

Bondo hydro-power development: communication for community engagement in project implementation

Author:

Carl Bruessow

Fund:

MMCT

Malawi | 2012



Latin American and Caribbean
Network of Environmental Funds

Case Studies

Bondo hydro-power development: communication for community engagement in project implementation

Context

The Mulanje Mountain Conservation Trust (MMCT) is an environmental endowment trust based in Mulanje originally funded by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) through the World Bank. The Trust works in collaboration with Department of Forestry and other stakeholders in facilitating the raising of people's awareness, involvement and understanding of the importance of the conservation and responsible management of the biodiversity and natural resources in the Mulanje Mountain Forest Reserve and to ensure equitable sharing of benefits. MMCT's mission is to facilitate conservation, research, management and increased understanding of Mulanje Mountain and its resources in a transparent, professional, committed and collaborative manner.

Mount Mulanje Global Biosphere Reserve is located in the south-east Malawi, a country in south-eastern Africa. Mount Mulanje is a mountain with a 640km² intrusion rising to 3,002m and is possibly the world's largest inselberg (massif). Most of the surrounding plains at 500m - 700m above sea level have rich fertile soils and the high rainfall in the region (2,000mm - 4,000mm) enables a high smallholder village population density. Nevertheless, there are many competing water demands. Economic activity is limited to tea estates, but poverty prevails and provides a conservation challenge.

The Mulanje Mountain Forest Reserve was set-up in 1927, and is managed by the Department of Forestry. The low capacity and protectionist approach of the managing authority has caused conflicts with community. The reserve

provides multiple resources for livelihood improvement such as water, tourism, timber, energy, biodiversity and current users include the 300,000 village residents, mainly smallholder farmers within 7km of the Protected Area.

It is important to note that poverty prevails, although the mountain is rich in resources and biodiversity. Payment for eco-system services, a key aspect of the power generation project here described, could benefit conservation efforts and local communities.

Energy is a local dilemma, since biomass is used for household and institutional cooking, which presents a threat to forest cover. There are opportunities for electricity generation in many rivers, according to an assessment carried out for micro-power. Electricity could provide incentive and stimulation to commercial opportunities, and enable households to be connected directly through cabling & indirectly by battery systems. This requires involvement from important partners, such as investors, technical experts, developers, micro-financers and management partners.

Developing a pilot scheme

The developmental approach was adaptable and external expert assistance was very important. There was also a careful work with the community, involving them from outset and understanding their needs. This was reflected in a flexible multidisciplinary approach, within a process of constant adaptation, leading to the proper functioning of the pilot project. It was also important to seek investment confidence and capital, as a way to enable scaling-up for conservation.

A comprehensive institutional arrangement was required for the project's success. This means engaging local communities, as they are consumers, part-owners and implementation partners; engaging development partners to financially assist the project, carry out studies, and assess the business development potential; come together with technical partners for design, implementation guidance, operational instructions and maintenance and with the Malawi Energy Regulatory Authority for licensing and oversight. Finally, it is also important to involve the Department of Energy to provide national leadership, policy guidance and donor confidence.

MMCT /MuREA facilitated the project, and the community determined the way in which they wished to communicate for operational modalities of implementation. MMCT tried not to arrange the community to its own designs but rather build the community leadership capacity where they wanted it for effective implementation. The communication is all through governance and incentives as this is how these close-knit village communities work.

The project was to build a hydro-power pilot scheme to serve as a power source to the communities and create development opportunities. The river, land for the site of the canal and the powerhouse are based on communal areas. Community acted as scheme guardians and electricity consumers on an agreeable basis, and acted also as responsible for supplying labour and building materials such as sand and quarry stones. Due to the scale of the scheme, labour and basic supplies were a huge requirement.

Communication

Understanding the local setting was crucial to determine the best communication and interaction models. The low education level and literacy skills, as well as limited access to TV and radio limited the use of written communication, and made oral communication the best choice for the project. The use of typical environmental awareness billboards was also a way to raise community attention.

“The project showed that communication does not represent a high financial cost, but rather a time-consuming and necessary commitment”



It was also important to respect the traditional leaderships and guidance that were customary to the village culture. For instance, there are committees to lead and oversee local projects, so interaction with these groups was the ideal modus operandi, including meetings with chiefs and committees members for project oversight and feedback to the community. In the end, the project showed that communication does not represent a high financial cost, but rather a time-consuming and necessary commitment.

In Malawi, the involvement of the local community in development activities is a fairly long-standing approach to local improvement as it does enable a consensus approach to determining priorities, generates individual labour and giving in-kind, and creates local ownership for future care and maintenance.

