

Engaging Communities Better

By Jet Damazo

IN REMOTE rural villages in Sri Lanka and Viet Nam, an Asian Development Bank (ADB) project used seeds to address poverty issues in a not so traditional way. Instead of planting the seeds, farmers were asked to use them to rank the various benefits water supply brings to them according to importance.

“The exercise, called the Hundred Seeds tool, was a simple cost-benefit analysis,” says Jennifer Francis, an ADB NGO/Civil Society Specialist.

Members of the community were asked about the benefits of water supply to them, and researchers listed down their answers, such as, ‘I was able to send my children to school because my daughters don’t need to walk anymore to carry water’. Afterwards, the participants were asked to score the benefits listed using the 100 seeds they have.

The exercise was part of a project that developed an enhanced methodology for participatory assessments (EMPA) for water supply and sanitation interventions that take better account of participation, demand, gender, and poverty perspectives. It was financed by ADB’s Poverty Reduction Cooperation Fund.

EMPA engaged communities and civil society organizations in 108 water supply and sanitation subprojects. The simple tools used empowered communities to make their own observations and analysis, and in the long run, contribute towards the success of projects.

“Water sector specialists will tell you that sustainability of any project depends on the community’s willingness and ability to continue and manage it,” says Ms. Francis.

“When communities are involved in the design of projects at the very beginning, you get their ownership, you get their vision on how they want to live, and in the end they take care of the project because it is their design in the first place. It increases the chance of sustainability.”

In Viet Nam, communities were pleasantly surprised to be consulted for the first time. In Sri Lanka, participants said that the methodology made them really think about their issues. EMPA is simple enough to be understood by non-specialists



and members of the community, and flexible enough to be modified to suit local conditions and needs.

The hundred seeds tool, along with other participatory rural appraisal methods such as focused group discussions, matrix scoring, card sorting, wealth assessment, social mapping, and pocket voting, were also designed to help collect qualitative data from communities.

"It is very difficult to synthesize qualitative information and EMPA provides a way to quantify the qualitative information that you get from communities," she explains. Quantifying the data makes it more scientific, and thus, more acceptable to decision-makers and financiers. With these tools, time savings, household incomes and expenditures, and decision-making processes and impacts can easily be assessed.

For instance, the rationale behind the hundred seeds tool is how people look at priorities by numbers. When the researchers asked the participants to consider the cost they have to pay for the various benefits, in many instances, people changed their priorities.

"They would say, 'I would like to put more seeds into sending my children to school because it is worth the high amount I pay'," Ms. Francis adds. These data are used as inputs to design more effective local water supply projects for the community.

EMPA is also cost-effective to employ because the system, which requires a one-time investment of \$100,000 in multi-million dollars projects, can be used at anytime as often as required from project preparation up until the evaluation stage. Also, it only requires a mere 2-3 days to carry out an assessment in any given community.

"The future of the water sector really lies in the hands of the community because they handle more responsibility in managing water supply," says Ms. Francis. "But the question is, do we consult sufficiently with the community? Are communities actually making decisions? Are they given enough power to control the water services given to them? EMPA does that." #