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Involving People in a Participatory Process



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The participatory process is a person's active involvement in interaction, dialog, sharing, consensual decision-making and action-taking. Participatory communication is the foundation of this process. Empowering people around the globe to express themselves, develop their human potential, and begin to seize opportunities to lift themselves out of poverty and become a person valuable to the self and the community, has been the ultimate outcome of the participation process.

Involving people in a participatory process has become a normal expectation in the development context. This is a phenomenon, however, that has evolved over the past three decades. In the beginning, giving grass roots people a say in determining their course of development posed a threat to the hierarchical power structure of the development community. Gradually, a partnership in development has evolved, and at present there is a reasonable

degree of comfort in the shared responsibility for uplifting and liberating depressed peoples and communities.

Communication technologies have played an important role in this liberation from isolation and despair. Video and radio, in particular, have given “voice” to this liberation. Both are tools that can be used by people who do not know how to read or write. Images give power to voice, conveying thoughts and emotions in unimaginable ways. The participatory model has transformed people from “objects” of communication, learning, and research, into active “subjects” who are shaping their life space, through knowledge and action.

Participation as Process

Participation issues surfaced in the 1970s and have dominated the development scene since. International organizations, regional and local agencies, and volunteer organizations have gradually recognized that a participatory approach requires not only a totally different mindset, but also a whole new set of attitudes and behaviors in order to achieve genuine participation. In this discussion of participation as a process, we will focus on the aspects of *participatory communication*. However, this concept must be understood within the broader connotation of *participation in development first*.

Understanding Participatory Development

Two international organizations have come to the fore with a commitment to make the development process participatory: The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Bank. FAO has a longer history of active interest and program focus on participation while the World Bank has made significant commitments over the past decade. Both have extensive Websites that articulate their interests and also offer a vast array of information and training resources to policymakers and development planners and practitioners.¹

FAO sees participation

as an equitable and active involvement of all stakeholders in the formulation of development policies and strategies and in

the analysis, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development activities. To allow for a more equitable development process, disadvantaged stakeholders need to be empowered to increase their level of knowledge, influence and (have) control over their own livelihoods, including development initiatives affecting them.

They point out that participation is, “seen as an organized effort within institutions and organizations to increase stakeholder access and control over resources and related decision-making that contributes to sustainable livelihoods.”²

The World Bank’s definition runs parallel to that of FAO: “*Participation* is a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them.” The World Bank has developed a useful Sourcebook that supports their definition of participation. They note that: “The Sourcebook is not a policy document on participation. It is primarily intended for readers who have already decided to use participatory approaches in their professional work.” Terminology like *Community-driven Development* is used to highlight the fact that community groups are given control and authority over the decisions and resources, which affect their lives. “At the local level, *Social Capital* is the networks, shared values and associated norms which enable communities to effectively organize themselves and assume the responsibilities of participating in decision-making and resource allocation.”³

Access to and a measure of control over resources is a major reason for a participatory approach to development. The process requires constant readjustment between the provider of resources and the community, allowing locals optimal, if not maximum, influence in decision-making and control over the development initiatives that impact their lives. It is important to recognize that citizen participation is the key to the sustainability of those initiatives and ownership of outcomes. If this is so, then it follows that the *participatory communication process* is also key to and inherent in participatory development and sustainability, if projects are to be relevant and appropriately institutionalized.

Understanding Participatory Communication

Participatory communication as a utopian “ideal” concept has become “real” practice in Third World development over the past 20 years. Somehow the belief that it could be so, doesn’t seem as bold to us today as it did when scholars and development practitioners were offering their definitions of the concept some two decades ago. At that time, we did believe that participatory communication was a timely conceptualization and would in time become common development practice. The surprise is that it has happened so quickly. Now, attention to facilitative communication practices, at least in most development circles, is a mandate.

The concept of participatory communication perhaps deserves some definition for clarity. Nair and White (1987) have projected a definition of communication for development that reflects the need for participation:

Participatory development communication is a two-way, dynamic interaction, between “grass roots” receivers and the “information” source, mediated by development communicators, which facilitates participation of the “target group” in the process of development (p. 37).

There are now many definitions of participatory communication. Some are media-centered, reflecting the ways communication channels and techniques are used to encourage people’s participation in development and to provide information. Others are centered on the human aspects of development, encouraging participation and dialog. The goal of communication becomes that of conscientization, leading to an anchoring of cultural identities that liberates people from powerless positions and places them in a position to construct their own future.

