



POWER, PROCESS AND PARTICIPATION

- TOOLS FOR CHANGE

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CHAPTER 3



Participation in context: key questions

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Participation, like development, means vastly different things depending on who defines it and uses it, and to what end, where, when and how. Past experience suggests that participatory development can bring about both negative and positive change.' Much depends on the relations of power embedded in the broader social context as well as in the participatory process itself. We acknowledge the need for significant change in social, economic and political institutions in order to address the deep rooted problems of poverty, unequal relations of power and environmental degradation. However, we will focus here on the practice and process of participatory research, planning and governance in the context of community development. We suggest careful consideration of six sets of key questions as a checklist against some of the common pitfalls of participatory development:

- **Why** is this participatory process needed? What ends does it serve?
- What are the **relations of power** at play in the local community, in the larger social context and in the specific activities planned?
- **Who** is involved? Whose interests are at stake? Who is in control of the process?
- What is the most appropriate **time frame** for the problems to be considered, the process itself, and the plans and actions to follow?
- What are the **appropriate spatial and organizational scales** for analysis, for action, for advocacy, for policy change and for follow-up? How can participatory efforts scale up to influence regional and national policy?
- Given the answers to the first five questions, how should a participatory process



proceed? What methods, in what sequence, and under whose direction will best serve the interests of the people involved?

We explore each of these points in the sections which follow.

Why a participatory Process?

The importance of defining the ends served and making them explicit in collaborative work should not be underestimated. While it seems a simple question, facilitators and planners can better serve the interests of communities if they ask ‘why?’ at all the stages of participatory development efforts. The ends of participation include those of the planners and facilitators as well as the objectives of the participants. It is helpful to both groups to make their reasons explicit and then to attempt to reconcile differences, rather than to proceed on the assumption that all parties involved have no agenda or subscribe to a single general goal. Participatory exercises can then be tailored to the various ends which the group decides to pursue.

Participation as a means to specific ends

One possible end is the instrumental use of people and their participation by outsiders for the achievement of some implicit or intentionally concealed aim. More often than not, it is an end that the initiators believe to be the best or necessary objective. Hand in hand with instrumentalism is mobilization, which in this sense means getting certain people to do something, even if it undermines their interests. Whatever action is being taken, it is probably not on the terms of the women and men involved. A good example of instrumentalism is the promotion of widespread local participation in the design and construction of rural reforestation, water management or soil conservation structures that serve the interests of urban water supply authorities or electric power generators. When they find that participation is used in such an instrumental way by outsiders, the intended participants may withdraw, or they may welcome the opportunity to negotiate for an exchange, including benefits for their community or for individuals.

Some people targeted by development have also used externally directed and designed ends that do not suit their immediate needs or interests as a way to gain something potentially useful later. In one specific case in Burkina Faso, researchers found that people allowed themselves to be mobilized by a land management project, calculating that it would be a way to get services that they really wanted later.² If nothing else, making such ends explicit at the beginning



opens up possibilities for more honest - and perhaps more mutually beneficial - collaborative arrangements.

Development relationships between donors and 'recipients' usually involve different ends. Outsiders often seek to help or to mobilize, while people in local communities participate or resist in order to survive, to thrive or to change something for the better. People find ingenious ways both to get what they want from outside initiatives and to protect themselves from unwanted development. In some cases, in spite of all efforts to the contrary, people are unable to re-orient or resist inappropriate interventions, and projects are perpetrated upon them rather than being designed and carried out by and for themselves. Participatory process, combined with an explicit treatment of the objectives of the process itself, can prevent such abuses.

Within local communities there may be many distinct objectives for participation, including hopes of personal profit from the resulting actions; a platform for voicing needs of marginalized groups; a means of capturing resources for the poor from local elites (or vice versa); or an attempt to control the damage from an unwanted intervention. Facilitators will rarely find all of these groups ready and willing to declare their intentions, for obvious reasons. However, they may be able to address the implicit or submerged objectives of each group, and their own. As the process unfolds, they should be attentive to signals about these unstated agendas.

