

RURAL POVERTY and ENVIRONMENT



Learning in the field

Isang Bagsak helps people chart their own future

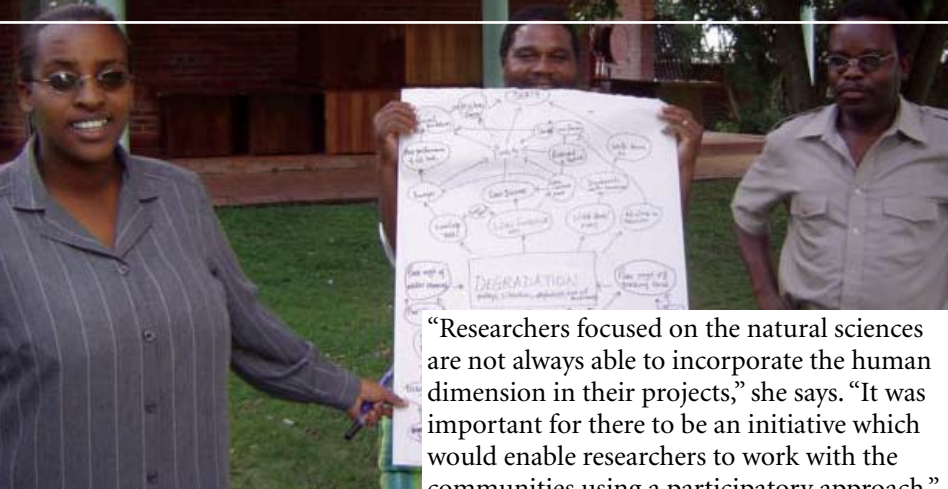
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Introductory
Workshop in Nha
Trang, Vietnam,
February 2003.

A new form of peer learning, developed jointly by researchers and development practitioners in Africa and Asia, uses face-to-face meetings, field practice, and Internet links to learn from each other about participatory approaches to research in natural resource management.

Traditionally, rural development planning in poor countries was conducted on a top-down basis, with imported specialists turning up with “expert” and often highly technical solutions. Too often, this approach paid insufficient attention to the needs of the very people it was meant to assist.

According to Maria Celeste Cadiz of the University of the Philippines Los Baños, most natural resource management projects failed to consult with community members until the point of implementation, and many of the professional researchers who were involved in these projects lacked the skills necessary for communicating with less-educated rural people.



Wini Dagli

“Researchers focused on the natural sciences are not always able to incorporate the human dimension in their projects,” she says. “It was important for there to be an initiative which would enable researchers to work with the communities using a participatory approach.”

Introductory
Workshop in
Zimbabwe.

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Grassroots sharing

Now, a new form of dialogue, called participatory development communication (PDC), aims to engage local communities in the process of charting their own future. Under the PDC scheme, people identify their problems, determine causes, and search for solutions through research, collaboration, and exchange.

One remarkably successful PDC training program was developed jointly by Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and research teams from Uganda, Cambodia, and Vietnam, and later adapted for general use in East and Southern Africa and the Sahel. This program is called *Isang Bagsak*, a Filipino term that means “arriving at consensus.”

Isang Bagsak uses a combination of face-to-face activities, distance learning, and web-based technologies. It offers an alternative framework for any rural community anywhere in the world that wants to take command of its own destiny.

Horizontal schooling

Isang Bagsak got its start in October 2000, at a meeting in China of IDRC research partners involved in community-based natural resource management. Many of the participants noted that to do their work more effectively, they desperately needed to communicate better with local people, policymakers, and other stakeholders. Out of this grievance emerged the basic idea for *Isang Bagsak*.

According to Guy Bessette, IDRC’s point person on *Isang Bagsak*, one of the first challenges was to create an effective way for people to learn about PDC. “We needed to find something that would allow an opportunity for people to reflect on their own experiences and try to acquire skills and knowledge and have the occasion to discuss it — which is a long-term commitment,” he says. “We knew people could not spend a year of their lives to follow a university course since everyone had jobs and projects.”

To make it easier for busy researchers and development practitioners, the *Isang Bagsak* course blends face-to-face meetings, field practice, and distance education. The program is based on the theory that people are capable of learning, not just from experts, but also from their own experiences and especially from sharing these experiences “horizontally” with their peers.

