

Awareness Raising Materials for Community Action in Wetland Conservation

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I would like to extend my gratitude to the organizers for inviting me to attend the Kitakyushu Seminar on Public Participation and make presentation on our experiences in the preparation of teaching materials for collective action on the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. The teaching material we are talking of is a package of modules for stimulating community action and consists of four modules prepared by the Environmental Education (EE) Project; pre-tested in Bangladesh, Nepal and India by wetland practitioners and now being experimented in some wetland sites of Thailand and India. After we receive the feedback and inputs from these experiments, each module would be improved and disseminated for wider application in the Asia-Pacific region.

In this paper I would like to share with you an innovative approach of packaging information through which the participants, at the end of the day, become aware of the issue; and be able to apply the new knowledge in, and adapt the same to, the real life situation and promote its diffusion.

Why this package

The analysis of information from the 36 status reports of the Asia-Pacific region identified numerous obstacles, of which one is the lack of teaching materials to advance the cause of environmental education. This obstacle is commonly found every where in the region.

To address these issues, the Project formulated a regional strategy on environmental education in cooperation with regional organizations, environmental educators, facilitators and practitioners. This joint exercise resulted in the identification of five major action agenda for the promotion of environmental education. Agenda one “*strengthen the capacity of stakeholders*” has recommended various activities at the national level including the one to “*encourage/support the development, testing, production and dissemination of innovative educational materials suited to local contexts*”. This is the basis under which the EE Project refocused its activities to mainly prepare the educational materials.

Educational materials are considered an important mode of disseminating information, knowledge and wisdom. The act of dissemination becomes easy and effective if subject matters are organized in a systematic way and supported by simple and easy-to-understand materials. The materials can be used by facilitators for dissemination or by participants independently for acquisition. Another reason is that materials are the authentic record of what and how one should use in the teaching-learning process. A good educational material can be even better than the well-trained teacher. Any body can substitute the teacher and can disseminate knowledge and wisdom but not the materials. In fact, it can be the real source of teaching and learning in the situation such as self-learning, individualized learning, distance learning, or in a place devoid of modern amenities.

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The Project, therefore, decided to prepare a good education material. Through its rapid assessment technique, it critically reviewed available materials, which ranges from simple to complex in the field of environmental management. Some were heavily skewed towards increasing the knowledge and understanding of the reader, while others were more inclined towards modifying behaviors and skills (application). Still, others were focused more on affective domains only. None were found balancing the cognitive, the affective and the psychomotor domain. It was also noted that not many materials dealt adequately with the affective domain (values, positive attitudes, commitment and responsibility). This review process led us to conclude that there is a need and an urgency of a good teaching material that includes information related to all three domains; cognitive, affective and psychomotor. This niche drew the attention of the Project while preparing educational materials for community action in wetland conservation.

Assumptions

As mentioned earlier, the package consists of different modules. Different modules target different groups of stakeholders in a community. Their preparation is based on the following two assumptions.

1. Environmental problems are a common concern, the solution of which requires the active and responsible involvement of the entire community.

Explanation: A community consists of diverse groups of people. They have different viewpoints on the community problem. Some know the problem fully while others may not know it at all, or know it only partially. Similarly, some may be highly vulnerable to the problem, while others may be only partially vulnerable, or not at all. In order to tackle this common problem, the concerns and needs of these groups should be addressed fully.

So, identify stakeholders of the community (students, parents, teachers, local leaders, NGO representatives, or others).

2. The collective action is possible only when all stakeholders of a community develop a common understanding about the issue.

Explanation: Different groups should be brought together; they should be made aware of. Once they realize the situation, they need to be taught in a way they develop the common understanding about the issue, particularly managing and tackling them jointly. For this, the following steps are proposed.

- (1) **Learn (L)** about the issue thoroughly
- (2) **Experience and evaluate (E)** the knowledge
- (3) **Adapt (A)** the knowledge for a specific community
- (4) **Promote (P)** the knowledge

This is what has been called the LEAP method, which represents the first letter of the sequence of the “Learn, Experience and evaluate, Adapt and Promote” steps.

Now let me share with you why we selected the LEAP method.

- On the way you might come across an obstacle. Then what would you do? Jump over it to cross.
- If the river is on your way, then you would need a bridge to cross it.
- If a pothole is there in front of you, then you leap forward to cross it.