Participation as an end in itself

Development agents or local participants may also value participation for its own sake. It implies that men and women are learning, organizing, deciding, planning and acting, whether quickly or slowly, easily or painfully, and with or without a specific end. In some cases the end is participation for its own sake in a first phase, so that people are in a position to define their own goals and to act on them in a second phase.

Participatory research

In the context of research, the objective of participatory approaches may be simply to extract information from people - the more common approach. On the other hand there are many participatory research efforts which place outside researchers at the service of local communities or popular social movements. Other options include collaborative efforts ranging from documentation of local experiments and innovations by professional scientists to farmer participation in outsider-designed agricultural and forestry experiments.³ Environmental, agricultural and develop-



ment researchers who claim to engage in participatory research often mean that ‘we’ (the researcher) allow ‘them’ (local people) to participate in ‘our’ research. For community organizers or rural communities, it may mean that ‘they’ allow outsiders (us) to take part in local experiments. What we all imply, but seldom discuss, is that we propose to join together people and institutions with very distinct traditions of acquiring and testing knowledge, and often, very different needs and uses for knowledge.⁴

Participation and relations of Power

It is important to recognize and address uneven relations of power in local context and in the participatory process. The workings of power pervade all of our dealings in everyday life and we ignore them at our peril. There is no reason to assume that they do not influence even the most carefully designed participatory process. To promote social change through participatory development it is essential to understand better and to address the way that power is distributed and wielded: in local communities; in the internal operations of development agencies; in their relationships with each other, the state and the local community; and in specific participatory initiatives. In order to do this facilitators need first to identify the multiple actors within communities, as well as those who work within and between communities and others whose decisions affect local development from afar.

Several critics of development (including Patricia Stamp, Wolfgang Sachs, Arturo Escobar, `Sonia Alvarez, Gustavo Esteva, and Vandana Shiva) have pointed out the cultural arrogance and the everyday abuses of power within much of development practice.⁵ Likewise many feminist scholars and activists have examined the workings of power not only between men and women but also those based on class, ethnicity, religion, race, nationality and ideology. It is crucial to consider the insights of both groups in the process of participatory development, in order to navigate through the complex relations of power between outside actors and local communities as well as between and within communities and between and within development organizations.

Central to any development process is an understanding of power relations embedded in the culture and social structure within local communities. Facilitators of participatory exercises need to consider carefully their choice of partners to organize and plan activities, whose interests to address and whom to include in any given event. Local authorities, political leaders and business people often present themselves as collaborators but may represent a very narrow range of experience, based on their wealth and social status (including gender, age, religion, race, caste, lineage, education and other factors).

It is often advisable to acknowledge and include official leaders along with representatives of the various social groupings which people themselves recognize



in the community.⁶ For example, facilitators might meet with women's groups, landless people's groups, a smallholder farmers association and a group of herders in a given community in order to identify members of each group to serve on a planning or oversight committee. These same groups could provide guidance as to what kind of format and procedure would be suitable for them to speak and discuss openly both among themselves and in combination with other groups and officials.

The relationship between outside development agents and local insiders is also framed by parameters of power. An outsider may be from a national or international NGO, a government extension service, or a bi/multilateral aid agency. The more specific identities that precede organizational affiliation - nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, religion and ideology - also influence whether someone is perceived as an insider or outsider, and further whether they are perceived as friend or foe. As noted by Ian Seones and John Thompson,⁷ there is no essential attribute that makes someone an insider or outsider. These terms are relative by their very definition and depend upon context. However, there is a general trend toward powerful outsiders wielding influence in local communities through participatory initiatives by a variety of institutions, including NGOs.

