Process, Principles and Challenges of Inclusive Community Engagement: Distilling NGO Best Practice

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Scope and Purpose

Central to overseas development assistance (ODA) are the goals of economic development and poverty alleviation. As key development actors, NGOs have multiple, interconnected roles and functions in achieving these goals (Horton & Roche, 2010). In the broadest sense, NGOs are ideally placed as facilitators of development services, often acting as intermediaries between the communities they work with and government services, the private sector and research programs.

In the context of research-for-development (R4D) and especially for programs aspiring towards sustainable development, NGOs must assume roles and functions that are less transactional and instead engage in more deliberative and inclusive interaction with communities. This is in contrast to common donor perceptions of NGOs as simply project implementers.

As the goals of development shift beyond service delivery to strengthening capacity and building resilience, NGO practitioners are required to becoming advocates, mobilisers and change agents for the communities they work in.

Inclusive or ethical community engagement (ECE) plays a pivotal role in the quest for more equitable and sustainable agricultural development. As a concept, ECE recognises that the very poor and marginalised, including women and the landless, are typically excluded from development processes and do not reap its benefits. As a process, ECE strives to facilitate the inclusion of individuals and groups in collaborative and participatory decision-making.

Tapping into the rich knowledge that our SIAGI NGO partners possess, and applying that knowledge to improve practices across a range of development actors is the key purpose of SIAGI project Activity 1.7. This report briefly outlines SIAGI's ECE philosophy through the motivations, values and practices of our NGO partners. Distilling best practice principles of *inclusive community engagement* is the primary focus of this research activity.

Background

The institutional context of ethical community engagement in R4D

There are both instrumental and intrinsic reasons to pursue engagement with communities ethically and inclusively, some of these overlap. Fundamentally, improving livelihoods and income alone, does not necessarily lead to individuals and communities being able to engage in independent, empowered and sustained livelihood strategies. Without constructive and inclusive collaboration with communities, R4D initiatives are neither scalable nor sustainable (CDHI, 2016; MacLachlan et al., 2010).

SIAGI's decision to pursue ECE reflects both instrumental and intrinsic motivations including: (1) an acknowledgement of the negative impacts of unjust past research practices on communities; (2) development outcomes not reaching the very poor, in part due to elite capture and traditional research translation models and; (3) the partnership's general commitment to social justice. The SIAGI team is also motivated to apply the ECE approach in light of the complex institutional environment which currently impacts on the effectiveness of R4D initiatives.

For example, the manner in which science is typically designed and implemented tends to ignore the significance of farmers' knowledge and values in the research process. Collective wisdom and strength has often been trumped by researchers' expert-driven agendas. As CDHI and PRADAN have repeatedly reminded us, "communities have endowments, both natural and knowledge-based" and the tendency to ignore these, shows a disregard for people's natural abilities and their intrinsic aspirations for self-determination and self-governance.

This practice of overlooking or diminishing local knowledge has in part, led to an environment of dependency and mistrust in many communities. In some cases manifesting as apathy, such sentiments are fuelled by previous poor experiences with research participation, research outcomes failing to deliver on expectations, or disappointment in governments' broken promises to provide basic services or improve community infrastructure. A concentration of research projects at particular sites along with conflicts in research approaches adds to participation fatigue and confusion. In this situation, the need to lift one's family out of depravation influences communities' willingness and capacity to engage. Given this environment, a culture of resistance to engage or indifference to participate is often present when initial approach to communities commences.

ECE attempts to change this dynamic by working in partnership with people rather than simply studying them or their fields. The general process our partner NGOs follow in the pursuit of ECE is described below.

The goals, values and practices of community engagement are highly complementary across Bangladeshi and Indian partners. Shushilan, CDHI and PRADAN all bring a range of experiences and deep knowledge to the SIAGI project. All partners believe that communities have a wealth of

knowledge and share Chambers' view that farmers "have far greater capabilities than most professionals have supposed" (Chambers, 2010, pg. 45). Generally, a community's "understanding of context is realistic and relevant. Their inclusion can create a strong sense of ownership and therefore contribute to sustainability."(Mishra, 2016a).

