



ENGAGING THE YOUTH COMMUNITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT: A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

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Received November 23, 2011; in final form June 13,
2012; accepted July 7, 2012

ABSTRACT

Youth, an asset of the community, can contribute its strength in environmental management. Pakistan currently has the largest group of youths (10-24 yrs), nearly 54.2 million individuals constituting 34 percent of its total population. These numbers are expected to increase to 64.8 million by 2025. The main objective of this descriptive research article is to propose the strategies by which youth communities can be utilized as an active agent of change for improving the environment for sustainable development in Pakistan. First, this paper identifies the importance of the youth population of Pakistan to participate in local environment upgrading. Next, the paper deals with the building of a community engagement framework which is based on five basic levels: information, consultation, involvement, collaboration and empowerment of Pakistan's youth population. Furthermore, the paper discusses all the possibilities and limitations a youth community can face for implementation of this participatory strategy in the field. In addition, keeping in view all the existing social, economic and political conditions, a set of suggestions is given for making youth community engagement possible at representative local levels. Finally, the paper sums up the importance of this participatory approach to achieve sustainable development in Pakistan through the most vital part of population, its youth.

Keywords. Environmental pollution, health, action plan, national youth participation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Youth is the most precious wealth of Pakistan. The United Nations defines youth as a period during which a person is being prepared and prepares itself to be an active and fully responsible member of society. This period of youth is identified by the United Nations to be 15 to 24 years [1]. While the lower period remains 15 years, each country has adopted different maximum years ranging from 24 to 40. In Pakistan, it is taken as 15-29 years, which are 35 million in number. They are not just the future, but also the present. National policy makers are giving increasing focus and high priority to youth development at international forums and what the development of their latent potential holds for the future [2]. At the moment, Pakistan has the largest number of youth in its history. According to last Census conducted in 1998, youth under the age of 29 constitute 70% of the total population. As much as 64.9% of the young population resides in rural areas and 35.1% in urban areas. The Census of 1998 counted 56 million children under the age of 15. There were another 13 million adolescents between the age of 15 to 19 and 11 million youth aged between 20 to 24 years. The youth of Pakistan presents the most promising resource and in huge quantity – a big reservoir of energy [3].

Although several studies have examined learning outcomes of environmental action experiences for youth, little is known about the aims motivating practitioners to involve youth in action, creating positive environmental and social change, nor how practitioners perceive success [4]. Around the world millions of young people are becoming involved locally, nationally and globally through new programs and infrastructure. Emerging approaches to environmental governance require a greater level of community participation than did previous approaches in which these responsibilities largely rested with government agencies [5]. Menegat [6] suggests that the system consists of four interrelated components: citizen participation, public environmental management programs, comprehensive knowledge of local environment and environmental education.

As recognized by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the involvement of youth in environment and development decision-making is critical to the implementation of policies of sustainable development. By embedding learning in multiple civic ecology practices and thus helping to maintain the supply of ecosystem services, creating platforms for sharing knowledge, and fostering ties among university students, the community and

government stakeholders. An Urban Environments course may contribute to social-ecological resilience [7].

Young people should be involved in designing and implementing appropriate environmental policies. They are also highly-aware supporters of environmental thinking. For implementation of such programs. Keen at al. [8] are of the view that, depending on the municipality in question, strategies have been developed by consultants, by an Environment (or Conservation) Officer employed by the local council, or by municipal officers already working within a local government department. The different approaches have also varied in the extent to which the local community was involved in the process [8].

2. KEY URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Increase in population and migration into cities have created serious environmental problems including lack of safe drinking water, inadequate solid and liquid waste management, and pollution in Pakistan. Many southern cities are characterized by overcrowding, contaminated water supplies, and lack of sewage disposal drainage or waste disposal, which is an unhealthy urban environment.

Studies conducted recently by the Government and donor agencies in Pakistan have highlighted a number of environmental issues. Broadly, the areas of concern identified include water, pollution and waste management in the urban areas of Pakistan. Overall, these studies reveal deterioration in all these areas. The increasing pollution of water, air and land continues to have an enormous impact on people's health, especially that of vulnerable groups such as children. The Government, private sector and civil society have not responded adequately to meet these challenges [9].

Water and sanitation is the neglected sector in Pakistan. Most of the households in Pakistan do not have access to safe drinking water and lack toilets and adequate sanitation systems. As of 2005, approximately 38.5 million people lacked access to a safe drinking water source and approximately 50.7 million people lacked access to improved sanitation in Pakistan. If this trend continues to year 2015, 52.8 million people will be deprived of safe drinking water and 43.2 million people will have no access to adequate sanitation facilities in Pakistan.