International and national NGOs, despite all intentions to the contrary, can develop a relationship with local communities that is best described as dictatorship.⁸ Because of the power that comes from the simple fact of having funds, and the assumption that all participatory efforts are inherently good, the NGOs may overlook the question 'Did anyone invite us, and if so, who?' With their substantial power, outside development agents can justify their presence and dictate the ends and means of participatory development. Financial assistance made too easily available can crush local initiative and undermine existing initiatives, corrupt accountability, and ruin the viability of local organizations. Some critics, such as Lecomte, contend that 'the main enemy is the supporting institution with its keenness to assist, to provide funds, to solicit needs and convert them into projects.'⁹ Outside organizations of all stripes need to be sensitive to the power that they wield and to carefully apply both their resources and their own priorities.

Whose interests, whose voices, whose actions?

Development practitioners often speak of communities as if they are undifferentiated wholes. They may assume that a project will bring equal benefits to all (and have equally shared negative or unintended side-effects). This assumption renders invisible the situation of women, whose distinct interests, perspectives, and position in society have been largely ignored or subsumed under community within even the most participatory initiatives. Class, ethnicity, race, age, religious group



and caste may also become homogenized within the term 'community.'

The opposite trap consists of grouping people based on one fixed or essential category such as women vs. men, Christian vs. Muslim, poor vs. wealthy, or other easy dichotomies. None of these is a homogeneous group. Individuals may identify more or less strongly with gender, class, ethnicity or religion, depending on their own experience and the current context. These attributes also interact. For example, a poor, lower caste Hindu woman in India may define and experience gender very differently from a wealthy Muslim woman in Morocco, and African-American, Latina and Euro-American women in the United States may likewise have very different notions of gender. Women and men are also more or less powerful relative to each other depending on the culture, situation, place and time. Both genders have many dimensions and distinct sources of identity and sometimes different power relations accompany each. There is also more to gender relations than power and conflict - gender divisions of work, knowledge, and authority may include conflict, competition, co-existence, complementarity and active co-operation.¹⁰ Other kinds of groupings are embedded in similarly complex circumstances.

The tendency to focus on identity, whether single or multiple, also fails to address the way that people group together based on more flexible criteria, such as shared interests on a specific issue, coalitions between very distinct groups with a common goal or broader affinities among groups and between individuals. This implies that groups will shift on the basis of the context and the issues at stake, which requires a highly sensitive and flexible approach by NGOs and government agencies. Facilitators need to grapple not only with difference, but with a multitude of different possible groupings and, beyond that, a shifting constellation of groups with flexible boundaries. For example, groupings such as those listed in Gendered Resource Mapping (reproduced opposite) often help to define distinct land user groups as participants in a resource management project. They are based on identity, land tenure status, occupation, and membership in various types and scales of organizational affiliation.

Not only must facilitators explicitly attempt to include the distinct perspectives and interests of diverse groups, they must also confront the question of how actively they will promote the participation and follow-up actions of the less powerful groups. For example, participatory efforts that challenge restrictions on women's or other groups' access to decision-making power often draw criticism and provoke debate over respect for cultural norms. However, culture and social relations are not static with respect to gender, class, race, caste or other dimensions of difference. Creative practitioners who care about the position of women in society have in many cases found ways to raise the awareness of men and women and to support women trying to claim the power to decide and act. In the case of Philippine land tenure reform programmes, facilitators in some districts have helped communities to register household lands in both women's and men's

Subdivision of land user groups (from Gendered Resource Mapping)

Land users by activity

Producers
 Gatherers
 Hunters
 Herders
 Farmers
 large/small
 paid/unpaid
 Farmworkers
Processors
Market vendors
Consumers

Land users by rights of access and ownership

(Applies to trees and/or land)

Owner (state, group, individual, *de jure or de facto*)
Tenant (rent paid)
User by permission or exchange agreement
 Continuous
 Regular
 Occasional
Squatters, 'poachers' (illegal users, occupants)

Land users by management unit/unit of analysis

Individuals or household sub-groups
 Women, men, children; age group members
Households
 Managed by men, women; small/large; young/old; rich/poor
Communities and community groups
 Families, clans, self-help groups
Companies and co-operatives
Administrative units
 States, districts, villages, neighbourhoods etc.





members of a given community, where 'local people' and officials engage in planning discussions about local problems and proposed development solutions. However, participation can take place in national policy discussions and legislative process as well as in small, quiet meetings between family members, neighbours, or members of particular groups based on occupation, class, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or other bases of identity and difference. In fact, close attention to the appropriate scale of problem definition, analysis and action can make a major difference in the quality of participation, the rate of Participation, and the representation of all groups involved in a given process. The scale of these participatory efforts can also dramatically influence the outcome, both overall and for particular groups.