*This report uses the umbrella term, 'collectives' to include collective farming, water users associations and self-help-groups (SHGs), reflecting the breadth of collectivisation mechanisms among our partner NGOs.

Methodology

Activity 1.7 follows three key steps: (1) data collation and thematic analysis; (2) theory building and; (3) engagement. This activity's research focus is to understand inclusive NGO practices, their processes and their challenges. The collation of project, workshop, and trip reports, presentations, written reflections and internal organisational documents including policies and training manuals was completed in early 2018.

The information sought targeted four areas of NGO practice:

1. Engaging with communities;
2. Philosophy or approach to engagement;
3. Modes of engagement;
4. Rationale for engaging in a particular way, using particular methods etc.

A thematic analysis was conducted to distil key themes to emerge from the data collected. A preliminary synthesis of principles of practice is outlined in this report.

Next steps include interviewing SIAGI NGO partners to fill any existing knowledge gaps, clarify points of key interest, and plan for engaging with external NGOs and other stakeholders for future learning exchanges. Reflection, learning and identifying changes in thinking and practice is an ongoing process and will inform successive steps.

The underlying research question in this activity is: *What do our NGO partners do well, how do they do it, and what are their struggles?*

Improving the research and practice of a range of development partners and actors (beyond NGOs to include research partners and donors) is the longer-term goal of this work. Improved program design, improved partnering and enhanced sustainability are among the perceived benefits from a deeper understanding of inclusive community engagement.

A select list of formalised documents analysed for this activity is provided at the end of this report. This list is illustrative only and does not include emails, trip reports or personal communication.

Inclusive Engagement: the Process

Enabling conditions for ethical community engagement in R4D

Project activities which meet the community where it is, with what is has, and with whomever is present is an ideal starting point for building meaningful relationships with communities. Figure 1 illustrates some key enablers to effective engagement.

SIAGI partners have all described the presence of what might be termed a 'confidence gap' –where, community members lack: either the belief they can contribute meaningfully to initiatives; or the confidence in the value of their current knowledge and/or; the social standing that allows them free participation. Time constraints, relentless labour demands (especially for women), physical fatigue and collective apathy can widen this gap considerably. Bridging this 'confidence gap' through creating agency and building capability using careful facilitation are often the first priorities in community engagement.
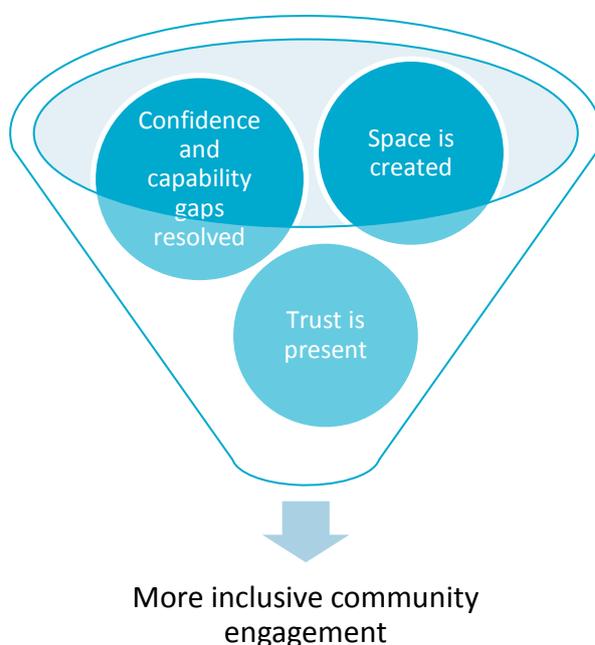
Figure 1. The enabling conditions for effective (and inclusive) community engagement

Shushilan, CDHI and PRADAN have communicated extensively about the importance of creating sensitive, inclusive and comfortable spaces for engagement. These spaces are both social and physical in nature (e.g. sitting position, respectful attire, using meaningful language, awareness of any existing social power). Such seemingly trivial considerations, can work to hamper or foster effective engagement.

Field practitioners who are aware of the power dynamics of seating arrangements, are attuned to the impact of body language and the significance of wearing culturally appropriate dress are more likely to convey respect, build rapport and eventually create trust. Awareness of local cultural and social norms, and the local socio-economic and political environment also assist in engaging effectively. The use of storytelling and other qualitative techniques can also be helpful in bringing others along the process.