An insight into the nature of *participatory communication*, its ideological, practical, and functional dimensions is useful for everyone whose mission it is to bring about “development.” This is a complex idea and difficult to facilitate in the real world of development. An understanding of the concept comes from first hand experience, by working directly with the people at the grass roots,

from facilitating and implementing projects, from conducting participatory research and planning, and from observing community action over time.

According to Nair (1994), those who conceive of development as a process of social transformation view participatory communication as a necessary instrument and condition for change. Highly contextual, participatory communication functions as a catalyst for action and as a facilitator of knowledge acquisition and knowledge sharing among people. He notes:

... the viewpoints on participatory communication, what it is and what it entails, differ widely. On some points there tends to be a common understanding: that it is a dynamic process, that it is dialectical and dialogic, that it brings about a transformation in communication competencies and social behaviours among those who engage in the process. Participatory communication for development begins with the premise that all people have a right to voice their views and become active partners in the development processes which impact upon their lives. As a human interaction, it is both a process and a product; it is both a means and an end; it is both a right and a need. As a dialogue between power holders and the powerless, it is both empowering and disempowering (p. 2).

Participatory communication is not simply a matter of studying about and dialoging with so-called “stakeholders” to make it possible for message designers to put forth more palatable information for a hungry audience. It also must be conceived as process methodology that involves people in an interactive way, making communication resources accessible to them directly, in turn, helping the grass roots people acquire the knowledge and skill that enables a partnership in generating messages.

Through that process, a person experiences self-awareness and becomes conscious of social issues that affect their lives. The transformative dynamic of communication exchanges acts as a catalyst for identifying one’s own problems, recognizes possible routes to empowerment and self-reliance, and builds a sense of independence through *interdependence*. Participatory community communication revolves around constructing opportunities for dialog in a context of commitment and concern about development. It has the

potential to generate self-confidence, self-esteem, self-respect and self-definition in relation to the community.

The outcome of participatory communication for the people is consciousness-raising. By reflecting about their own condition, they are better able to think about and articulate social action that they believe would improve their well-being. Additionally, people develop communication skills, acquire new knowledge and contribute indigenous knowledge to development decision-making. Ultimately, the participation process can lead to resource acquisition that enables people to reach common goals within the community, making it possible for people to live and work harmoniously. Above all, those who control the resources for development will seek the input of local people in the development process—an input that is valued and sought through interaction, involvement, patient trust, and confidence building. At the same time, grass roots people, i.e., stakeholders, have to believe that their own individual efforts can make a difference when they are truly co-equal partners in development. In the end, they will feel a strong sense of ownership of projects undertaken.

Necessary Conditions for Participatory Development

Before the focus shifted to people's participation, earlier development models were based on the assumption that expert knowledge and practice was correct and that indigenous peoples were either uninformed or following incorrect practices. In this situation instituting participatory development represented a drastic change in direction. In addition, top-down models became obsolete overnight. This new approach required totally different assumptions. A new point of view in order to develop an appropriate perspective became critical. With this in mind, I would regard the following as necessary conditions for participatory development:

- ♦ Commitment by development planners and donors to human resource development.
- ♦ Understanding of the cultural aspects of the community.
- ♦ A critical mass of interested people in the community.

- ♦ Competent facilitators willing to and capable of enabling others.
- ♦ Training programs for building competencies, participatory planning, and action.
- ♦ Full interactive participation in defining, prioritizing and implementing development programs.
- ♦ Institutionalizing mechanisms to ensure sustainability: coalition building; setting up education and training facilities; establishing a resource base for continued development; creating linkages to advisors, resource providers, governmental bodies, and neighboring communities.
- ♦ Withdrawal of outside facilitators, when projects are completed.
- ♦ Provision of ongoing guidance and consultation to communities as needed.

Participatory development is people-centric. Localized indigenous knowledge is now combined with expert knowledge and outside experts become partners with the local citizenry. As partners they engage in ongoing dialog. Participatory communication, which undergirds all action, is process oriented, stressing critical thinking and reflection. The most important outcomes of participatory communication are the presence of local people in decision-making, project design and implementation as well as evaluation. The people must come through the process with newly acquired skills and a sense of being in control.