Nested, sliding scales of access, use, control and management

Scale matters because problems that manifest at one level may be caused at another and may contribute to additional problems at a smaller or larger scale. To address the problems of one community group at a given time and place may require a much broader look at the regional and national context, as well as a closer look at the daily lives and landscapes of individuals and particular groups. For example, the actions of three large-scale farmers and two groups of herders in one upland location may affect the availability and quality of water in nearby downstream water points as well as the sedimentation of a hydro-electric dam further downstream. In the case of the nearby downstream water points, a participatory planning and problem-solving exercise might focus on a specific kind of degradation to be addressed locally by the individuals directly involved as causal agents, and/or as consumers and resource users. A community level organization or a local government agency might also act to address the problem at the community or village scale. However, in the case of dam sedimentation, there would be a need for the co-ordination of responses by a number of actors across communities if this problem were repeated elsewhere. The local actions might be quite distinct for upstream and downstream communities, while a single policy at district or river basin level would be needed to guide these diverse actions toward a just and viable conclusion for all the land and water users in the area. Participation in such a case would need to begin with multiple scale analyses of the problems and potential solutions and would need to occur at several levels. While many activities could feasibly take place at community and small group level, others would be best conducted at household, individual or regional level.

We suggest careful attention to scale in three specific areas of participatory research, planning and action. The first is the exploration of problems and opportunities at multiple scales, always looking at larger and smaller-scale processes that influence or are influenced by any given problem. The second is the



process, with special attention to the size and nature of the social unit of resource users and stakeholders and the size of the landscape units involved in various stages of participatory initiatives. Third, the size and nature of the landscape area and the social units for follow-up action will vary with the type of problem and the context. Careful attention to the scale of both social organization and ecological units can improve the quality and outcome of each of these stages of participatory activity.

Multiple scales and multiple interests

Facilitators need to pay careful attention to choice of size, composition and format of groups for research and planning activities and to the choice of the scale of organization to act on decisions and plans. It should be noted that these will often not be the same. Even though the problem affects a group at one scale, the analysis may need to involve larger and smaller groups and the solution may need to be addressed by national or regional as well as local agencies.

Most people participate in resource use and environmental practices from a number of distinct but overlapping perspectives. They use and manage resources as individuals, as members of a group (based on criteria ranging from clan to caste to church affiliation, from political party to gender-specific self-help organization to social movements) and as legal residents of a given administrative unit such as a village, town or district. That is, as land users or Stakeholders, they may be members of several different groupings, as illustrated in the partial list on page 23.

Regardless of the number and size of stakeholder groups, facilitators will also need to consider the appropriate scale of participant groups for various activities. Participation extends well beyond group meetings, whether to learn, to plan, to make decisions, or to discuss points of conflict and to search for consensus. Every activity, in a given geographical and historical context, has a particular set of opportunities and limits with respect to the nature, size and number of groups that can readily take part. These activities may include everything from research planning to detailed documentation of local history to work parties to act on specific solutions already identified. The appropriate size and nature of participatory groups will vary with the outsiders and local residents involved and their respective facilities/preferences for working in small or large group settings, with men or women, with homogeneous or diverse groups or with individuals. There is also the issue of whether always to work with groups as they are already organized and defined on their own terms or whether to convene special meetings to work with other groups that suit the topic and situation at hand. Good reasons for doing this might include allowing the poor, minority racial and ethnic groups, or women to voice concerns not readily raised in a larger, more diverse forum controlled by members of more powerful groups.