The pilot: intercontinental e-learning

The *Isang Bagsak* approach was tested in an IDRC-supported experiment carried out during 2001–2002. Three highly motivated research teams from Asia and Africa took part. They came from Uganda’s National Banana Research Program, Vietnam’s Hue University of Agriculture, and Cambodia’s Ratanakiri Natural Resource Management Action Research project.

The test course comprised a sequence of “learning themes” each of which represents one step in the PDC process, for example: making the initial approach to a local community, involving that community in identifying its natural resource management problems, developing a communication plan, disseminating results, and so forth.

The pilot phase opened with a face-to-face workshop designed to familiarize each team with the PDC process and allow them to discuss

The *Isang Bagsak* course blends face-to-face meetings, field practice, and distance education.

the program. Each team then launched into the second theme: approaching the community.

For each theme, the research teams were asked to share experiences from their fieldwork, focusing both on challenges and on successes. Each team then drafted a synthesis of their discussion and sent it to the others through the e-forum. During a second round, everyone commented on the experiences of the other participants. On the basis of these exchanges, the resource people introduced additional related topics.

Finally, the facilitators synthesized all discussions, summarized that theme on the e-forum, and moved on to the next step. The cycle of exchanges on each theme usually took about 5 weeks to complete.

In addition to the e-forum, the program included face-to-face meetings and field exercises.

Practical results: better communication

Evaluation workshops, both within teams and involving different teams, brought people together and allowed them to share views about how *Isang Bagsak* had affected their projects.

According to the Ugandans, *Isang Bagsak* enabled them to develop a better communication strategy with banana farmers as well as the capacity to implement it. As a result, the farmers were more enthusiastic than they had been about any other initiative carried out by the researchers.

Similarly, *Isang Bagsak* helped the Cambodian team to incorporate a project-wide communication focus and to involve local people in development activities. Members also became more confident in working as a group and in understanding and implementing PDC.

Yet again, *Isang Bagsak* allowed the Vietnamese team to integrate into its project certain communication strategies and tools. These included farmer-to-farmer meetings and discussions on critical issues and concerns, technical handouts, videos and posters, workshops, training opportunities, and on-site trials and demonstrations.

The program also helped develop the national teams. For instance, some of the groups included as many as 60 people, based in different projects and focusing on different issues. It was *Isang Bagsak* that brought these people together and allowed them to tackle a common objective.

Inspiration, responsibility, and fast feedback

Program evaluation revealed that *Isang Bagsak* was successful, in part because the team members were inspired to learn and experiment with a new approach. They realized that to participate fully in the program they would have to increase their workload — something they were willing to do because they knew they were developing skills integral to their work.

The evaluation also found that giving people specific responsibilities ensured that things got done and the project maintained momentum. For instance, one person on each team was put in charge of downloading and printing information on the e-forum and distributing copies,



Wini Dagli

Exploratory meeting with Indigenous communities of Mindoro, Philippines.



Wini Dagli



Guy Bessette explains the *Isang Bagsak* approach to a group of CDC undergraduate students.

Wini Dagli

while others were responsible for arranging team meetings and later posting the minutes on the e-forum. To help individuals and teams carry out these tasks, a duty calendar integrated all these activities into a single work plan.

Bessette also attributed success to the constant monitoring and evaluation that were built into the program. Continuing assessment enabled the teams to adapt as the program unfolded and things changed. Reporting on meetings held during the course — rather than only at its conclusion — elicited feedback from the participants. Everyone was reminded that flexibility was vital to ensuring they stayed committed to *Isang Bagsak*.

Challenges: slow servers and saturation

One barrier to communications among the teams was the varying access to the Internet. In Cambodia, for instance, the Ratanakiri team could not log on to the Web-based e-forum directly, because Web access there was too expensive and slow. Instead, the team relied on the more limited e-mail service. In the end, all messages were successfully archived on the Web and provide a permanent, rich database of experience for the benefit of researchers and others.

Sharing ideas during an introductory workshop in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



Wini Dagli

Another challenge — again in Cambodia — occurred when a major flood made it impossible for the team to meet and post its ideas. In situations like this, everyone involved in *Isang Bagsak* learned that patience and adaptability were essential to the process. In this case, the forum was suspended for a few weeks until the Cambodian team could again participate.