Inclusive engagement can be a complex and time-intensive process. In general, there is a spectrum of interaction with communities ranging from passive involvement, to participation, to engagement. The further down the spectrum to true engagement, the more dynamic, resource intensive and gradual the process (Mishra, 2017).

Women's FGD on nutrition, health and livelihoods in Chakadoba village, West Bengal
(Photo credit: PRADAN)

Facilitating inclusion of traditionally marginalised members in a shared process of sense-making, planning, decision-making and reflection - while keeping in mind that communities are dynamic and unique entities existing independently of project ambitions - helps to build respectful and sustainable relationships (Mohindra et al. 2011; Mishra, 2017).

Depending on the level of mobilization present in the community of work, practitioners may spend considerable time building and strengthening groups to assist in building vision, solidarity, leadership, and empowerment. These are often necessary (but not sufficient) conditions which enable activities such as participatory livelihood planning to succeed.

Collectivisation is influenced by a myriad of factors including past experiences, intention, existing power relations, perceived costs and benefits, strength of facilitation, leadership and organisational capacity (Mishra, 2017). For communities where collectivisation is not mature or not functioning effectively, transforming the human condition to include social, psychological and spiritual transformation is a necessary step for inclusion (PRADAN, 2017; CDHI, 2018).

Once groups have initiated democratic and participatory organisational processes, efforts to strengthen relationships with local government representatives and other stakeholders are possible. Encouraging community to drive any proposed initiative by identifying leaders who encourage and nurture local leadership is essential. The demanding (and receiving) of entitlements (eg caste certificates) may be necessary steps in the process of building hope and capacity. NGOs have an important role in helping to distribute responsibilities among individuals, synchronize community proprieties with project priorities and facilitate this process skilfully (CDHI, 2017). In time, searching for opportunities to scale and integrate lessons into policy decision-making becomes a focus.

A process of empathic collaboration, participatory action and collective learning is at the heart of inclusive engagement. Techniques such as facilitating open questioning, collective problem-solving and reflection are useful in this process. Repeated validation of knowledge generated with the community strengthens participation and engagement. Learning and adaptation across the partnership is key to inclusive engagement.

Women from the community of Sekendarkhali village monitoring canal re-excavation activities
(Photo credit: Shushilan)

Finally, allowing for sufficient time to develop rapport and trust over consecutive visits is more fruitful than multiple short visits (CDHI, 2017). While practices across NGOs will differ, PRADAN establishes a base in close proximity to village sites and assigns a dedicated staff member to lead engagement with the village. This practice has proven beneficial for building stronger relationships more quickly.

Values Underpinning Inclusive Engagement

"To stimulate or facilitate change, one has to begin where the community is" (PRADAN)

Beliefs and values drive attitudes and ultimately behaviour. Inclusive and ethical engagement is a deliberative process. It's underpinned by key principles which reflect fundamental values of respect, empathy and collaboration. These values are derived from philosophical standpoints which drive and inform inclusive NGO practice at individual and organisational level. Three philosophical positions run throughout the documentation surveyed.

1. Human potential is infinite. People have the potential to change their own lives and influence change in the lives of others.
2. Self-reliance and self-determination are central to reducing poverty and depravation. Externally-driven agendas fail to achieve sustainable change in the long-term.
3. People's wisdom and traditional knowledge hold enormous importance to the success of development initiatives. Undervaluing these 'endowments' make engagement less effective and less morally defensible.

These standpoints drive core values of: ***dignity, respect, empathy and collaboration***. These core values guide the way SIAGI partners interact with communities, and with others in the partnership. They drive the selection of research approaches and activities.

Two additional considerations are notable here. The first, is that these values do not exist as stand-alone principles which simply guide organisational practice at a policy level. As much as possible, they are present in the motivations and actions of the individual staff who engage with communities. Second, applying these values in practice is rarely straightforward and can pose challenges to the practitioner. For example, respecting local customs may entail initially accepting exclusionary practices based on traditional and entrenched social rules and structures (IIED, 2014; Agarwal, 2001). Over time, a skilled practitioner will learn how to balance these conflicts and risks in the context in which they work.