In order to keep the high community involvement, some motivational aspects were considered. The project promoted learning visits to similar schemes in Zimbabwe & Mozambique and, by enabling access to electricity for households, business opportunities, clinics and schools, the project was able to present new life opportunities to the community. It was also necessary to keep constant construction progress, which proven to be difficult due to the political/economic context, such as the president becoming increasingly dictatorial, international ostracising, building supplies and fuel very restricted.

It is noteworthy that efforts to maintain commitment of labour and supplies represented large part of project, as well as individual motivation, since there was a need for individual time efforts to earn electricity credits. Also, communication materials were produced for the national context: a video, press releases, journalist awareness days, etc., to ensure that the national context was positive.

Evaluation

An evaluation process has been carried out recently to analyse local community involvement and it was carried out by a local independent consultant. The consultant was in charge of analysing the experiences and role of the committee to date and outlining improvements and most suitable models for community involvement for future schemes. The main target group were the committees, chiefs and the communities with few other informants.

1. Formation of the Committees and its Operation.

Over the period of project implementation, there were two committees formed one after the other to guide the work on the Bondo micro-hydro power scheme. Both committees were formed of the seven villages under

Group Village Headman Bondo, each bringing together three trusted representatives, with at least one woman from each village. A criterion for village representative selection as provided by Mulanje Renewable Energy Agency (MuREA) was that they could write and speak English. Villagers added that the persons selected should not hold other voluntary positions in the village to ensure focused commitment, a criterion dropped with the second committee. The result was persons considered youthful and inexperienced in coordinating communal work by some chiefs or very educated by others were elected. Both the chair and vice were educated with secondary school level and aged in their mid-30s. According to the chiefs, the criteria for selection included personal traits of being humane, tolerant of people's criticisms, the ability to listen and constructively contribute, and previous experience in leading community work.

After a seven member committee was drawn from the 21 representatives, the villages were requested to add one more committee member each to keep the number of 21. During training sessions carried out at the beginning of the project, the community understood that these two groups would be central to an overall management model; the 21 formed the General Assembly in the management model and the 7 member committee would form the Electricity User Board after construction.

The second committee was originally formed the same old way, a selection of 7 from the 21 representatives who elected their own office bearers; the only difference was that chiefs were now asked by MuREA to reconfigure the committee by replacing some persons in key positions especially the chair and secretary; according to the first committee chairman the office individuals did not see each other eye to eye.

Issues during Implementation - In the Chief's view, the first committee & office came into conflict for two key reasons:

- the committee felt that the office did not share with the committee financial information on the project
- the committee felt that the office did not hand over responsibility for procurement of construction materials as it had anticipated would be the case in the traditional community projects of bridges, school blocks and boreholes. What is clear is that there was insufficient clarification from the office to the committee as to their responsibilities and remittance on the project.

In the view of the office, the committee was changed because the term of office for the first committee had expired and that the committee became childish, inefficient and could not garner the support of the community.

Community Committee Representation - There were changes in the committee representation numbers. At about midway, the membership of the committee increased from 7 to 23 because it was observed that the participation of sub-villages under the same Group Village Headman Bondo had been excluded from the selection of the initial seven full villages. There was a total of 12 full and sub villages so each village's representation was modified to two in the committee, realising nine women and fifteen men.

Adequate Guidance - The committee expressed that it did not have formal guidelines for operation. The informants explained that it was advised during the training sessions, that rules would be addressed to guide the construction phase for the committee, this was an opportunity missed. On the other hand, there was a draft constitution that was not being used, that was attempted during the training which was done for the first committee. In my opinion the draft constitution needed to be done near the end of the construction to reflect issues that might concern stakeholders during the construction and operation since this was the first experience for the community.

2. Interaction of committee with other structures and participation in the project.

The process of cooperation for implementation:

- Initially, MuREA and the chief decided on a plan, and then this was communicated to the committee and with other chiefs to bring people to carry sand and stones to work site.
- The trend changed with the second committee where messages then moved from office to committee first, and then to chiefs and finally to the community.

One important cooperation rule was the joint planning meetings held every Monday by the committee and fortnightly between chiefs and the committee to share tasks and review progress. The joint meetings between chiefs and the committee had changed back to every week on Mondays to speed up things. The second, though not a rule as such but had a direct bearing on participation, was the opening of an account toward a pocket allowance that was used for food after meetings a thing the committee thought contributed to good attendance of chiefs. The weekly

meetings, with a minimum structure such as food for the participants, were key for the project partners to communicate and keep engaged.