The Water Quality Report (2004) of the Pakistan

Council for Research on Water Resources (PCRWR) shows that in Pakistan 30 and 40 percent of all reported diseases and deaths are attributed to poor water quality, respectively. Moreover, these are the leading causes of deaths in infants and children up to 10 years of age. A mortality rate of 136 per 1000 live births due to diarrhea is reported, while every fifth citizen suffers from illness and disease caused by polluted water. Moreover, in Karachi alone more than 10,000 people annually die of renal infection due to polluted drinking water. Thus, the majority of the population in Pakistan is exposed to the hazards of drinking unsafe and polluted water. Based on the Program carried out by the PCRWR, the bacterial contamination in 2004 ranged from 48 percent in Islamabad to 100 per cent in Ziarat. Arsenic testing of drinking water supplies across the country has indicated that the districts of Bahawalpur, Liyah, Multan, Rahim Yar Khan and D.G. Khan in Punjab and Dadu, Mirpur Khas, Khairpur, Nawabshah, Shikarpur and Ghotki in Sindh were high risk districts with several areas indicating arsenic levels at over 50 parts per billion (ppb) [10].

Similarly, air pollution is considered to be primarily an urban problem in Pakistan as the rate of urbanization has increased. The notion of maintaining good air quality has been the center of attention of concerned stakeholders [11]. Air pollution vehicle is caused by industrial and thermal power plants, but more particularly by vehicle emissions. As a result, the outdoor air quality in Pakistan's urban areas has deteriorated significantly. In 2001, concentrations of suspended particulate matter in Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Islamabad were four to seven times higher than levels recommended by the World Health Organization. Even higher levels of fine particulate matter were measured in Gujranwala and Faisalabad in 2003 and in Quetta in 2006. A substantial increase in the number of vehicles on urban roads continues to drive up levels of urban air pollution. Common gases emitted by vehicles include carbon monoxide, nitrous oxides and ozone, and are dangerous to human health beyond certain levels of concentration. Polyaromatic hydrocarbons released by diesel-powered vehicles are known carcinogens, while smoke from diesel engines has aggravated already elevated levels of airborne soot.

Nitrous oxides are emerging air pollutants with the highest concentrations recorded in Karachi, followed by Lahore, Quetta, Peshawar and Islamabad. Industries located in urban areas are the main source of sulfur dioxide (dangerous to human, animal, and plant life) while brick kilns powered by low-grade

coal are major sources of soot [9].

The government is trying to control some of these environmental issues through policy making and several actions at local level with the help of municipalities, but it is the need of the hour to engage local people in the action plans, particularly the youth population.

3. YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

A participatory approach to environmental protection is one of the sustainable developments in environmental perspective [12]. The idea of a participatory approach to public policies and programs is something that the policy community and bureaucracy in Pakistan like to endorse and love to pre-empt. Very often, this hybrid attitude prompts them to use a mix of manipulative and passive forms of participation. Community engagement can be organized or monitored by key institutions of the society, for example local government, municipalities, educational institutions and NGOs. Community engagement initiatives by higher educational institutions give benefits to the students, community, researchers and also the institutions themselves [13]. Similarly, this practice is immaculately visible in the typology of community participation in the Social Action Program (SAP), which aims to improve the delivery of four basic social services, namely primary education, primary healthcare, rural water supply and sanitation, and population welfare [14].

The Youth Engagement Service (YES) is the most active agency dealing with this issue. They have a view that the concept of youth participation is very new in Pakistan. The mass media are silent on this issue. The majority of Parliamentarians are still unaware of the concept of youth participation. High-ranking civil servants and bureaucrats have never expressed any priority for this important issue. Civil organizations at all levels are ignorant about this vitally important concept for national development. Of three citizens in Pakistan, two are young people. This is a massive untapped human capital that has not been harnessed for the development of the country. Youth potential is not recognized; instead youth are considered a problem. It is high time to identify youth participation as the vital tool for reaching out to other marginalized youth in helping to realize their full potential as well as for nation building.

Thus, keeping in view the importance of youth engagement in improving local environments there is

a dire need of some governmental body that will design, implement and monitor all the processes as well as provide resources for such projects. One of the proposed structures can consist of the hierarchical administrative units right from national, provincial, district, tehsil and local levels according to their representative tasks (Figure 1) which will plan, design, implement and monitor the youth engagement projects based on the suggested Youth Community Model. In spite of the governmental administrative body, educational institutions can also be involved in such projects from schools to universities to train the focus group in a better way.