Constraints and Tensions

The institutional, operational and environmental constraints to inclusive engagement

Our NGO partners work hard to achieve a degree of interactive participation in the conduct of their everyday work. Where, participation is intrinsically valued as a "measure of citizenship and a means of empowerment, and for its potential effects on equity, efficiency and sustainability" (Agarwal, 2001, pg. 1624). It is this level of participation that the SIAGI project as-a-whole aspires. Yet, this aspiration is not always amenable to constraints presented by traditional research approaches, operational demands and the social and institutional complexity inherent in marginalised communities.

Engagement practitioners are faced with multiple challenges and tensions in the course of engaging with communities. Existing research governance requirements, general resource constraints and the challenges presented by multi-stakeholder partnerships compound the task. A significant challenge for NGOs in the pursuit of inclusive engagement is to align research priorities with community priorities (Mishra, 2016b). NGOs need to find a balance between enabling communities to be self-determining and self-governing entities while satisfying externally-enforced goals often set by distant donors. Disparate trajectories are not always complimentary and tend to hamper

trust-building and participation. Additionally, rigid timeframes and reporting obligations to donors who may not understand the resources needed to build relationships, places added pressure on practitioners and the engagement process.

Farmers, including landless women, tenants and landowners planting collectively
(Photo credit: CDHI)

There are dangers in treating engagement as simply a means (data collection) to an end (project delivery). A key goal of ethical community engagement is to partner with farmers to help create the conditions for change. Engagement is a complex and ongoing process requiring forward planning, adaptive management, skilled facilitation and shared ownership of the process and outcomes (Mishra, 2016; SIAGI partner presentations, 2016). For development practitioners, this very process inspires human transformation.

For researchers working in traditional settings, this approach creates many challenges. The manner in which traditional research organisations organise and conduct field work can be a real source of tension. The primacy of quantitative methods and scientific knowledge, the demands of rigorous (often rigid) research methods, the constraints of academic calendars, and the pressures of generating high-quality research publications influences research approaches to engagement. Existing disciplinary biases and hierarchies can also compound multidisciplinary work. As can assigning a hierarchy of value to knowledge types where local knowledge is of lesser value to knowledge acquired from expert sources.

At the scale of research sites, a lack of integration between agencies and programs raises challenges for realising anticipated benefits. Multiple research and development projects working at the same sites, with different underlying philosophies and approaches can compromise sustainability of work (e.g. functionality and effectiveness of collectives). This is particularly evident when there is competition among projects that offer material resources instead of capacity building and less tangible capitals.

In addition, communities are not homogenous entities. There is often heterogeneity in terms of caste, class and other social indicators (Mishra, 2016a; Mohindra et al., 2011). There may be conflicting agendas and interests present among community members. There may also be attempts to exploit potential benefits for individual or group advantage. Dealing with individual interests and the presence of elite capture, including opaque proxy representation of women and other marginalized communities, are considerations practitioners must be aware of in the course of engagement.

Power and the lack of it plays an influential role in group dynamics (Mishra, 2016a). The recruitment of 'ghost' leaders of Panchayats controlled by menfolk is an example of existing inequity and false representation. Without deeper understanding of the social landscape, effective engagement will not be realized and can potentially harm existing relationships.

Finally, consideration must be given to communities' own physical and economic pressures in maintaining current livelihoods, and prevailing tackling environmental and natural challenges. Fighting off illegal forest loggers in the tribal communities of Hakim Sinan and managing wild life conflict in Uttar Chakuwakheti are examples of the broader environmental challenges villagers face.

Taking account of any existing community divisions and the challenges of sustaining mobilization over time also compounds the engagement process. Existing exclusionary structures and practices may be deeply entrenched. Initial farmer participation in collectives can decline over time and in some parts of West Bengal, there are state-controlled influences which use incentives and disincentives to garner support from communities. These tensions can affect the quality of R4D partnerships and how partners work together. They are also factors that challenge sustainability of inclusive engagement.

Early Lessons for the Partnership

In the course of implementing ECE, our partners have been presented with a myriad of challenges. These challenges have provided early lessons and in some cases, raised further questions. The challenge of communicating with a diverse range of research and government stakeholders on the benefits and demands of inclusive processes continues to consume time and energy.