The Participation Debate

There has been considerable debate in development circles over the concept of participation and participatory processes during the past decade. Yielding the position of the "expert" as the ultimate authority in searching out "what is" and "what isn't" real, and "what is" and "what isn't" legitimate or necessary, has been painful. The shift from a "top-down" mode of information and knowledge dissemination to a "participatory" mode of information and knowledge generation has been a transformational force. Traditional communication theory and research models patterned after the

prediction models of the hard sciences for which there were discrete measures, have given way to qualitative and interpretive models. Today anthropological perspectives are regarded as more valid, reliable, authentic and explanatory, and thus, useful. However, this juxtaposition will continue to be debated until these issues are sorted out. Interestingly, at the "grass-roots," external interventions in the name of development are now not tolerated without considerable struggle. Though top-down strategies have dominated development for a long time within villages and rural areas the world over, people still value their indigenous knowledge and know they must be a part of the development dialog. Their voice is increasingly heard in decision-making circles and the poor have become an active force in formulating policy.

No matter how paternalistic or dominating the external forces in the development environment may have been in the past, grass roots people *have* adopted new ideas and their knowledge base has widened. For example, in India, village women who are concerned about the well-being of their children no longer cling to health practices relating exclusively to indigenous knowledge. They now visit and use modern allopathic practitioners and modern medicine rather than use primitive systems of medicine. Even though indigenous systems of medicine still exist and many of its practices useful, the health care system has changed drastically, offering modern medical approaches instituted through decades of development. More importantly however, health care needs and services have become more relevant because people are playing a role in determining what they will be. This is only one example.

The Current Concept Dilemma

The current direction of development, which increasingly emphasizes "people's participation," has made earlier development communication models obsolete, thus requiring scholars to rethink their theoretic positions and theories. It has become necessary for practitioners to reinvent their personal style and up-date their approaches to the local (micro-level) communication environment. Communication models, systems and technologies, also develop much differently when issues of partnerships, stakeholding, coop-

eration, win-win conflict resolution, and collaborative community action are to be incorporated.

Popular education, participatory research, and localized alternative communication systems that integrate modern and traditional communication systems and technologies could conceptually benefit through the utilization of useful new models of participatory communication. Development educators, researchers, development communicators, and community citizens all must therefore become more facilitative, as they work toward common goals. The participatory development paradigm recognizes diversity and pluralism and the fact that there are many pathways to development. Consequently, message functions reflect the felt needs of local people, facilitating self-help, self-reliance and independence. Local strategies of communication are showing more promise for behavioral change than has been realized with regional, national or centralized strategies.

Relevant media content has become a contentious problem and its effects perplexing, thereby making a case for strengthening micro-level systems that can be more socially relevant and locally controlled as well. As the voice of the local people and bureaucratic power structures cannot be ignored, the communication dilemma has to be confronted. Communication systems and approaches to message-making must reflect a collaborative, interactive, dialogic, transactional relationship among stakeholders. No development stakeholder can cling to privileged knowledge, privileged information, and "power-over" models, but must embrace practices of sharing knowledge, information and power. Embracing the ideas of interaction, dialog, and information exchange that are components of a transactional or dialogic model of communication assures that a transformation will take place throughout the participatory process. The ultimate goal of empowering local people to take control of their life space is more realistically reached.

Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron⁴ would concur with my observations, I believe. He makes a case for a new kind of communicator who can facilitate the participatory perspectives. He notes that: "If participation is not encouraged, communities are passive about development projects that are supposed to improve their living conditions. Communities do not have the sense of ownership of projects that were decided and implemented with a top-down approach." He sees participation as an absolute necessity, but maintains that

development practitioners face extreme difficulty in translating and implementing what is written in their project documents into a process at the community level. Participation may be a part of policy,

... but there is no mechanism to guarantee it will happen. Few agencies have at the field level people that have certain knowledge and experience in community participation. Most of them just improvise by adding the participation and communication tasks to the job description of any professional, regardless of his or her academic background and experience. Often, the responsibility is given to experts who spend most of their time flying from one continent to another, attending important program meetings, reading and drafting sharp documents with recommendations, but have little or no experience of working at the community level. They miss the whole cultural dimension of development (p. 2).

We can only hope and believe that this lacunae is steadily being remedied as stakeholders come to understand and internalize the expectations and behaviors of the participation process and how to communicate effectively as partners in development.

Issues to be Addressed

There are many issues, which arise as we debate the pros and cons of people's participation. If we are to become increasingly more effective in promoting participation then they must be addressed. Four important issues have been identified:

- ♦ *Lack of appropriately trained development communicators.* Participation in development and participatory media development are at present understood conceptually, but remain operationally inadequate. For this situation to improve there is a need for more educated development communicators who are proficient in participatory approaches. The fact that the development communicator roles are often assumed by people educated in other disciplines results in less than competent handling of the participation facilitator

role. This problem is often present in the use of participatory video where the leadership of these projects is often in the hands of technicians and individuals who operate from the "product" rather than "process" perspective. Professionals who assume these leadership roles must have appropriate academic preparation.