Nested and multiple land units and ecosystems

Most environment and development issues are enmeshed in a web of political, social, cultural, economic and ecological relations that encompass two or more scales of organization, and which often include problems which are caused at one level and expressed at another. For example, a local scarcity of a particular fodder grass might be linked to national policies affecting the grazing practice of a transhumant pastoral group that moves over a broad savannah region. Likewise, the crop-raiding behaviour of a particular form of wildlife may be related to the eviction of that species from a forest or park site some distance away. The original habitat and migration routes of the animal would be relevant spatial units for wildlife management, while the individual farm holdings would be appropriate units for design of protective measures.

Some problems have multiple causes originating at many different scales, with distinct expressions and consequences of the problem appearing at yet other scales. The case of a watershed is one which is most clear with respect to the need to look at nested watershed units of different scales to address the causes and effects of, and solutions to, water quality and availability problems. For example, a watershed with serious erosion problems could include farm level causes of hillslope erosion in croplands and farm level problems such as crop yield decline. Overgrazing and subsequent compaction of hillslope grazing lands at community scale could lead to farm level problems such as malnutrition of livestock as well as watershed problems such as rapid and excessive drainage of rainfall into local streams. National land use and agricultural marketing policies would also influence farmers' decisions to use particular cropping methods or to keep more or less livestock. The net result of all this could create a serious national watershed management crisis with respect to water supply and hydroelectric power generation. Such a problem would require a network of participatory efforts across many communities and a regional or national co-ordinating body, to negotiate settlement of differences within and between various communities as well as between local and national interests in watershed management.

What are your means?

The overall approach and the particular process employed often reflect the predisposition of the outside organizations and the individual facilitators who initiate such a process. This is not entirely wrong, since the ability to carry out such activities rests partly on past experience and acquired skill. However, the five previous points can guide the choice of both approach and techniques to better fit a given situation and the preferences and needs of the participants. Planners and



facilitators can find a variety of activities to suit the objectives of organizers and participants; the spatial and time scale of problems, opportunities and potential actions; the diverse groups in the place; the relations of power and affinity within and between them; and the situation of the facilitators with respect to a given community.

If a group is interested in consciousness-raising or becoming organizationally stronger, a facilitator will use tools in ways that are different from those used if the goal is mobilization. If a problem exists at one scale but an institution is able to address it only at another, that may influence the choice of methods for both discussion and analysis. An understanding of group power relations may suggest bypassing some people and listening to others, or gathering information in different ways to get all sides of a story. This might also lead facilitators to air and resolve conflicts, or to negotiate a settlement where resolution proves impossible. One would employ different means for a group beginning to think about doing something and one that has already joined together, chosen leaders, and (to use a Southern US social action expression) ‘wrestled with the alligators.’

It is also important to reach a consensus among the people involved about the role of the facilitator. They can point out problems at a conceptual or procedural level and suggest what kind of process, formats and activities may work best. For example, many peoples have a strong oral tradition. Histories and other knowledge have been passed through generations in this way. Opting for visual tools because people cannot read or write may overlook the strength of the oral tradition and the value of detailed narration or lively discussion. People may have other methods that planners and facilitators have not yet imagined. It may also be interesting to mix methods, such as drawings by both participants and researchers based on narratives by skilled oral historians. This is simply a note of caution to suggest that we examine participation fads and our own preferred means and that we explore those of participating communities.

This book does not try to set up a list of good and bad methods, or to identify and promote the ‘best’ approach and methods. In some circles, visual is in and verbal is out, qualitative is in and quantitative out, and informal is in while formal is out. It may be more useful to realize the limits and potential of what facilitators know how to do, to tailor the process to the local context and to respect the needs, preferences and knowledge of the participants.

Conclusion

Tools can empower or disempower. If they are adaptable to different contexts and easily used by people of any class, gender, or culture, they can enable women and men to take greater control of their lives. We need to think about what we are doing in development and why we are doing it. We need to reflect on these ques-



tions in the midst of everyday practice as well as in the context of policy, planning, and administrative procedure. A careful review and consideration of the six issues presented here provides a sounding board for the choice and application of the tools in Part III.



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