There are deep questions emerging from our NGO and research partners about what it means to collectivize effectively and whether farmers' movement in and out of groups compromises longer-term sustainability.

There is also deepening appreciation, especially among our in-country research partners of the value of qualitative methods to both research and engagement processes.

There has also been practice change among our NGO partners following exchanges with partners. For example, PRADAN have now instigated the inclusion of children and the elderly in visioning exercises while also providing crèche facilities for women participating in training activities. These largely operational changes have enabled the inclusion of women, children and the elderly in community capacity building and planning activities.

Key Emerging Principles of Practice

1. **Individual and organisational values and cultures play a key role in inclusive practice.** A deep commitment to intrinsic values about people, their 'endowments' and their agency are integral to inclusive (and effective) engagement. For some development actors, this may require a fundamental shift in attitude to acknowledge the centrality of people's values and aspirations in influencing participation and decision-making and ultimately catalysing change. It requires treating all farmers as collaborators and equal partners in the research and development process.

2. **Situational awareness is paramount to building trust and achieving inclusion**. There are deep structural and institutional barriers to effective engagement that practitioners must be aware of as they enter communities. Previous and existing community experiences with research, unsuccessful government-led programs, perverse incentives by political factions, and empty promises of momentous change have led to a general sense of disempowerment and distrust among communities. These conditions can hamper new efforts to build relationships and mobilise participation. Knowledge of these barriers and persistent effort to engage with communities despite these constraints is needed to achieve inclusion. This may require substantial internal 'house-keeping' and careful planning before field work commences. Without this effort, trust-building is made more difficult and the potential for additional burdens to be imposed (and harm done) is placed on communities.

3. **Inclusive engagement demands specific skills integral to the engagement process.** Highly skilled facilitators who are: able to communicate meaningfully; practice active and empathetic listening; in possession of sophisticated interpersonal skills including active and

empathetic listening and; who have awareness of local social and environmental factors that may influence the quality and direction of engagement are more likely to build trust long-term. Facilitators work hard to make meaningful connections with others, and between individuals and groups. These skills are not innate and potentially require guidance to develop. Beyond the technical skill required of facilitation and analysis, a willingness to learn and experiment, and character traits such as sensitivity, empathy and a sense of justice are vital in building relationships with communities.

4. **A commitment to continuous learning and experimentation** is required to successfully engage. For some communities, the need for NGOs to facilitate a realization of human potential, to empower individuals and groups, to build their capacity, etc. sets the foundations for inclusivity. For some development partners, including researchers and donors, the ECE process may necessitate a change in the beliefs, norms and behaviours that drive program implementation and design.

5. **Qualitative methods are a key technique in inclusive engagement**. The use of storytelling, participatory planning, scenario analysis, individual and community level dialogue and the need to conduct multistakeholder meetings requires skill in qualitative methodology. The monitoring and evaluation of engagement process demands the use of innovative indicators which seek to measure quality and value in favour of quantity and frequency.

6. **Physical and social space creation is a key ingredient to inclusive engagement.** This requires presence, commitment and time. Communities have historical, social, cultural and economic constraints to participating in development initiatives. Some of these barriers are the result of previous poor development and research planning. Others can be attributed to previous poor experiences with government. Others still are the product of social and cultural divisions which hamper capacity to participate and engage fully. Practitioners must take steps to accommodate these exclusionary factors and wherever possible, reduce their impact.

7. **Scaling initiatives without community driving the desired change is not sustainable.** Without sufficiently deep commitment and ownership, (for example, those achieved through a process of ECE), initiatives are less likely to sustain over time. In addition, purely externally-imposed agendas deplete the resources of communities and over time, erode trust and diminish energy for participating in new programs. This presents a considerable risk for the wider development community.

Next Steps

Over the next 3-6 months, the next stage for Activity 1.7 includes interaction with key NGO practitioners to verify, challenge and seek clarification on the general principles and practices outlined here. This will be followed by a mapping of some of the specific skills, steps, how-to's against typical timelines for a range of village and community settings. This compilation will be jointly evaluated by the entire SIAGI team at its next review meeting in late 2018.

In time, a process of sharing these lessons more broadly with other NGOs and stakeholders will be explored, possibly comprising tailored workshops and training events in the course of 2019.