- ♦ *Insufficient individual and community networking.* The participatory process implies that local people be brought together in groups to pursue mutual interests and projects. This is impossible unless linkages between individuals of a group are made—linkages that result in interpersonal trust and commitment. Some linkages may come about naturally, but more often group situations must be constructed to encourage linkages. The same is true among communities. It is only when community networking occurs that more expansive development projects take root and become sustainable. The key to establishing networks is creating a context of ongoing dialog, consensual thinking, and shared commitment to action among leaders of neighboring communities.
- ♦ *Inadequate attention to social norms and cultural differences.* There exists a high degree of complexity in rural communities. In many countries the extent of cultural diversity is mind-boggling. Very often, because of the complexities and the personal nature of social and cultural perspectives, such differences are ignored by development facilitators. There will be no sustainable outcome for projects unless the issues of diversity are addressed, sensitively and openly. So, it is imperative that communication facilitators confront differences head on and bring participants to a position where they can relate to each other beyond their differences and establish some common ground.
- ♦ *Lack of commitment to sustainability.* All the parties involved in development endeavors must be able to see beyond the life of the project. It is unlikely that a vision of the future will be present at the onset of any participatory project. However, one of the built-in process goals needs to focus on "where from here, and how are we going to get there." Development facilitators need to continually look for ways to alert participants to the connections between

their current efforts, and future well-being. If they are able to do so, they will look forward to becoming self-sufficient and becoming increasingly less dependent on the facilitator. The day the facilitator can walk away from a project confident that it will continue on its own should be anticipated from the beginning and celebrated at the finale.

Conflicts of Interest

This may be the only spot in this book where I can air one of my pet peeves: development exploitation. As an academic, I have suffered continuous disbelief and frustration over the extent of exploitation of the “know nots” by the “know it alls.” For many years, I believed that the motivation for involvement in development efforts was one of helping the oppressed, the downtrodden and the poor. It was a rude awakening to find that for many people, motivation was the opportunity for making money especially through consultancy. I was shocked when one of my colleagues explained the reason behind his interest in becoming a part of the projects: “Have suitcase, will travel.” Travel was a personal goal, and there was always time to tack several personal days on to a schedule, sometimes paid ones. This is a huge conflict of interest, whether inside or outside of academia.

Organizations can also be opportunistic. Their motivation to “help” may center around building the organization, more than on building the community. The picture of organizations competing for the time and involvement of the same people is a common one. A spirit of competition, rather than cooperation prevails at the expense of the community. In some cases organizations are advocating courses of action or use of products that will result in direct financial gain, e.g., medical or agricultural products.

The conflict of interest problem is present with media organizations as well. Enabling communities to become proficient in media production and establishing their own indigenous media organizations can be a threat to externally controlled media. Participation, which inevitably leads to capacity building and independent thought and action, is a threat to the status quo and to the power holders, both in the community and in development organizations.

Myths of Sustainability

It is expected that participatory approaches will result in more active citizens, responsible for their own futures, and capable of achieving goals and maintaining courses of action and direction that have resulted from a systematic process of addressing development issues. Unfortunately, this has not been so for many development projects. Perhaps “myths” may not be the word most appropriate for these comments, ‘misconceptions’ perhaps may be a better one, or may be even “false assumptions.”

- ♦ *Development facilitators are capable of promoting meaningful participation among local people.* Capabilities are in question here. Enabling others to become involved in community action is not an easy task. Many times the individuals who have potential to become leaders and initiators are the most reluctant to become active. While it is ideal to engage a wide range of citizenry, it is also a fact that not everyone has the capability, or willingness to develop the necessary capabilities to play crucial roles in the community. Appropriate persons therefore need to be identified in an equalitarian fashion. Facilitators need endless patience, and must themselves be willing to step out of their “expert” role and become co-learners in projects. Relinquishing control carries its own risks, the greatest of which is that projects will not precede “my way” or may take a turn not anticipated by the facilitator and sponsoring agency.
- ♦ *Local people will automatically wish to become involved.* Participation carries with it personal sacrifices. Low resource people often pay dearly for becoming involved. They give up their time, they may have to spend money to participate, i.e., buy new clothes, pay for transportation, buy food, or arrange for childcare, for example. They may also face criticism from their families, their friends, or from people in the community. This is a variable directly affected by family norms, cultural practices, and political forces. The poor are totally involved in the day-to-day task of just keeping their families fed and functioning. This preoccupation can paralyze any thinking that their life may change if they involve themselves in external activities.