A broader issue was that of language. Although conducting the course in local languages would have allowed more people to take part, it was necessary to use English as a common language, at least during the pilot phase. Even so, some participants — especially those from the Asian teams — found themselves at a disadvantage in terms of language skills.

South–South partnership

Despite the language frustrations, however, the excitement and enthusiasm that people from Asia and Africa derived from exchanging ideas was a powerful, dynamic force, particularly as participants had been accustomed to working only with others from

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Members of the Foundation for the Philippine Environment participate in a learning group discussion at the introductory workshop.

Wini Dagli



their own continent. “The South–South exchange is a very important factor in *Isang Bagsak*,” says Cadiz. “It widens our perspective about the challenges faced by the Southeast Asian region and East and Southern Africa as well.”

Bessette was also impressed by how much people from different regions learned from one another. “Many of the participants were surprised to realize how much they actually had to share, and the skills and experience they already had since they had not previously reflected much on it,” he says. “And then when they compared their experiences with what other people in other countries were doing, they became excited and realized new possibilities for their work.”

The next phase: regional implementation

After the participants had deemed the pilot project a success, IDRC’s partners were keen to continue the *Isang Bagsak* course, but on a regional basis. They wanted not only to better reflect the local contexts but also to build capacity so that regional institutions could take over the program.

Thus the College of Development Communication at the University of the Philippines Los Baños volunteered to coordinate the *Isang Bagsak* program in Southeast Asia (Cadiz was the coordinator during 2003–2005). The research teams involved come from the Philippines, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

In East and Southern Africa, meanwhile, *Isang Bagsak* is now being coordinated by the Southern African Development Community

Centre for Communication in Development (SADC-CCD), with teams from Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Uganda.

An *Isang Bagsak* program has also started in the Sahel for the benefit of an agroforestry network in Senegal, Burkina Faso, and Mali. This effort is managed by the Sahel program of the International Centre for Research in Agroforestry.

A happy by-product of the *Isang Bagsak* approach is that — in the spirit of South–South partnership — the learners from the pilot phase have become the teachers in the current phase. For instance, the Ugandan participants from the pilot project became the core organizers of the *Isang Bagsak* program in East and Southern Africa based at the SADC centre.

Another consequence of the new regional approach is that participants may wish to conduct the program in their own local languages, rather than only in English. This means that more people are able to take part and a wider range of local voices can be heard. On the other hand, it also means that these participants lose the essence of the *Isang Bagsak* method — learning from the experiences of others who may work in a very different context.

Consensus achieved?

Formally evaluating *Isang Bagsak* is a major challenge. Should “success” be declared, for example, when more people have learned to use the PDC technique — or only when more people have been lifted out of poverty as a result of its application?

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Participants can now conduct the program in their local language.

Nonetheless, it is clear that, in a remarkably short period, the *Isang Bagsak* network has grown into a dynamic knowledge endeavour driven by many teams of researchers and practitioners spanning two continents, all of whom are learning to communicate and work more effectively with local communities that struggle to solve natural resource management problems.

The change in the mindset has been dramatic. "It is now not uncommon to hear a scientist insist on the need for communities to participate fully in the planning and implementation of a particular project," says Jones Kaumba, of *Isang Bagsak's* East and Southern Africa team. "This is the complete opposite of how most scientists viewed communication before their participation in the program."

Wini Dagli

But it's not just scientists whose minds have been changed. Kaumba reports a conversation he had with a village headman in Malawi, who said to him, "You people have shown us that we have the capacity within ourselves to change our situation."

For more information, see the Website www.allincbnrm.org.

This brief was prepared by Patrick Kavanagh based on a case study by Blythe McKay and Guy Bessette.

Why *Isang Bagsak*?

The literal translation of the Filipino term is "one down," but more generally it means "arriving at consensus." It is a technique used during a discussion to signal that agreement has been reached. It is always accompanied by a decisive slap of the palm on the tabletop.

At the China gathering where the *Isang Bagsak* program was born, one of the participants, a Filipino, used the technique often. When the decision was finally made to proceed with a pilot project using the PDC approach, the obvious name to give the new program was... *Isang Bagsak*.

IDRC's Rural Poverty and Environment (RPE) program is a global program launched in 2005 to support research that meets the needs of the rural poor who live in fragile or degraded ecosystems in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East. Its goal is to strengthen institutions, policies, and practices that enhance food, water, and income security.

For information visit www.idrc.ca/rpe

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