We need action to succeed and cross these barriers. Likewise we need thoughtful action to meet any challenges. One has to be thoughtful and alert in reaching the goal. It is in this sense this active word “LEAP” is being used in this paper. It is an active process of transferring knowledge by which participants acquire knowledge

(learn), self-assess (apply and evaluate), modifies to suit a specific condition (adapt) and then share with others (promotion of the knowledge). The notion of the LEAP approach transcends the boundary of conventional learning -- where it is believed that the process is successful once the individual acquires learning and adopts it in the real life situation – to a progressive step of disseminating ideas to others. This method enjoins the obligation of dissemination to the participant.

Under the LEAP method, the educational materials are prepared in the form of modules and packaged under the banner of community-based educational materials targeted for a whole community (different stakeholders) to stimulate their general awareness and action on the conservation of wetlands and their resources. Each module prepared in the form of a booklet constitutes the following parts; (1) tips for the facilitator, (2) short introduction about the module, (3) treatment of the issue in a systematic manner (including references), (4) different ways to experience, adapt and promote the idea, (5) teaching outlines for the facilitators.

A photocopy of *Module One: Let Us Keep Our Wetlands Healthy* is annexed to this paper for references. Four models targeting different groups are as follows. Plans to add more modules to the package are in place.

- 1) Module One: *Let us keep our wetlands healthy*
- 2) Module Two: *What is happening to our freshwater resources*
- 3) Module Three: *Objective-oriented Program Planning*
- 4) Module Four: *Participatory rural appraisal (PRA)*

Objectives, features and target

Our vision is “*willing, able and informed citizen on the wise use of wetlands and their resources*”. In order to realize this vision, the following major objectives have been identified where the participants are supposed to be able to;

- Develop basic understanding, knowledge, appreciation and skills needed to apply the concept in the real life situation.
- Promote the knowledge thus gained to other individuals in the community.

The unique features of this method are as follows.

- It is friendly to the facilitator and the participant because it requires no serious preparation. Just a minimum preparation. Every thing is made simple and easy.
- It is a self-contained activity-based method for both indoors as well as outdoors. Every thing is there, including touching, feeling, experiencing and being in the nature.
- It provides the facilitators and participants an opportunity to acquire and apply the knowledge as well as disseminate it to others. In sum, it attempts to instill in the participant a sense of value, appreciation, admiration, respects and support for the new idea so that they can internalize the knowledge.

Each module is targeted for a different group of individuals in a community. Intentionally the whole community was selected because wetland conservation is a joint adventure and needs the support of every resident such as students, women, farmer, NGOs, teachers, researchers, etc. Training a single group alone would not be able to solve the problem. Training has to include all the relevant players. So the first and the second module are prepared for raising general awareness of the high school students and the high school teachers respectively; the third module, for local organizations such as NGOs and CBOs; and the fourth module, for researchers, NGOs and teachers so that they would be able to understand the community dynamics. Figure 1 below presents different types of people being affected by an issue in a community.