- ♦ *Capacity building is positive.* There is no question that capacity building is a must. However, it sometimes happens that local people, who acquire new communication skills, increase their economic position, or who become politically active, may have just gained the necessary tools to manipulate others for their own interests. Many examples come to mind: the bright and self-serving tenant farmer who manipulated his neighbors and acquired their land to become a new land baron; the village woman who used her new found video skills to bar other women from learning so as to seek payment for her services; the local politician who found clever ways to “skim” money from projects for which he was successful in finding funding. New capacities often need to be accompanied with guidance and frameworks for responsibility.
- ♦ *Participatory approaches will cure all development ills.* There is a possibility that participation brings with it red flags that signal the need for caution and care in the many aspects of its catalytic action. There is a need for constant feedback, dialog among stakeholders, and ongoing interaction and reflection over changes that are taking place with individuals and within communities. Many “ills” can be cured, but learning appropriate treatments that will not have adverse long-range effects is the ultimate challenge.

Essentials of Involvement in the Participatory Process

If a person is to take action, change and control his/her environment, becoming more self-reliant and self-determined, then genuine participation is necessary. People must be able to educate themselves, becoming more reflective through the development of thinking, acting and problem-solving abilities. Authentic or genuine participation can result in a sense of power, which in turn increases one's control over their environment and enables them to shape their own destiny.

Dimensions of Involvement

People's capacity to benefit from meaningful involvement is important when development participation is people-centered rather than focused solely on economic goals. Given a people-centered approach, let me outline what I think the dimensions of involvement are. Interestingly, these appear to be nearly parallel to the dimensions of personal change.

- ♦ *Awareness.* Rural people lead basic lives. Their daily patterns give priority to meeting the immediate needs of their families—food, physical well-being and maintenance of their living environment. The “work” that provides resources for meeting these needs, takes precedence over external activity. Recognizing the possibilities to reach out from their immediate “life space” to be a part of development projects may be unfathomable. Personal contacts, media messages, or direct requests from organizations will create awareness of the opportunity.
- ♦ *Active Interest.* Interest follows opportunity awareness. If individuals can understand the opportunity in highly personalized terms, they are more likely to become involved. If they can see benefits for themselves and their families, or ways to improve their economic status through improved “make a living” practices they will seek, and be open to receiving more information. It is only when the most personal needs of people are accommodated is it likely that they will become interested in the wider issues of the community.
- ♦ *Motivation to participate.* The promise of things or money or other “hand-outs” has characterized participation in some cases. But when the promises have not been fulfilled, apathy and distrust have been the result. When the only promise is to enable people to think for themselves, do for themselves and collectively chart a path of progress for their community, there may be even more skepticism. Initially, people may become involved out of curiosity, but when given the opportunity to be recognized and have a “voice”, the enthusiasm builds. Video has proven to be a

powerful tool for motivating participation, when used in the initial stages of involvement. Being a part of a discussion, voicing points of view, then viewing these discussions has a somewhat 'magical' effect on individuals. It arouses a confirming force within the individual, prompting further participation.

- ♦ *Testing and trust building.* Facilitators may find the road to building trust fairly long. In communities where disappointments have been a routine experience, there will be a trial period for the people to see that becoming involved in collective activity can produce desirable outcomes. In the past, whenever development has been imposed upon people, they have had only one choice, "take it or leave it." This imposition has erased the value of indigenous knowledge. Once people discover that indigenous knowledge is valued, the door to building trust and bringing about social transformation is opened.
- ♦ *Assuming a role and responsibility.* Interpersonal or social trust is the key. Once established it becomes rather straightforward to lead people to define the goals they wish to pursue and sort out the role they might play. A facilitator leads people through their own ideas and expectations for defining roles. Assignment of responsibilities is also up to the group. The facilitator gives participants the tools for building relationships, organizing projects, assessing alternatives and solving the problems to be encountered. In this process task trust develops, i.e., someone will do what he/she commits to do.
- ♦ *Project action and partnership.* Development projects are a partnership between external sponsors and internal participants. As projects unfold, it is expected that the community, with consultation and guidance from the external sponsors and their facilitators, will carry out the implementation. With the expectation that project decisions are reached through consensus, community leaders will actually share the facilitation roles. Ongoing evaluation is important in order to give community leaders the information they need to successfully carry out the project and make the necessary changes in the direction required. Above all, the community

will be involved in such a way that will enable them to take ownership of the process and the outcomes.

