



Photo: Oxfam in Cambodia

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN WATER GOVERNANCE

Learning from a Youth-Led Programme Design

In June 2014, Oxfam convened a participatory youth-led project design workshop as part of its Mekong Regional Water Governance Program (MRWGP) in Cambodia. The MRWGP piloted a youth inclusion component for 18 months to contribute to its wider aim to ‘support vulnerable communities in the Lower Mekong to enjoy sustainable livelihoods that contribute to ecosystem integrity and protection of biodiversity’.

During the scoping phase of the project, the team identified the need to convene a workshop with young people and other key stakeholders to co-design the youth component, which would directly contribute to the aims of the overall MRWGP. The workshop used a range of youth participation techniques to provide a safe and enabling space for young people to inform the design of Oxfam’s youth pilot project.

Youth participation approaches

Youth-led workshop design: Oxfam brought together six young leaders, identified during the scoping process, who had expertise on gender, indigenous people’s rights, ICT and youth leadership. These young leaders formed the Youth Consultation Group (YCG). Together with three non-youth partners and three Oxfam project staff, they co-designed the workshop over Skype, Facebook private messaging and email.

Identifying workshop participants: To identify the workshop participants, selection criteria were set using information from the scoping study and guidance from the YCG. The aim was to ensure the participation of marginalised young people, so it was important to have steer from the YCG. Leaders from youth organisations and Oxfam partner organisations also nominated some participants.



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Capacity building for workshop leaders: A team of seven people were identified to facilitate the workshop, including two Oxfam staff and five young people. The team had not worked together before and its members had different levels of facilitation experience. Only two of the young people had previous experience as facilitators, while two had never even attended a workshop before. Oxfam held a one-day facilitator meeting, where lead and co-facilitator roles were assigned. Oxfam staff and partners also provided training on workshop facilitation, including support for solving common issues, and provided time for the facilitators to plan and practice so that they felt confident in running the sessions.

Youth-led logistics to ensure inclusion:

Preparation for the workshop, including the logistics and scheduled field trip, were coordinated by a partner staff member alongside members of the Cambodia Indigenous Youth Association (CIYA), as they were best placed to ensure that the workshop was inclusive and accessible to marginalised youth. The workshop was held in the provincial hub of Ratanakiri in Cambodia, to mitigate any concerns of the families of young women from the community that might prevent their participation (for example, the young women would not have been permitted to travel to Phnom Penh, the capital, for their personal safety).

Diverse participation methods: Several special measures were taken to support the participation of indigenous people, youth living in project communities, and young rural and urban women. These included the following:

- The field trips were designed to enable greater participation of young people in rural communities who could not attend the full workshop.

- The youth-led indigenous organisation CIYA was identified as a key partner and played an advisory role to ensure that the workshop was inclusive of young indigenous peoples and respected cultural protocols; CIYA also provided links with the community during the field trip.
- A gender quota was set for the workshop and shared with the organisations who nominated participants. Gender officers were targeted as participants.

Youth-led facilitation: Most of the workshop sessions were led and facilitated by a young person, setting the tone of a youth-friendly and open space. Oxfam staff took on various roles in the workshop including as facilitators, participants and presenters, and provided support with story-capturing and logistics. Staff were briefed that the workshop was youth-centred. The knowledge of technical staff was drawn on as requested by the youth participants.

Promoting diversity and addressing power dynamics: The approach to learning allowed for the breakdown of traditional power dynamics and created a space where the knowledge and life experience of each participant was equally valued. The facilitation team encouraged mutual learning, whereby the staff, facilitators and participants all learned from each other.

The sessions and discussions were designed so that participants with different levels of expertise could collaborate and identify commonalities and links in their work. For example, during a session on the project's Theory of Change, young people from a community affected by hydropower dams were partnered with young people who had successfully campaigned on this issue.

Addressing gender: Gender equity was overtly addressed throughout the workshop, including by appointing young women facilitators and ensuring that the facilitators included the perspectives of young women – especially the younger indigenous women from the community – by pairing them with more experienced youth leaders. Small-group work was encouraged as young women were more likely to contribute in a small group setting, and discussion questions were included specifically on gender in relation to the issue being discussed.

Informal spaces: Oxfam deliberately set up informal spaces where participants could be together without a workshop agenda, to build



relationships and trust. For example, the group travelled from Phnom Penh together, stayed in the same accommodation even if they lived in Ratanakiri, ate together, had free time together and went on the field trip together.

Key youth participation successes

Youth-led from the start: Participatory workshops take significantly more time to organise and plan than workshops that are Oxfam/partner-led and run. The value of working with young people was recognised from the start, so this additional time was allowed for in the planning stage.

