

Case Studies on Community Participation in Belize

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Abstract

What is community participation; its origins, and objectives attained through its exercise? These are some of the questions this study addresses in two case studies done in an urban and a rural community in Belize. The study is one of a series that the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) has commissioned in ten Latin America-Caribbean countries to get a more empirical grasp of community participation, as it promotes its goal of "health for all by the year 2000." PAHO realizes that the involvement of all segments of the society is essential if this goal is to be realized and that a comparative perspective on participation in health, among other fields, would be especially helpful.

Through interviews with a select sample of informants, the study elicits data on participation in health, community development, and grassroots programmes. The framework it uses is a qualitative analysis of input in decision-making, implementation, and evaluation exercises. The two communities chosen by the Ministry of Health in Belize are Saint Martin and Santa Cruz.

In the urban community of Saint Martin there are three sets of health programmes. For the community development programme there is a project featuring an integrated approach to urban development on the part of three government ministries with the cooperation of UNICEF. The grassroots organization selected is the Citizen Association, which is a representative body of the residents exercising leadership in local

community affairs. The study reveals that there is more participation in the grassroots organization than in the community development and health programmes. The Citizen Association is currently assuming a greater leadership role, a process that will enable it - and the community as its constituent body - to exercise a greater level of community participation.

The study caught a quick glimpse of a group of people, most of whom have lived in the area for less than five years. The fostering of community participation is one of several issues that they are addressing and their success in doing so is already resulting from their group attempts to tackle problems which arise from their physical environment and their low socio-economic status relative to others in Belize City. In brief, community participation is a *process* that is gradually developing in Saint Martin with *some* tangible benefits that already can be seen.

The rural community of Santa Cruz has a primary health care programme. The community development programme is the *fajina*, the periodic cleaning of the village by the men. The grassroots organization is a football team. The high level of community participation in the *fajina* and the football team contrasts with that in the health programme. The study points out lessons to be learned to increase participation in health. They include formulating an appropriate rationale that stresses that maintaining good health is an obligation for villagers similar to that expressed in the need to keep the village clean and to protect the village honour in a football match. The health programme should also use the methods of mass mobilization, an informal spirit of camaraderie in activities, and a complementarity in the use of both western and local cures.

The case studies highlight - almost in a laboratory like fashion - two types of social context where community participation occurs. This becomes clearer in reviewing the urban and rural character of the two communities. It is the socio-cultural factors that form a backdrop for community participation at Santa Cruz; while at Saint Martin it is the socio-economic. The values of Santa Cruceros that are especially essential are their self-help ethic, dedication to their Maya culture and their home village, and their close affiliation within kinship ties. On the other hand, at Saint Martin it is the verbal expression of needs arising from pressing socio-economic problems that precipitated the use of community participation. The conclusion is that in the analysis of participation it is necessary to be aware of the sociocultural and socioeconomic constraints that are applicable within each community. ...

The Study ...

Belize - a background for the case studies

Are Santa Cruz and Saint Martin typical communities in Belize? To answer this question it is necessary to elaborate on the rural/urban differences in Belize. Visitors to Belize often remark about *its* small population, geographically dispersed settlement pattern, and ethnic **heterogeneity**. **Belize** has a population of 145,353 (from the 1980 census) and a land area of 8,866 square miles. This results in a population density of 16.4 for each square mile, one of the least in the Caribbean-Central America region.

The population is dispersed but it is not evenly distributed throughout the country. (*Fig. 1*) There are more people in the northern half than

the southern. There is greater concentration in the areas nearer the coast than in the hinterland, mostly a function of the hilly topography especially in the southwest. About one half of the population is found in urban areas. These are Belize City, the largest city with 40,000 inhabitants; Belmopan, the national capital, and **six** district towns. Further evidence on the uneven distribution of peoples within a widespread area stems from the fact that the towns range in population from 2,400 to 8,500. Similarly, there are 254 villages with populations of more than fifty each that are scattered throughout.

Apart from population size, urban/rural differences rest on the fact that the cities and towns are the centres for government administration, commerce, and light industry; as well as cultural and recreational events. Another source of differences is that the economic base of the towns is mixed, with greater prevalence of wage labour. The economic base of some villages, as in the case of some towns, rests on cash remittances sent by relatives from abroad and other parts of the country. In most cases, however, the villages maintain a subsistence economy relying on cash through the sale of cash crops. Santa Cruz is a good example of this.

The inhabitants of Saint Martin and Santa Cruz consist of two different ethnic groups, Creoles and Maya respectively. Creoles are the result of mixture between earlier whites with blacks. They speak a form of English similar to that in the Caribbean islands. Among the main ethnic groups of Belize, the Creoles have *been* the most urbanized, found more often in towns and cities in professional and clerical jobs. Several have also lived as marginal folk in Belize City with no employable skills and limited prospects for participation in the development process. The government

has built additional parts to the city to relocate some from the latter group. Saint Martin is one of such areas. There is a brief description of the Maya people in the Santa Cruz portion of this report. They have remained primarily a rural people with little integration into the Belizean mainstream.