- ♦ *Reflection.* Participatory processes require ongoing reflection. Facilitators will have to structure the opportunities for group reflection and give participants the tools they need to engage their own reflective thought processes. Reflection is a "reporting" activity, not a "blame game." That is, data and observations should simply state the realities of what is happening and formulate options for correcting any flaws that are identified. It is not a process of self- or other-condemnation.
- ♦ *Confidence, self-development, satisfaction, feeling of usefulness.* These are positive outcomes of involvement. As individuals experience success in expressing views, learning new things, using indigenous knowledge and skills, they will develop the confidence to continue to be involved. They will recognize their own self-development and the fact that they are becoming different people. Feelings of satisfaction and usefulness result from being able to play a part in community effort and be recognized and valued for that part. This is not to say that all outcomes of involvement will be positive. In some respects, we might expect positive outcomes to be directly correlated with the effectiveness of the facilitator. But when outcomes are negative, a facilitator must help people understand the "whys" and avoid the "blame game."
- ♦ *Commitment to continued activity.* Given that an individual does experience positive outcomes of their involvement and understand the negatives, they will be more willing to continue activity. Hopefully, there will be adequate resources for continued development projects that are locally identified. Frequently the experience that individuals have leads them into further education, paid employment, or assumption of direct leadership roles in the community. Personal growth, increased capacity, new challenges, or uplifted economics are immediate outcomes that provide a base of future involvement.
- ♦ *Leadership niche in community.* Beyond becoming capable and motivated to assume active roles in community leadership, the foundation is laid for a permanent leadership

niche in the community. Individuals now become active community facilitators enabling others to become involved and experience the personal growth they themselves have

benefited from. In time, no one will be left behind because individuals of the community will be assuming a personal responsibility for injecting their friends and neighbors into active community involvement.

The Facilitator as a Communication Catalyst

White and Nair (1999) have presented the concept of a “catalyst communicator,” which is pertinent to thinking about the role to be played by a facilitator in involving people in the participatory process. They view the facilitator as a communication catalyst. They describe this person as “putting people together in order to make things happen, to catalyze thinking, motivation, interaction, action, reaction, and reflection.” Through partnership and participation, grass roots people learn to more effectively communicate with others on their own behalf. “A generalized knowledge and understanding regarding needs, aspirations, goals, and anticipated outcomes is assumed to be present before these human linkages are made,” they say.

The transformation goal of the CC (Catalyst Communicator) is to unlock the human potentials of individuals, increasing their capacity to think, to relate, to act, and to reflect from a foundation of communication competencies. The courage to launch out on an expanded vision of their own quality of life and what it takes to achieve it, will be an important outcome when this transformational goal is reached. The interesting thing about this transformational process is that it also brings about parallel changes within the catalyst communicator (p. 40).

Their explanation of the concept goes on to present a matrix of catalyst communicator competencies outlining in detail the interactions within an analysis of belief, knowledge, and skill along with identifying specific activities and characteristics. From their perspective, it is ideal that a facilitator has strong academic and/or an experiential background in communication theory and practice.⁵

