DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: COMMUNITY-BASED MONITORING SYSTEM TO EVALUATE THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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SUMMARY

For over two decades, national governments and international aid agencies have developed actions to reduce poverty and inequality in countries with high percentages of populations living in these conditions. In most developing countries, the lack of information at the local and community levels has hampered development planning and programmes and has inhibited national- and local-level identification and monitoring of programme and project impacts.

The community-based monitoring system is a process that engages I stakeholders that are based in or have a presence in the municipalities and communities in which programmes and projects are being implemented.

The design and implementation of this methodology for community monitoring aims to:

- Gather information about the economic, social and environmental conditions at the community and local levels;

- Identify actions and frame them within programmes and projects that help to improve the socio-economic conditions of affected populations; and

- Monitor and evaluate implemented actions with the participation of beneficiaries in project areas.

The system has demonstrated that understanding and addressing poverty levels and measuring progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) require community involvement in policy decision-making.

The lack or absence of social power is characteristic of poverty. This limits the potential of those who are excluded and discriminated against to interact on equal terms with other stakeholders, to negotiate and manage proposals or to influence public policy. Recognizing and addressing these factors will affect the type, design and implementation of interventions. In addition, these factors account for the need to design and implement community-based participatory methodologies that generate impacts and empower local stakeholders. This will generate challenges that lead to rethinking the goals and strategies of project monitoring and evaluation. Therefore, policy makers should:

- Ensure that a broad range of stakeholders participate in the design, implementation and impact assessment of proposals; and

- Strengthen the capacities of local and community stakeholders in decision-making and resource management.

The Dominican Republic has launched a community-based monitoring system within the context of a broader monitoring and evaluation framework for the joint programme for strengthening the banana value chain through inclusive markets. Through its work with the joint programme, the community-based monitoring system seeks to influence the achievement of the MDGs, particularly MDG1 (Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger), MDG3 (promote gender equality and empower women), MDG6 (combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases), MDG7 (ensure environmental sustainability), and MDG8 (develop a global partnership for development). In addition, the monitoring system seeks to link actions and outcomes to the National Development Strategy and the National Strategy for Systemic Competitiveness.

For the operation of the community-based monitoring system, monitoring committees were created in three areas of the joint programme's intervention: the provinces of Azua, Montecristi and Valverde. This helped to define local development strategies framed within the objectives of the National Development Strategy. This system not only seeks to provide participatory monitoring to those involved in the joint programme, but has also served as a mechanism to address the MDGs on a municipal scale and assess their progress in development strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In much of the developing world, the lack of local information about the poor hinders development planning and programmes and inhibits efforts to track change. The community-based monitoring system (CBMS) methodology demonstrates that understanding and addressing poverty in a meaningful way requires involving local communities in public policy decision-making. The community-based monitoring system can therefore help governments and international cooperation agencies to develop more effective programmes, to monitor their impact and to measure progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Appropriate public investment is essential for reducing poverty and addressing social inequalities; updated and accurate data is necessary to measure progress and plan such investment. This data is also essential to achieve proper analysis and policy implementation. The '2007 Millennium Development Goals Report' recognizes the necessity of "a sound national statistical system and enhanced public accountability" to support the achievement of development goals.

This report is a brief presentation on the advantages of developing and implementing participatory methodologies for monitoring and evaluation. Participatory methodologies empower local stakeholders in interventions that are being implemented in their communities. This methodology has proven effective in achieving its objectives and can further contribute to development goals by identifying assessments, impacts and proposals to improve programme and project implementation, effectiveness and success.

MEASURING PROGRESS TOWARDS ACHIEVING THE MDGS WITH COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Policy decisions must address the concerns of the poor, build on their knowledge and experience, and involve them in political processes. Engaging communities to work with local authorities in developing planning through the monitoring and use of locally obtained, verifiable information about the real conditions of life is what many CBMS practitioners refer to as 'localizing the MDGs'.

The importance of measuring and monitoring the multidimensional aspects of poverty in order to assess progress towards the MDGs is widely accepted. However, there is less consensus on practical methodologies or how to translate it into policies that work in practice.

Governments are responsible for providing public goods and services to reduce poverty. However, studies conducted across the developing world show that public resource allocations alone do not ensure that services are actually provided or, if provided, that they are efficient or accessible to the poor. The poor, the providers and policy makers must be effectively linked through institutions that promote inclusion and accountability.