Table 2 gives a breakdown of the main ethnic groups of Belize taken during the 1980 census. The Mestizo are the result of intermixture between Maya and Latinos.

Table 2 Population of Belize by ethnic groups in percentage,

Ethnic Group	Percentage
Creole	39.7
Mestizo	33.1
Garifuna	7.6
Maya	6.8
White	4.2

(Figures obtained from the 1980 census)

The Garifuna are descendants of Carib Indians who intermixed with escaped African slaves in the Eastern Caribbean and arrived in the country during the early 1800s. The diversified ethnic groups of Belize and their dispersed settlement pattern make for a wide representation of different kinds of peoples within a small population living in a large land area. Traditionally, there *has* been little intermarriage among them and they have confined **themselves** to different parts of the country. The endogamous practices and geographical isolation are gradually breaking down, however, under a strong ideology of nationalism perpetrated by the government since the 1960's. The inhabitants of most of us are now made up of different ethnic groups. Finally, there is a more recent addition to

the Belizean mosaic, namely the Central American refugee/immigrants. Several hundred are now in the country, although it is not known exactly how many there are.

The above description of the peoples of Belize throws some light on the difficulty of selecting the communities in the case studies. Heterogeneity is the rule when trying to classify Belizeans and it is almost impossible to choose a community which is typically Belizean. Nevertheless, when focusing on rural/urban differences, it is possible to find communities that fit characteristic normally associated with cities and villages throughout the Caribbean-Latin America area.

The development process in Belize, which has been unfolding since the 1960s, includes the field of community development, namely promoting the social and economic welfare of all citizens in both rural and urban areas. Table 12 outlines some of the application of national policy *for* community benefit at Saint Martin. They appear in higher profile at Saint Martin than *in* other communities because of the present interest of government to implement a pilot project of integrated community development there. Generally, the effect of the government's policy on community development can be seen through the following - strengthening local groups; aided self-help; and providing social welfare services. Personnel from the Ministry of Social Services and Community Development work throughout the country on different kinds of local groups. They include organizations for local government, such as village councils; youth groups, such as the 4-H; and women's groups working on handicrafts. Aided self-help is based on the need to foster cooperation between the government and local communities through the sharing of resources from both sides on

projects. An example is the building of a cement platform around one of the water pumps at Santa Cruz, which will be discussed later. Social welfare services cater to citizens who need assistance as a result of disaster, other kinds of misfortune, and old age. Special services are provided to youth with deviant behaviour. Being aware of its severely limited resources, the government encourages voluntary organizations and international agencies to assist in social welfare and the larger field of community development.

Since 1981 there has been an effort to re-analyse government's policy toward community development. Government officers have realized that there is a need to introduce a new approach that is more dynamic and can initiate programmes that are properly planned and can use resources from different sectors. Three ministries have been working through the Inter-Ministerial Council using an inter-sectoral approach toward the complex problems of community development. ... The focus of the Council has been on poorer urban areas.

Improving the nation's health by creating an awareness of the need for citizens to assume greater responsibility for their health needs is also a major thrust in the government community development effort. This is a main aim of the Ministry of Health as expressed in its commitment to primary health care since 1981. On primary health care a Ministry of Health policy document says,

"Primary health care implies that the people's basic needs are identified and dealt with in the simplest and most effective way possible, with emphasis on eliminating the causes of the most prevalent diseases. In most cases, this means providing basic sanitation, adequate nutrition, sufficient water, prompt access to essential drugs and life saving techniques and knowledge on how to prevent disease and promote health."

Implementation of the primary health care plan started in 1981 with the introduction of the Toledo District Primary Health Care Project with support from Project Concern International. The Santa Cruz health programme is a part of it. The Ministry's primary health plan calls for the formation and training of district health teams, a decentralization of responsibilities for planning, implementation, and evaluation, as well as establishing links with local NGO's. The recently formed Health Education and Community Participation Bureau is the main body with responsibility to supervise primary health care. ...

CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Overview of the Study

This study on community participation relies on a qualitative analysis of data from a small sample of informants on decision-making, implementation, and evaluation on specific group activities. The results of the study provide data on the following:

- (a) an overview of the social interactions in grassroots organizations, community development programmes, and health programmes in two Belizean communities.
- (b) the origin of community participation and the factors that hinder and foster it within the above organizations and programmes.

A brief synopsis of the results of the study is as follows.