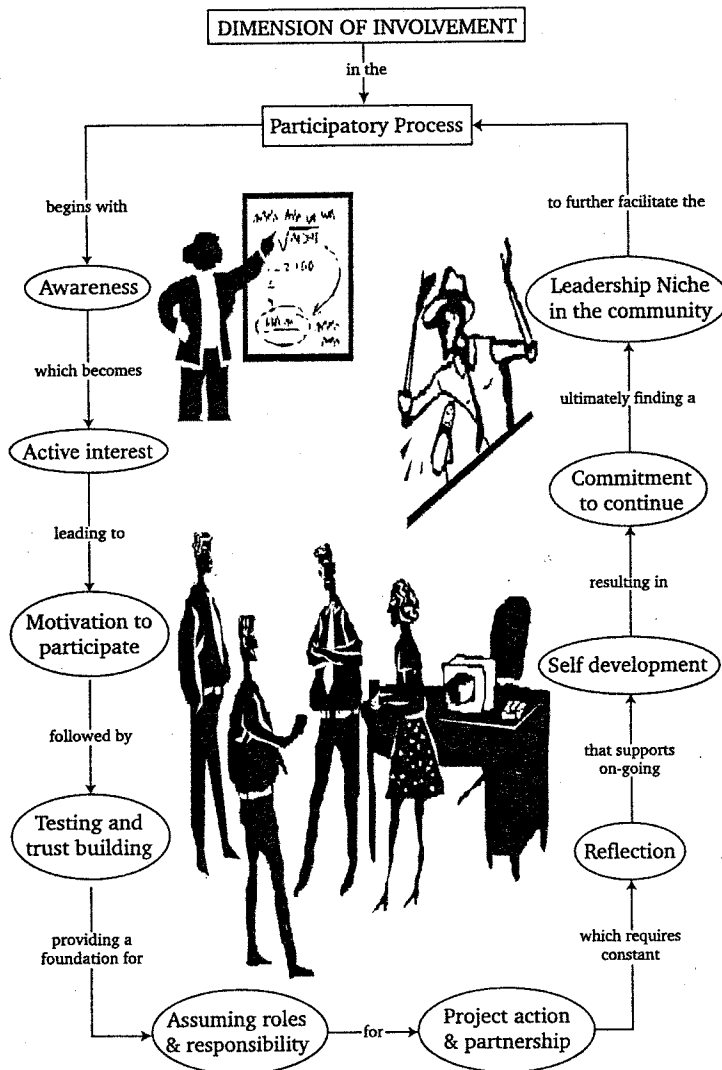


Figure 2.1
Dimensions of Involvement in the Participatory Process

Shared Ideas, Knowledge, Goals, and Responsibility

Meaningful involvement requires sharing. Inherent in the participation process is ongoing sharing. The initial bringing together of individuals from a community can establish a norm of sharing very quickly. I had the opportunity to observe the techniques of Kathy Colverson (1996), who conducted a participatory research project on women's access to agricultural information in Honduras, as she encouraged sharing behaviors among her interviewees. She was probing into the issue of women's marginalization in agriculture—an issue which when confronted gave rise to defensiveness in all corners. She was intent upon uncovering the innermost thoughts of women about the issue.

Before she began the research, her first step was sharing some of her experiences with groups of women. On one occasion, I observed her with a group of women who were operating a nursery school for children of field workers. They served a lunch of gruel (cooked cornmeal in water) each day. Although cabbage was produced in the area, all the good produce went to market and the culls and scraps were fed to the pigs or just thrown away. (Kathy said in some cases the pigs were better fed than the people.) The people knew they could eat the cabbage, but they did not know how to prepare it. In a very interactive way Kathy did a small workshop on how to make cabbage rolls, utilizing the corn with a small amount of rice and beans as stuffing. Each woman made a roll and placed it in the cooking pot. Their greatest satisfaction was the delight of the children with their new food. Kathy's satisfaction was that the women had acquired useful knowledge about nutrition and skill in preparing a nutritious meal.

Through this type of mutual sharing Kathy gained the confidence of the women who in turn were more than willing to talk freely in personal interviews about their status as women farmers. More importantly, this process involved an ongoing sharing of ideas and knowledge that resulted in the setting of goals and discussion of responsibilities for bringing about change. This small example highlights the very personalized aspects of the sharing process.

In the process of sharing, people can arrive at more clear understandings of their own life circumstances. By sharing, people can realize that they are not alone with their problems. Through a sharing experience, people can exchange and acquire useful knowledge and understanding. Courage to confront comes through consensual thinking. Dialog is instrumental in setting goals that are relevant to all members of a group or to a community. Shared responsibility produces mutual commitment. These are but a few.

Capacity Building and Institutionalization

Capacity building goes beyond but does not exclude individual growth. Hopelessness and lack of opportunities for self-expression or assumption of responsibilities outside their family context, makes people often lose confidence in, or perhaps not even recognize their own abilities. Involvement through participation initiates a process that results in acknowledging and awakening abilities.

Over time the capacities for uplifting life are increased through development of self-esteem, acquisition of new knowledge and skill, confidence in assuming an active role in the community. Learning to use the tools of the media is instrumental to capacity building. Use of participatory communication tools creates opportunities for people to involve themselves in activities that are empowering. New organizations, systems and patterns of communication can evolve and become an integral part of the community structure, thus institutionalized to serve the formerly unempowered.

Empowerment

Though empowerment is usually conceptualized as moving out of a condition or sense of deprivation or oppression, it can also be looked at as a positive, holistic outcome of self-discovery, successful human interaction, and the ability to dialogue with people different from one's self (Crabtree, 1998, p. 189).

It is essential for people to understand that empowerment can result from participatory involvement in development endeavors. For those who have been forever powerless, this promise will no

doubt seem an impossible one to keep. However, most will find that their aspirations for a better life provide a compatible framework for participation that holds the promise of empowerment.