The youth Engagement Model includes five major stages (Table 1) including inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower. With the increasing level of engagement there is a corresponding increase in expectation for public participation and impact. In simply “informing” youth there is no expectations of receiving feedback, and consequently there is a low level of public impact. At the other hand, “empowering” youth to make decisions implies an increase in expectations and therefore an increased level of public impact. Following are the main stages involved in youth engagement.

3.1. Program Components

Stage I - Inform

This stage is the foundation of community engagement. It involves establishing direct communication with youth through organizing open sessions or meeting in the community with the different segments of youth at various locations, for example at schools, colleges, markets and residential colonies in order to inform all the diverse groups within the community about the environmental problems and their impacts on their lives. The process used can be proactive (information dissemination) or responsive (responding to question from the community). Examples include one-off communication such as brochures or media release through to long term, intensive processes such as environmental education through training and workshops.

Stage II - Consult

This stage describes the process of eliciting feedback on information provided. The basic goal is to obtain feedback on analysis alternatives or decisions. Consultation actively seeks youth community views

and input into policy plans and decisions. The responsibility for the decisions remains with government or the organization doing the consulting. This stage also involves the scrutiny of potential youth leaders in the community and guides them to scale up the process of participation and coordinate the developing plans of action as team leaders. Moreover, it provides training to the organized youth committees by teaching the skills necessary in their chosen areas of action. In general, it involves youth community mobilization, participatory planning, project management, communication and facilitation, conflict resolution and teamwork. The overall objective is to enable youth participants to develop their skills in planning and management of environmental actions at the local level. Tools for engagements can be the meetings, surveys, comments of target groups and as so on (Table 1).

Stage III – Involve

After establishing grassroots level structures and receiving training in programmatic and administrative areas, the youth community members are ready to become engaged to address the environmental issues for a specified period of time in their representative localities. Each youth committee develops an individual plan of action and begins the process of implementation with minimum technical support from the supporting agency, that is, government. The youth committees share their progress with the agencies working at District and Tehsil level in order to share their challenges, successes and areas for improvement. After these reflection and feedback sessions, the members again go back into their communities to continue their work.