In September 2000, 147 heads of state and government and 42 ministers and heads of delegation, gathered at the United Nations General Assembly. The Millennium Summit explored ways to pool nation's combined will and efforts to revitalize international cooperation on behalf of the less developed countries and, in particular, to decisively combat extreme poverty.

They identified goals that included combating poverty and hunger, reversing environmental degradation, achieving improvements in the fields of education and health and promoting gender equality. During the Summit, it became clear that because the lack of development is a problem that affects and concerns the entire world, the formation of a partnership to enrich and reinvigorate international cooperation, while making it more appropriate and effective, should be one of the eight selected goals. These deliberations provided the structure for the Millennium Development Goals.

The Goals were expressed with the greatest clarity possible, and specific targets were set for the progress to be achieved by 2015 in terms of the major economic and social issues

reflected in meeting the approved Goals. Countries also agreed to review the progress on a regular basis in order to ensure that efforts would not fade over time.

In the Dominican Republic, pursuing the MDGs has achieved significant accomplishments in education and in reducing infant mortality and tuberculosis. However, making progress towards the Goals of poverty reduction, environmental sustainability and access to safe drinking water remains a challenge.

Databases and statistical series for measuring, monitoring and evaluating the MDGs at the local and regional levels are poor and inconsistent in methodology, data collection and results presentation. As a result, data sets are not reliable or comparable to other, ostensibly similar data sets.

This particularly problematic in monitoring and evaluation progress towards MDG 3 (promote gender equality and empower women), where national gender capacities are limited by insufficient statistics; data is neither updated nor disaggregated by sex or gender indicators.

In the face of these challenges and constraints, the CBMS provides an organized methodology to collect local information on an ongoing and regular basis. Collected data can be used by local governments, national government agencies, non-governmental and civil society organizations to plan tasks, budget and implement local development programmes, and monitor and evaluate programme performance. Fundamentally, CBMS is a tool to improve local governance and democratic decision-making that promotes increased transparency and accountability in the allocation of public resources.

THE COMMUNITY-BASED MONITORING SYSTEM METHODOLOGY

CBMS has several aims, including assessing the scope of poverty at the local level; developing appropriate plans and programmes to address issues; providing the basis for rational resource allocation; identifying potential beneficiaries for focused programmes; and monitoring and evaluating the impact of projects and programmes.

The CBMS has a series of distinctive characteristics in that it is a household census, not a sample survey; it is rooted in local government and promotes community participation; it calls for performing its tasks with local staff and community volunteers; it has a core set of simple, well-established indicators; and it establishes databanks at all geopolitical levels.

Data can be disaggregated by region, gender, socio-economic status, age, ethnic group and other variables. Because monitoring activities are conducted on a regular basis and the results are processed quickly, the data is useful for ongoing, local-level planning. Furthermore, as results are universally accessible, stakeholders perceive increased value in the results.

The CBMS is an atypical poverty monitoring system because it gathers information from all households in the community. This represents a fundamental contribution to specialized interventions focused on poverty such as cash transfers, health care benefits and other public sector social assistance programmes.

Communities and local governments have ownership of the CBMS and lead data gathering and processing. They are also in charge of the database and are expected to use that information in their annual investment and development plans. Collected data provides crucial information to define socio-economic profiles, project proposals and other

development-related reports. CBMS information also serves as a barometer to measure projects' and programmes' effectiveness.

Successfully implementing CBMS requires community participation. The community is informed at the outset of the objectives and purposes of the survey and provided with pollsters to collect data and personnel to process and analyse the data. Information is collected from all households and the data is then entered and consolidated at the borough (*villa*) level. The processed data is returned to the community for validation and discussion.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC IN CBMS IMPLEMENTATION

The information obtained from population and housing censuses has been unsatisfactory in terms of timeliness and content, as several towns and municipalities still lack the information required for these censuses. Because local authorities do not consider demographic behaviour, housing and basic services for planning purposes, the process is guided more by popular demand and group interest. This hinders the best use of the scarce resources, which should be based on real planning and the actual interest of the governed.

The Dominican Republic's experience in participatory monitoring and evaluation is still limited, but necessary steps are being taken to promote social methods that will enable communities to participate in the development and monitoring of plans, programmes and projects. The creation of Local Monitoring Committees is an example of such an effort.

