are now almost guaranteed the attention of senior bureaucrats — there is a question of how far a coalition can pursue lobbying routes before destructive internal tensions are created or before its pressures on another party cause a negative reaction detrimental to interaction. In contradistinction to this it is also likely that unless the aggregate coalition does bring about change — something which is more likely to occur when the group is in advocacy or lobbying mode — many participants will lose interest.

NESTED MID SYSTEMS

Coalitions have been suggested in this paper as a useful way of framing and organizing for collective action. The point has been made however that these entities need to have formalized mechanisms in place if they are to function and to overcome internal tensions. Any process model, never more than a representation of a vision or idea,

constantly shifts in response to new knowledge. This is particularly true of the nested MID system which has been presented in this paper as one set of coalition support mechanisms.

Two continuing tensions currently dominate the decisions of individual organizations on how far to engage in information sharing: one is the cost of analyzing what may currently be largely informal information flows, the other is mistrust about how information may be managed. In relation to the first, for those (especially smaller NGOs) relying largely on informal flows, the costs could be substantial and have to be weighed against the anticipated benefits of "signing up," which are difficult to determine, especially in the early stages. The benefits are partly assessed on the basis of what tangible financial support is available for the system.

The second tension concerns both the dissemination and use of information. For example, whilst a policy decision may be taken at State level to make certain subsidies available, this may be prevented from filtering down by rent-seeking behavior among mid-/lower level functionaries. Widely held suspicion among NGOs that key information is being withheld from the public domain in this way will discourage their participation in the information system as will any hint that information relating to specific organizations or individuals, made available through a common system, will be used for policing rather than constructive learning. This implies the need for an "interim agent" or impartial liaison functionary to be built in to MID systems at a state level.

MID systems may constantly mutate. One example from Rajasthan is the development of satellite systems around independent systems: some NGOs have begun to

exchange information among themselves and there is some indication that communication between government departments is increasing at a district level. In terms of Figure 1 this would be shown by the overlapping the spheres which symbolize independent systems. It is not yet clear if these new relationships will continue to be typified by informality and fluidity and if they will continue to consist mainly of information rather than conferral flows. Systems thus have to be able to change and evolve as the situation in which they are functioning changes and the purposes they serve develop. The design lesson here is that systems, rather like the interventions they may be part of need to have opportunities to revisit and re-orientate their mandate and function.

SUMMARY

It is easiest to summarize the lessons of this experiment involving organization of collective action in a series of observations emerging from the experience in Rajasthan.

- In situations which are unfamiliar to actors enabling environments, that is supportive policy environments, will not generate change unless enabling mechanisms are also established.
- For these situations a multi-stakeholder intervention requires a process, not pre-determined, approach.
- A process approach will demand changes in both the pattern of financing and the form of professional support given by the group initiating the intervention.
- Financial and support patterns need to shift towards higher levels of early investment in human and organizational capital development. This implies

greater initial transaction costs but more sustainable and effective long term impact.

- Multi-stakeholder development requires coalition building. Coalitions, while displaying characteristics better suited to multi-agency action than formal organizations, are often fragile and transitory entities. They thus require the assistance of an external agent for troubleshooting and liaison.
- Coalitions will need investment in formalized monitoring, information exchange and decision making mechanisms. The implication of this is that one or more organizations has to take on these support roles.
- Coalitions cannot contract with organizations and thus need a formal administrative body able to do this. This leads to the conclusion that in multi-stakeholder action coalitions may assume a management or executive function but that they need a formal administrative body for every-day maintenance.

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