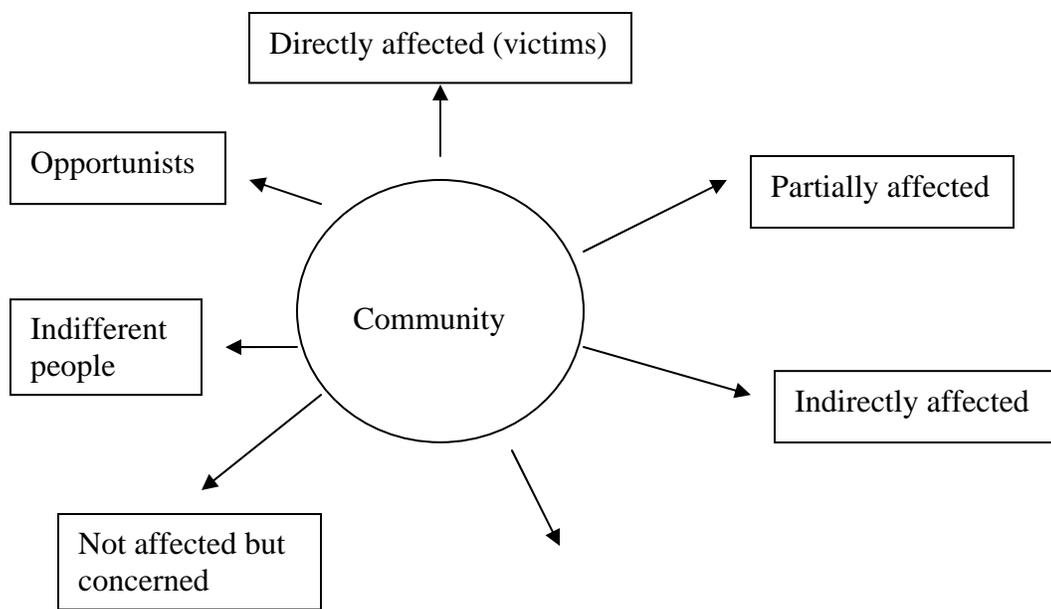


Figure 1: Schematic representation of people being affected by an issue in a community

Short description of the LEAP method

A short description of each step of the LEAP method is given below. These descriptions can also be found in each module.

Step One: Learn about the issue thoroughly

Before putting them into action, participants should understand the issue and be fully aware of it, especially its nature, impact, driving force and possible solutions. But participants can not do it without any guidance. Here lies the responsibility of the facilitator. Only an informed facilitator can pass the information effectively on to the participants.

Under this step, the issue is simplified and explained in detail. The facilitator should read it carefully and understand it thoroughly. Then s/he should teach participants with the help of the teaching outline annexed to each module.

This step attempts to equip the facilitators with basic skills and knowledge to apply them successfully in the field. The facilitators and the participants share with each other directly in this step.

Step Two: Experience and evaluate the knowledge

Once the participants understand the matter thoroughly, they should be given the chance to apply their new knowledge in the real world of work. The direct and first hand experience facilitates them to integrate the theory into practice. The hands-on experience enables them to evaluate the topic in terms of its practicality, replication, profitability and sustainability. In fact this step is crucial for participants to make any decision on whether to take the issue seriously or drop it off completely. This step gives him/her a chance to think over the topic and make a right decision, whether to adopt or drop. The participant must evaluate their knowledge. Some of the questions they should be encouraged to ask are given below.

1. Can I make any sense out of this presentation?
2. How much have I learnt?
3. Do I understand the subject matter fully?
4. Do I have any question for clarification?
5. Is this a relevant topic for my community? Will it be useful?

6. How can I apply this information to the field?
7. Do I have adequate skills in conducting similar activities?
8. What precautions do I need to take?

Step Three: Adapt the knowledge for a specific community

The knowledge and skills will be in limbo if they are not used. They will be stagnant and become a dead wood. The knowledge should be lively and living by using it time and time again. Participants should think of a site, where they can adapt their knowledge so that the acquisition becomes a regular practice. This step provides the participant another chance to apply the knowledge in the real life situation until it becomes their daily practice. In order for the participant to be able to achieve this goal, they should have the chance to experience, apply and adapt the knowledge under the supervision of the facilitator.

Step Four: Promote the knowledge

The knowledge should not be confined to the facilitators and the participants only. They should, in turn, share their knowledge with others until it becomes integrated into the practice. The knowledge should be disseminated as far as possible. Participants should attempt to build up the capacity of the community to retain, use and promote the knowledge. Let them share their new learning and experiences with as many people as possible, using such techniques as talks on different occasions, community programs, home visits, campaigns, personal contact and letter-writing, preparing educational materials, involving community, use of mass media, demonstration, etc.

Conclusion

As explained above the modules were designed, developed and tested in consultation with our wetland partners. The objective was just to determine the appropriateness, organization, wordings, suitability of the material, etc. Their validity was also tested.

In the second phase, the materials were discussed in the regional workshop and the suggestions from the wetland practitioners were incorporated into each module. The purpose was mainly to see if materials are suitable to the wetland community.

In the third phase of testing, (which is undergoing) the modules are being experimented in Thailand and India to check if the package is going to be useful to solve the problems of a community and is a valid tool to raise general awareness and allow them for collective actions on the issues of wetlands and their resources. The package has to undergo many tests and experiments before this gets adopted in the real world of work.

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