The data in the two case studies derive from activities in grassroots organizations, community development programmes, and health programmes. In both communities the origin of community participation stems from external and internal sources. The external sources are national policy initiatives in such efforts as primary health care, aided self-help, and an integrated approach to community development

through the Inter-Ministerial Committee. The internal sources are cultural traits and community responses to socioeconomic needs. The study shows that some factors hinder the development of community participation while others foster it. Generally, the positive results experienced from projects that incorporate community participation contributed the most to its promotion. Similarly, dissatisfaction experienced from other projects hindered it. Another source of frustration among citizens arose from the delays of government to deliver items and services already promised and, most of all, not devolving the authority to them to take full control over their own programmes. Further below we will develop the problematic situation surrounding the role of local community members as against outside agencies in the development of community participation.

Community Participation as a Process

Before analysing what lessons we have learned about community participation from the case studies, it is necessary to review the definition. The PAHO protocol defines community participation as, "a process by which individuals and families assume responsibility for their own health and welfare and for those of the community, and develop the capacity to contribute to their own and the community's development." (pg. 1) The main operational component of the definition is that it is a process that can lead to the assuming of responsibility for health and welfare. In both communities the end result of participation, namely assuming responsibility for health and welfare, has not yet been fully realized. However, the process of developing community participation has been taking place. As a result, we highlight the nature of this process in our discussions.

From the case studies we can isolate three attributes underlining the development of community participation. They are:

- (a) historical factors that provide a background for community participation

- (b) the use of methods to claim opportunities for participation
- (c) the use of national policy as a form of intervention to promote community participation.

Historical factors are essential backdrops for the building of community participation. Santa Cruz and Saint Martin present us with distinct patterns. In the former socio-cultural aspects predominate while in the latter they are socio-economic.

Santa Cruz is a rural village located in the heartland of the Maya in southern Belize. The villagers retain substantial aspects of their indigenous culture, including the language, forms of local government, and belief systems on self-help and on the need to maintain strong village solidarity. They maintain a closely knit social fabric with overlaps in kinship, similar experiences shared in age-sets, and participation in village organizations.

The origin of these traits is within the Maya culture which has existed in this area for thousands of years. The Maya themselves have undergone *centuries* of acculturation attempts, the most recent coming from the nation-economy and political system, as well as in geography has strengthened their inward orientation – "us" as against others from the outside world. Apart from some disjointed efforts related to land tenure and aided self-help, among others, the primary health care programme is probably the first broad base attempt by the government to establish community participation in Santa Cruz. It is not surprising that the response of the Santa Cruzeros to it has been mixed. They welcome the medical delivery services but have not integrated the village health committee within their own social organization. It is a form of social grouping that does not fit within

their indigenous system.

In contrast to the well-established pattern of community involvement in Santa Cruz, in Saint Martin we see a group of people who are gradually forming a community base. Saint Martin is geographically located in the periphery of Belize City but is integrated into its economy, local government system, and other urban services. Habitation of the area intensified within the past ten years as a response to the central government programme of building houses to relocate some of the low income people from the inner city. Most of them are black and arrived at Saint Martin with a history of poverty. The move signalled a desire on their part to improve not only their housing condition but also their physical environment as well as their socio-economic condition. An integrated urban development project organized by three government ministries through the Inter-Ministerial Committee has been the main agency contributing to the improvements within Saint Martin. One of its aims is to help form a Citizen Association to be a representative group of leaders from within the community.

There has been no sociological analysis of the conditions of the urban poor in Belize. My own observations of living conditions in parts of Belize City reveal a pattern of chronic unemployment, drug abuse, reliance on emigration to metropolitan centres that dictate the life styles desired by the masses, and a flexible form of social organization built on the extended family. The main cornerstone of daily life among the urban poor would seem to be a system of dependence on patrons within established institutions, such as the political party, church, and labour unions, as well as wealthy individuals. The provision of housing by the ruling party as a form of political reward to its

followers falls within this pattern of dependence. The community of Saint Martin started as such a housing project.

The transformation of Saint Martiners from a state of total dependence to one of attempting to use community participation to solve their multiple problems is still continuing. The set of circumstances can be traced to the following stages. There was heightened awareness of their problems generated through meetings that go back to 1979 sponsored partly by the Ministry of Community Development to discuss what avenues were available. Their spirited articulation, as well as their attempts to locate resources both within the community and beyond, were encouraging and most impressive compared to that of other communities. Further development came when the Inter-Ministerial Committee decided to use Saint Martin as a pilot project *for* their innovative integrated approach to community development. An infrastructure was laid predicated upon the formation of a strong community-based organization, namely the Citizen Association, which would interface with the Inter-Ministerial Committee. We have already traced some of the milestones in this process in the Saint Martin case study. In summary, an awareness of social and economic problems together with a concerted effort to address them provided the main impetus for community participation at Saint Martin.