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SIAGI NGO partners' (CDHI, PRADAN, Shushilan) presentation slides on Community Engagement from both Kharagpur (March 2016) and Kolkata (October 2016) meetings.

Existing documents collected in the synthesis of themes

Source Title/Date	Description	Authoring Organisation
Community Engagement: Perspectives, Processes and Practices (2016)	Community Engagement Manual	CDHI
Community Validation Studies: An essential step in ethical community engagement (2017)	Reflection document	CDHI
Embedding Collaboration: Uttar Chakwakheti readies for action: Reflections (2016)	Reflection document	CDHI
Workshop Report on Ethical Community Engagement: Perspectives and Practice (2017)	Workshop Report	CDHI
Exchange visit to PRADAN-Bankura (2017)	Exchange visit report	CDHI
Farmers Meeting (Dhaloguri) (2017)	Reflections	CDHI
Ethical Community Engagement for Intensification, Inclusion and Collectivisation (2017)	Learnings from ECE (Reflections document)	CDHI
Engagement and Ethics (2016)	Contribution to PowerPoint slide set for Kharagpur Workshop, March 2017	All
Engagement Approaches and Strategies (2016)	PowerPoint slide set for SIAGI annual meeting	CDHI
Engagement Approaches and Strategies with the Government and the Community: Inputs from CDHI (2016)	Planning document for slide presentation	CDHI
Their Mustard must have Wilted, their Spirit kept Flowering! (2018)	Farmers' Reflections	CDHI
Contributions to Trip Reports (several)	Trip Reports	All

Source Title/Date	Description	Authoring Organisation
Justice and Inclusion: PRADAN (2016)	PowerPoint slide set delivered SIAGI meeting Feb 2016	PRADAN
Ethics and Engagement - PRADAN (2017)	PowerPoint slide set delivered for Nov 2016 SIAGI meeting	PRADAN
Ethics (PRADAN)	PowerPoint slide set delivered SIAGI meeting Feb 2016	PRADAN
Community Engagement Process (2017)	Operating and policy document	PRADAN
Grassroots Engagement Methodology (2017)	Methodology document	PRADAN
PRADAN's New Approach (2017)	Policy document	PRADAN
VBNB Grid for Cultural Change (2017)	Policy document	PRADAN
Vision– Revisiting and renewing PRADAN (2017)	Policy document	PRADAN
Community Engagement – Hirbandh	Field report	PRADAN
Livelihood System - Hirbandh		PRADAN
FGD on Mango - Hirbandh	Research report	PRADAN
Case Study Ranibandh	Research report	PRADAN
Engagement with the Women Collectives		PRADAN
FGDs in Chakadoba (2017)	Research report	PRADAN
Contributions to Trip Reports (several)	Trip reports	All

Source Title/Date	Description	Authoring Organisation
Ethics and Social Inclusion	Power Point Slide Pack, presented 2016	Shushilan
Ethical Engagement of Women: Experiences of Shushilan	Power Point Slide Pack, presented 2016	Shushilan
Equity, Justice, Social Inclusion, Adverse Incorporation and Empowerment: Research and Development Experiences	Power Point Slide Pack, presented 2016	Shushilan
Engagement Report on Khatail Village	January 2017	Shushilan
Practice of Shushilan for Community Engagement	Table summarizing organisational roles, modes of engagement and approach (2018).	Shushilan
Annual report (July 2015 to July 2016)	English copy received	Shushilan
Policy of Ethics	Potentially relevant, not available in English	Shushilan
Gender Policy	Potentially relevant, not available in English	Shushilan
Gender Policy Operational Guideline	Potentially relevant, not available in English	Shushilan
Shushilan Child Protection Policy	Potentially relevant, not available in English	Shushilan
Human Rights Policy	Potentially relevant, not available in English	Shushilan
Environment and Social Safeguard Policy	Potentially relevant, not available in English	Shushilan
Partnership Policy and Procedure	Potentially relevant, not available in English	Shushilan
Participation of Women (Best Practices: Case Study Series)	Potentially relevant, not available in English	Shushilan
Social Justice (Samajik Najyota)	Potentially relevant, not available in English	Shushilan