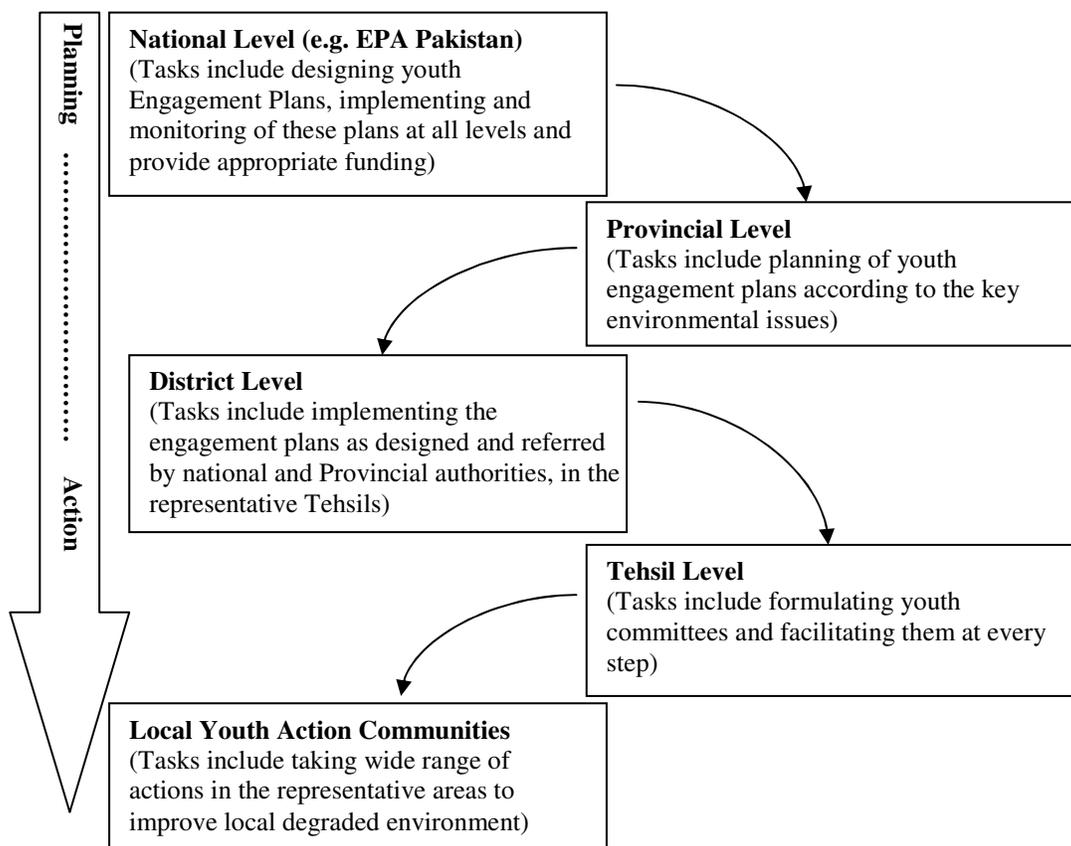


Figure 1 Youth Engagement Hierarchy among Administrative levels in Pakistan

Table 1 Youth Engagement Model

Levels of Participation	I Inform	II Consult	III Involve	IV Collaborate	V Empower
Participation Goals	To provide the youth with balanced and objective Information to assist them in understanding the environmental problems, alternatives and solution	To obtain feedback from youth on alternatives and decisions	To work directly the field to ensure that local environmental issues are considered and consistently understood	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	To place final decision-making in the hands of local community particularly youth
Tools for Engagement	Fact sheets Open houses Print and electronic media	Public Comments Focus groups (Youth) Surveys Meeting with youth community	Training Workshops	Youth Committees Participatory Decision Making	Citizen Juries Delegate Decision Representation of youth in policy making meetings
					
Source: The International Association for Public Participation (Modified from IAP2 spectrum of Public Participation)					

Stage IV - Collaborate

This stage of engagement further extends the level of participation and, consequently, the impact upon the community. After gaining experience and learning by doing, the young people should be confident and competent enough to replicate the same process in other areas of their communities, reaching out to other young people. Over time, the Youth Committee should be able to assume complete responsibility to plan, manage and monitor the local activities without any external assistance. Ownership is shared between the organization and the other stakeholders but formulation of youth committees and involving their suggestions in the improvement of local environments can be the fruitful outcome of these engagement activities.

Stage V - Empower

The goal of this stage is to place final decision-making in the hands of the youth representatives. The local Youth Committee will be equipped to expand their horizon and start networking with other organizations to strengthen and expand their program activities in the field of environment. During this phase, the Youth Committee expands the coverage or initiates new

services for their target community. As it recruits more volunteers within its own boundaries, it might reach out into new communities to initiate and help develop additional programs of youth participation for environmental governance. Participation of youth representatives in the decision-making meetings at the highest level, that is National agency meetings, will be the vital sign of youth empowerment.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of all these stages is a systematic and gradual process determined by those involved. This framework can be applied to various local environmental issues like solid waste disposal, waste water disposal, sanitation, air pollution, health awareness and so on. It is very important that government organizations (Figure 1), with or without NGOs involved in promoting the concept of participation, should carefully assess themselves during the preparation phase of the project in order to plan and invest time and resources accordingly. Each stage will increase the level of youth participation incrementally and reduce the role of the implementing agency. It is very important that the organization's involvement should be gradually phased out. The

gradual reduction in their contribution will help the local groups to become increasingly self-sustaining and increase the impacts on the community in maintaining their environment positively.

This is only the proposed framework for youth engagement in governing the environment, but actually there are many constraints in its implementation, some of which are as follows;

- Illiteracy among the target group that is the youth population.
- Lack of background knowledge of the environment among young people.
- Lack of volunteerism among them.
- Insufficient national plans for community engagement for environmental action.
- Political, cultural and religious barriers in the implementation of youth engagement e.g. gender differences.

It is very important to consider all these negative factors while designing any community engagement project for youth in Pakistan. Illiteracy is a general problem of Pakistan, hence there are many actions that are in their implementation stage for its eradication. However, for communication of fundamental environmental knowledge, related sections or full courses can be introduced in curricula from schools to universities. Moreover, short courses, awareness campaigns, seminars, workshops and youth conferences can also be useful to attain the prescribed objectives. Once the youth become aware of environmental issues and their fatal impacts, that will surely motivate them to volunteer themselves for its management. Similarly, this awareness and motivation will be effective for both genders. For the practical implementation of this model through the Government, the authors will propose it to the Environmental Protection Agency of Pakistan. Thus, it is time that we adopt and implement this participatory approach and make it happen to drive our country toward sustainable environmental development.

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