Contrary to expectation that the village representatives in the scheme would mobilise the villagers to work, this differed, where in one village the chief himself went round his village to call people out to the scheme, while in others call messengers announced this call. The role of the village development committee (VDC) in this project was not determined properly as this would normally have a big role of planning and implementing development initiatives at community level. The Group Village Headman and the rest of the informants alleged that VDC did not play any part in the scheme neither did any of such office bearers appear working alongside other villagers; they think the cause is simply the inactiveness of the VDC reps, but it is possible that another cause would be the lack of coordination of stake holder institutions by MuREA. All chiefs and committee members alleged the VDC was mostly active during the subsidized fertilizer coupon distribution. If involved the VDC members could have strengthened the messages on development affecting the rest of the villages under GVH Bondo if on inviting GVH included VDC representative.

There were differences in numbers of willing people from villages coming to work which might indicate how differently the scheme might affect the various villages and the people. The village whose people had the highest stakes because they donated land and crops were destroyed without compensation, had highest participation. The second village with high participation was the next closest village to the scheme, where the chief himself goes round to call people to work. As a community both men and women mention the need of a maize mill as their number one motivation followed by connecting the dispensary and schools. Individuals who participated had another incentive apart from lighting their homes, their cost of connection will be reduced as opposed to those who did not contribute labour. For future community engagement, there is a need for careful assessment of the willingness and leadership qualities of the key traditional leaders and local development committee members.

3. Strategies Used for People to Participate

Part-time work without food - Community participation was high at project start with most people contributing 2 to 3 hours per day. Attendance dropped down as the period to complete the project was taking long.

Committee fed chiefs and committee members - Committee opened a contributory social account where committee members and chiefs put in MK100 (30 US Cents) each. The account assisted the participating committee members and chiefs to get meals after meetings. This improved the attendance for both chiefs and committee members. Committee tried to extend the same to cover the participating communities by asking MuREA to fund them



with a bag of maize and beans but MuREA said that was a community contribution. According to MuREA food was considered part of the community contribution. In addition MuREA observed that the project had already taken over some costs like buying of bricks, transporting sand and stones because such could neither be produced in the area nor locally collected a thing which was not in the project budget.

Bring Plate and Cup (school feeding program) - Practical Action Zimbabwe brought this in April 2012 on pretext that they were to do training on the job for the communities in two weeks after which the Bondo scheme should be switched on and commissioned. Great numbers indeed turned up for two weeks but the work was not completed due to the hand to mouth kind of supply of the purchased materials by the office; this arrangement of materials had hindered progress since the beginning of the scheme and in the opinion of others that 2 weeks was an unrealistic / impossible estimation of the time needed to complete the outstanding civil works. Use of the numbers of people to work improved when they were divided into task groups led by skilled and knowledgeable individuals either from office or community. Period of work also increased to about 4 to 5 hours as people discussed and agreed to work from 6 am to 14 hours pm, taking tea/sobo at 8am, lunch at 12 noon and knock off at 2pm. This was done at a cost of about MK 35,000 per day during the first 2 and half weeks of April 2012.

Success and Challenges

First of all, it is important to highlight that almost no money was spent in the project meetings. The key to local development projects is always to motivate community-based approaches that don't benefit individuals; otherwise each project gets hijacked by demands for allowances, food, etc. This is a typical African dilemma for most development projects and can reveal different organisational successes and failures across Africa. Nevertheless, a sum of US\$5,000 was invested to take the committee to a similar project in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe on a study visit, so that the group had a very real sense of the positive change to come and to motivate their leadership locally to ensure the community involvement until completion.

Successes

- Fortnightly meetings of chiefs and committee were key to community planning and contribution;
- Meetings had clear agendas & action oriented minutes of the resolutions in their local language;
- Group formation around tasks brought a new work impetus as people dispersed the previous day knowing what to do next even where office people were absent;
- Free food during and after work tended to improve participation comparable only to the school feeding program. More discussion needs to be done on the food issue in the future as it had impact on attendance across all the community, committee members and the chiefs themselves.

Challenges

- Entry into the community, there could have been more project awareness;
- Information about transparency on finances could have been more clear based on the expected roles of the community and MuREA during construction and operations;
- Lack of realistic bill of quantities greatly hindered the planning process both for community contribution and stocking of purchased materials.
- Perceived absence of accommodating some ideas from villagers on the design and construction by employees brought ill feelings to community as last minute reversals were taken.
- The inadequate flow of purchased materials is greatly criticized on the office, and is viewed as the most significant cause of low participation and delays leading to the protracted period of the project.
- Innovations implemented without first discussing with leaders like rewards of t-shirts and introduction of food on communal work were viewed very negatively by community leaders in the scheme. Lack of proper communication in this case was a relevant issue.
- Finally, rules of the committee during construction should have among other things included the expected cooperation between the community and the implementing agency which were generally absent.