



Note No. 54

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“Bottom-up” Community-Based Development: Gabon Urban Development Project

Social Development Best Practice Elements

- Multi-dimensional approach to poverty reduction aimed at enhancing opportunities, capabilities, empowerment, and security of the poor
- Institutionalized mechanisms for participation and decentralized implementation
- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of social development outcomes by the government and community

By 2020, the majority of the developing world’s population will live in urban areas, increasing the number of urban residents by 2.5 billion. The World Bank is at the forefront of international efforts to manage urban growth and reduce poverty. Decentralization enables local urban governments to address the specific needs of the urban poor, including employment, infrastructure, finance, and governance.

By African standards, Gabon is a relatively wealthy country with a per capita GNP of \$4,230. Yet, pockets of extreme poverty are growing in urban areas. More than half the population in Libreville, Port-Gentil, and Franceville live in neighborhoods that lack electricity and running water. Bank support has enabled the government to invest in these poor neighborhoods through community-based development.

In the past, the government focused little on poverty alleviation, especially at the community level. Typically, budget allocations were put toward large and costly infrastructure projects in the transport sector, with poor management of urban sector issues. Thus, the shift by the government from a centralized strategy to localized

projects to alleviate poverty in the urban areas is unprecedented.

The Gabon Urban Development Project is being conducted through a series of pilot projects in the poorest, most densely populated neighborhoods in three cities. Reducing poverty hinges on increasing the access of the poor to employment opportunities. This requires improving infrastructure, which includes establishing water and sanitation systems, as well as creating roads, safe walkways, and transport services. This work is being carried out by local contractors and employs the local poor.

Adopting decentralized and participatory processes in poor neighborhoods is not easy. Bringing together disparate peoples to develop plans to improve their living conditions requires, first, involving beneficiaries and other stakeholders, including local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), municipalities, local contractors, and engineering firms. Second, it requires extensive training of these different groups. Although the process is laborious, participatory planning and implementation enable the community to become involved in common

This project was recognized as Best Practice in Social Development by the Social Development Family and received an award for Excellence in Quality at Entry from the Quality Assurance Group (QAG). The task team leader was Patrick P. Canel.

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concerns and result in a sense of ownership for beneficiaries and other stakeholders.

Characteristics of the Urban Poor

In Gabon's urban areas, unemployment is high and rising, particularly for unskilled workers. Many urban poor are recent arrivals from rural areas. They tend to cluster around urban peripheries—areas that are poorly connected and under-served by traditional transport routes or service and distant from commercial centers.

The 1995 poverty assessment highlighted lack of infrastructure, isolation, and unhealthy living conditions as key elements of urban poverty. Inadequate infrastructure acts as a regressive tax on the poor. Much of their time that might be used for productive employment is spent carrying potable water, collecting fuel or in commuting to work. Public health indicators in the urban shantytowns were alarmingly low. Inadequate water and sanitation contribute to high morbidity rates from parasitic and infectious diseases.

The urban poor are much more heterogeneous than the rural poor, making it more difficult for them to present a unified voice in community matters. Neighborhood improvements often are left in the hands of absentee owners of housing properties, who have little interest in spending more money or time to improve the community.

Developing a “Bottom-up” Approach

The pilot project focuses on the construction of roads through targeted neighborhoods to improve access and create direct, complementary benefits such as services, local employment, and support for local construction companies. To increase employment of local unskilled laborers, the project uses concrete blocks for paving roads.

At the community level, each targeted neighborhood provides help to identify the location and alignment of the road that would make the area more accessible. One of the criteria in the exercise is that the proposed road

should not involve involuntary resettlement. Working with the assistance of NGOs, each neighborhood organizes its Community Finance Plans (CFP) around micro-projects that complement the construction of the main road.

The NGOs provide technical assistance such as engineering and architectural expertise to the communities to ensure that their micro-projects are linked to the provision of local public goods and services. In addition, each micro-project must meet certain standards: that environmental conditions are improved and that no adverse environmental impact will result from implementation or construction. Local NGOs assess and certify these standards while the Ministry of Planning oversees the process.

Lessons Learned

- Improvements in urban infrastructure and public transport contribute to increased equity and inclusion of the urban poor in economic growth.
- Participation of local communities in project selection and design ensures that investments reflect community priorities and enhance ownership.
- Partnership of public agencies with local communities and NGOs helps to adapt project design to local needs and priorities.
- Community involvement in operations and maintenance increases the likelihood of project sustainability.

Project Sustainability

The project's bottom-up approach is a key strategy for sustainability. After the project is completed, it is expected that, to generate their own source of activity as advocate planners on behalf of communities, NGOs will pressure local governments to target poor communities. Targeting will include allocating appropriate budget resources and matching community contributions made in cash or kind. In turn, local governments are expected to pressure the central government to match community participation in infrastructure upgrading in the neighborhoods. Maintenance and replication of community infrastructure schemes will keep local contractors involved in the project. Ongoing monitoring throughout the duration of the project is carried out by a designated NGO.