Objectives of the Monitoring and Evaluation Committee

A primary objective of the Local Monitoring Committees is to ensure that stakeholders actively participate in the design of project activities, indicators, outputs and outcomes and in the monitoring and follow-up of evaluation activities. Further, the Committee seeks to facilitate stakeholder contributions, suggestions and recommendations for more efficient and effective interventions.

Another principal objective of the Committee is to ensure that programme activities, outcomes, indicators and outputs empower beneficiaries.

Committee tasks

The Local Monitoring Committees are tasked with monitoring the activities performed by each agency and their implementing partners; evaluating the quality and relevance of training received; participating in gathering baseline and MDG information; participating in organizing and facilitating workshops for the systematization of experiences; providing cooperation and support as key informants to consultants for mid-term and final programme evaluations; and channelling recommendations, requests and suggestions from the target population.

Composition and organization

Monitoring and evaluation committees are composed of a minimum of three to five people, one of whom serves as president, another as secretary and the others as supporting members or delegates.

Activities

In practice, these committees operate in the following programmes and projects:

Joint Programme for Strengthening the Banana Value Chain by Growing Inclusive Markets

The joint programme is implemented by seven UN agencies: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Labour Organization, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, Pan American Health Organization, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund and the World Food Programme. Its headquarters is located in same facilities of the National Competitiveness Council, a government institution that coordinates programme activities. The joint programme's main objectives are to achieve greater competitiveness in the banana sector and to support the achievement of MDGs 1, 2, 3, 6 and 8.

The joint programme works in three provinces, Azua, Montecristi and Valverde. Monitoring Committees were created in Azua and Valverde to monitor and evaluate programme actions and their impact on the MDGs (a third Committee is being established for Montecristi).

The Monitoring Committees have achieved several results, including empowering involved stakeholders in the social and economic sectors, improving implementation of joint programme activities, and increasing awareness of the MDGs.

The National Development Strategy and Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation

Within its strategic line of macroeconomic stability, competitiveness and productive development, the National Development Strategy (NDS) aims to have a production structure that is coordinated and competitively integrated into the global economy. In particular, the NDS aims to promote export development based on competitive insertion in dynamic international markets; increase productivity, competitiveness, environmental and financial sustainability of agro-productive chains in order to contribute to food sustainability, harness export potential and create employment and income for rural populations; develop the manufacturing sector underlying the productive apparatus in an environmentally sustainable manner and facilitate the sector's integration into global markets.

The NDS includes creating provincial and municipal development committees, whose tasks are to participate in developing participatory budgets in municipalities and municipal districts; support the socialization of the NDS; and participate in the development and monitoring of the Municipal and Regional Development Plans.

SWOT Analysis of Local Monitoring Committees

Strengths

- Increases communities' empowerment over their socio-economic issues;
- Develops the capacity to effectively gather information; and
- Improves programmes' and projects' operations through community participation.

Weaknesses

- Low levels of education make training more difficult;
- Committee tasks tend to become centralized in a single person;
- Lack of resources for their sustainability;
- Meetings are held infrequently; and
- The NDS committees operate poorly.

Opportunities

- END Act will promote this type of methodology; and
- Involvement of OFIs in this type of initiative.

Threats

- Changes of government;
- Premature termination of programmes and projects; and
- Involvement of members of opposition political parties.

CONCLUSIONS

Most communities and municipalities in the Dominican Republic do not have the specific or up-to-date information necessary to characterize their socio-economic conditions as a basis for decision-making, public policy and coordination of appropriate strategies to promote development.

This deficit of specific and up-to-date information affects the MDGs in two ways. First, the lack of information hinders the establishment of the baselines required for creating projects and programmes and making policy decisions at the local level. Second, without sufficient information, monitoring cannot be effective. Therefore, it is impossible to determine the impacts of national and local MDG-related initiatives.

The CBMS enables communities to collect the necessary information and data. This ability empowers communities to assess and plan actions to improve their living conditions. With regard to the MDGs, CBMS can provide the required reliable information that will facilitate monitoring and follow-up of activities.

The CBMS helps measure progress towards the MDGs. This system shows that understanding and addressing poverty in a meaningful way requires involving local communities in public policy decisions. This empowers and encourages the poor and significantly improves the engagement among local authorities and communities.