Another attribute we observed as essential for the development of community participation is the use of a number of mechanisms to claim opportunities for participation. Table 35 presents an outline of the comparative use of different mechanisms in Santa Cruz and Saint Martin. They are establishing a representative group to exercise leadership, the use of voluntary labour, mounting fund raising activities, verbal

expression of needs, and requesting technical and financial assistance from outside the community. The exercise of leadership is a crucial mechanism for community participation. And Santa Cruz excels in this regard compared to the fledgling attempts at Saint Martin.

Table 35
Mechanisms the Communities use to claim Opportunities
for Participation

Mechanisms	Extent of use	
	Santa Cruz	Saint Martin
Establishing representative group to exercise leadership	high	medium
Voluntary labour	high	low
Fund raising	nil	high
Verbal expression of needs	high	high
Requesting technical and financial assistance from outside the community	high	high

Santa Cruzeros maintain a structure of leadership that delineates a hierarchy of leaders complete with a definition of their responsibilities. It also includes a form of democratic representation by allowing for the periodic changing of individual leaders. The relative success of the leadership structure at Santa Cruz appears in sharp profile as against the attempts to build the Citizen Association as a first effort of community leadership at Saint Martin.

Table 35 shows that there is differential use of voluntary labour

and fund raising activities in the two communities. There is a greater use of voluntary labour in Santa Cruz than in Saint Martin; but the situation is reversed in the use of fund raising.

Previous discussion on the historical circumstances that condition the formation of community participation helps us to understand the comparative position of Santa Cruz and Saint Martin on the use of voluntary labour and fund raising. People contribute toward community participation what they can most easily do within the constraints of their own socio-economy. Statements that follow logically from this assertion are:

- (a) For community participation people contribute extra work beyond the necessities for their own daily living;
- (b) There is a need to channel that extra work toward community projects as against tasks which may be disruptive of the community well-being, such as crime, drug abuse, idling, and "hanging around the base".

The motivation to perform tasks for community well-being is created by several factors, some of which are cultural while others arise from experiences derived from successful community participation projects. Here we see that there is greater need for such motivation at Saint Martin than Santa Cruz, since the former is a much younger community which is only now building its tradition of community participation.

The extra work that people themselves contribute is based on their socio-economy in terms of the use of time and labour resources. In Santa Cruz the use of voluntary labour is an extension of the daily practice of manual work at the milpa, which allows for a considerably flexible schedule to engage in community projects. On the other hand, the more extensive use of cash exchange in the economy of Saint Martin

makes it easier to resort to fund raising for community projects. Ideally, both voluntary physical labour and fund raising are essential components of community participation. But cultural factors, as well as differences in the socio-economy, will dictate which one is more often used.

Table 35 includes two more mechanisms used to claim opportunities for participation - verbal expression of needs and requesting technical and financial assistance from beyond the community. The use of both is high in the two communities. However, closer examination indicates that there is far greater scope for their use at Saint Martin because of a greater amount of intervention there directed toward participation. Mention of these two mechanisms leads to a discussion of the final attribute observed in developing the process of community participation, namely, the use of national policy as a method of intervention to develop community participation.

The thrust of national policy in two areas is mainly responsible for the effort of community participation in the case studies. These are primary health care and community development.

At the village level the government predicates the functioning of the primary health programme on the strength of the village health committee and the effectiveness of the community health worker in the delivery of services. The health committee and the health worker form the core of the present community participation movement at Santa Cruz. Already Santa Cruzeros are using the strategies of verbal expression of needs and requesting technical and financial assistance to further their participation in primary health care. Building the water pump platform is a good example for the use of this process.

The case studies demonstrate that the use of primary health care as a medium to generate community participation is presently functioning at a far less scale than the use of community development. Differences in the scale of intervention at Saint Martin, as against the limited amount at Santa Cruz, underscores this point. The Integrated Urban Development Project, which affects the daily life of almost all the inhabitants of Saint Martin, is basically a pilot project designed to test methods of intervention to promote community development. The location of Saint Martin within Belize City facilitates intervention coming from other sources, such as government departments not associated with the Inter-Ministerial Committee, the Belize City Council, NGOs, and international agencies.

Intervention, however, is a double-edged sword. It can help with material resources for projects but it can cause strains on the community attempts to maintain control in decision-making and implementation, which themselves are major aspects of community participation. We have already seen this dilemma occurring at Saint Martin leading the Citizen Association to restructure itself to assume greater responsibility in public affairs (see the discussion on Table 11). Ultimately, the check on excessive intrusion, among other problems of community participation, rests on the use of appropriate mechanisms to claim opportunities for participation, especially building strong community leadership.

Earlier in this chapter we defined community participation as a process. The discussion has highlighted some attributes of this process

as they function at Santa Cruz and Saint Martin. The complexities of community participation can only be analysed through detailed case studies. A comparison between our conclusions and those of other studies will contribute to our understanding of community participation.