Diversity of experience, knowledge and expertise:

- In selecting participants, the 'usual suspects' were consciously avoided, for example urban-based, English-speaking, conference-attending youth leaders with experience in the development space. Support was provided to enable the participation of a diverse spectrum of young people who were affected by and wanted to create change on issues of water governance. The cohort intersected culture, language, gender identity, nationality and level of education. This allowed for an open discussion about power within the youth demographic in the Mekong region, and about how young people could best collaborate with each other.
- Trusting and enabling young people who had no prior experience of facilitation to lead workshop sessions enabled them to build their individual skills, knowledge and experience.
- Assigning all participants a task to deliver each day – either a summary of the day, an ice-breaker, or a role helping with logistics – gave young people opportunities to participate in different ways. As a result, the confidence of some of the less-assured participants increased dramatically over the four-day workshop.
- Participants spent every waking hour together, largely unprompted by Oxfam. The result was a cohesive group with strong relationships based on respect and mutual understanding.

Addressing power dynamics:

- The workshop highlighted differences of opinion between urban and rural youth, challenging young people's perspectives. Many urban youth assumed that it was their role to influence older people in rural

communities about the value of listening to young people; however, the rural youth disagreed. This led to a robust discussion that unearthed the power dynamics that exist and a recognition of the diverse knowledge and skills that each group brings, highlighting the need for collaboration.

- Oxfam staff and the facilitation team modelled in their actions that young people's ideas and opinions were equally valuable to theirs. When Oxfam staff were asked questions, for example, they deliberately stepped back and provided space for the young people to respond. The participants were also impressed by staff members' willingness to make changes to the workshop format based on end-of-day feedback. Several commented that they did not expect Oxfam staff to listen and make the changes they had recommended.

Sustainable capacity building to ensure longer-term impact:

- Time was taken to understand the support each young person would require in order to feel confident facilitating the workshop. Experienced facilitators (Oxfam staff or another young person) provided mentoring, support and guidance to less experienced facilitators, who demonstrated increasing competencies and confidence in their facilitation skills as the workshop progressed.
- Combining capacity building with an engaging, practical exercise to design a Theory of Change to inform the youth component of the MRWGP gave young people a tangible opportunity to apply these skills and to use their knowledge and expertise. This involved including diverse lived experiences to create a roadmap of the youth component of the MRWGP.

Supporting youth beyond the project:

- While using young people as translators can hinder their full participation in the process, in this case it proved a positive experience both for them and for the other participants. One young person set up her own translation business following the experience.
- An Oxfam staff member was the dedicated photographer/videographer, but she invited two volunteer citizen journalists from a partner organisation to conduct interviews. This built on the skills the volunteers were developing and added great value to the story-gathering.





Photo: Oxfam in Cambodia

Lessons for others

Allow additional time for preparation: More preparation time before the workshop would have provided space for the youth facilitators to practise and request extra support, and may have generated further ideas which would have reshaped some of the sessions.

Provide language support: Several participants provided feedback that some of the terminology was not easily understood, and that the pace of conversations did not allow enough time to check understanding. Although small-group discussions were divided by language groups, the larger group discussions were more difficult to control. The workshop was mainly run in Khmer, and the three translators sat with non-Khmer speakers and checked their understanding during each break.

Invest in youth training and capacity building: Action-based capacity building that is relevant and immediate anchors the learning and consolidation of skills. When supported and trusted, young people with little or no experience can facilitate sessions, provide opinions, design a project strategy and more.

Clarify roles and participation – Hart’s Ladder of Youth Participation:

- Oxfam needs to be aware of and clear about its role and the participation being sought from youth. For example, who is initiating the event, or parts of the event? Is it being initiated by the participants? Who forms the facilitation team? Is it a shared initiative or is it being initiated by Oxfam? If the event is initiated by Oxfam, what methods are being used to ensure the meaningful participation of young people? In this project, Oxfam used Hart’s Ladder of Youth Participation as a reference point to ensure that youth were given the space and opportunities to lead.

- Ensure that youth participation is strategic and appropriate. Draw on local expertise for facilitating sessions to ensure they are inclusive of disability, gender, religion, race and human rights.
- Trusting young people to take leadership roles is key to running a successful participatory workshop. While acknowledging that the outcome may not be as ‘perfect’ as was first envisaged, this is an important part of relinquishing power and space to provide young people with more equal and meaningful opportunities to lead.

Address unequal power dynamics from the start:

Power dynamics must be identified and addressed for authentic and free participation to occur, as well as to ensure the highest-quality input. This includes the intersectional and intergenerational participation of young women and men, LGBTQI youth, urban and rural youth, indigenous and non-indigenous youth, and younger and older youth.

Promote intergenerational dialogue: Inviting more non-youth participants to part of the workshop to create an intergenerational dialogue and cohesion would have added great value to the process.



Photo: Sophoan Phean

This case study forms part of a series of case studies exploring how to go from programmes developed *for* young people, to working *with* them and on projects led *by* them.

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