Narayan, et al., (2000b) characterize the powerless as “trapped in a many-stranded web.” This web is one which is linked with deprivations—a struggle against “ill-being,” a struggle for livelihood, social deprivation, and lack of access to information or education. Personal incapacities are a barrier to providing adequate resources for families or to belong to society. This web strangles feelings of self-worth and fosters low self-confidence and self-esteem. Only through empowerment and by reducing vulnerability can some escape.

Empowerment implies a change in power relations. The first step is ensuring the voices of the poor are heard. This requires strong facilitation and mentoring on the part of development agencies. The poor need to be heard in decision forums of the community and play an active role in policy-making. This suggests that the power holders be willing to listen to these voices and that services be made available for addressing problems that poor people identify. The “Agenda for Change” (Narayan, et al., 2000a) suggests that progress across several themes is necessary for empowerment. People must move:

- ♦ From material poverty to adequate assets and livelihoods.
- ♦ From isolation and poor infrastructure to access and services.
- ♦ From illness and incapability to health, information, and education.
- ♦ From unequal and troubled gender relations to equity and harmony.
- ♦ From fear and lack of protection to peace and security.
- ♦ From exclusion and impotence to inclusion, organization and empowerment.
- ♦ From corruption and abuse to honesty and fair treatment (p. 266).

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is a Freireian concept and a key one, pertinent to the participatory process. It is the process of “action–reflection–

action” that makes *conscientisation* possible. In participatory involvement, this suggests that at each step participants share an experience, think about it, then talk about it, draw conclusions and map out the next step. *Critical reflection* would include self-reporting of one’s own actions, examining self–other relationships, sorting through options, recognizing outcomes, establishing causality, and outlining future alternatives.

People can diagnose their own situations and realities. They readily recognize their feelings of shame, hopelessness, depression, dependency, and fear, all of which have a bearing on their ability to move out of their current conditions. The process of critical reflection is helpful but *the process must be a part of their learning through participatory involvement*. An important element in learning to reflect is that self-blame, self-condemnation, or devaluing yourself or others, are all against the “rules.”

Culture and Continuity

The cultural context and heritage of a community are strong factors in how people within communities relate to one another. Culture provides a meaningful framework for order and harmony in relationships. There are key factors that have strong bearing on the behavior of people who live in the same geographic area. These factors become determinants of community building and continuity of social practices. Some of these are ethnicity, race, religion, caste and social status. These account for significant differences in attitudes, beliefs, personal ethics and standards, values, and norms of behavior. Vast differences in perspectives are rooted in these cultural factors. So any involvement in the participatory process will be accompanied by sensitivity, respect for diversity, and tolerance of differences.

The Cultural Context for Participation

It has taken a substantial amount of time for developers to recognize the crucial role of culture in socio-economic development. The ideas for “knowledge sharing” and “participatory communication”

surfaced and have steadily gained credence, providing a more people-based, thus culture-based perspective on Third World development. One of the strongest cultural forces in development is religious values that impact heavily on attitudes toward modernization and economic action. Another important force is the psychological factor of need for achievement, which is rooted in the value orientation of a community or ethnic group. Factors such as kinship and joint family structures, ritual obligations and caste solidarity contribute to the cultural context for participation. The interplay of these cultural factors can strengthen or weaken the development process. The interplay also accounts for competition, irreconcilable differences, and even violent actions.

Many anthropologists agree that education, i.e., knowledge acquisition, has the potential of altering cultural patterns and making people more receptive to modernization and the process of economic development. Alexander and Kumaran (1992) made a comprehensive study of the role of culture in development. They argued that culture, being a component of the socio-economic system, tends to be in coherence with other components of the system. Thus, cultural changes would be necessary in order to meet the requirements of development. The cultural context would thereby be altered by development.

The Pattern of culture in a developed area is likely to be different from its pattern in an underdeveloped area. While the cultural pattern in the underdeveloped area is likely to be characterized by a low level of knowledge about various aspects of day-to-day life, and less economically rational values, those in developed areas are likely to be characterized by higher levels of knowledge and more rational values (p. 26).

Their research showed a strong interrelation between knowledge and values, indicating, "knowledge is a powerful cause of change in value orientation." They found significant variation in the patterns of culture that they attribute to levels of education and exposure to mass media. This suggests that expansion of knowledge is brought about through education. We might safely conclude that it is probable that economic development increases the opportunity for education that in turn brings with it changes in the cultural context and framework of the community.

Cultural Renewal: A Transformation Model

True social transformation calls for both cultural and structural change. Popular participation in communication for development provides hope for cultural and eco-sensitive change. Development can only be successful when framed within the cultural expectations of indigenous people. Nair and White (1994) have framed a perspective for change they call *cultural renewal*, defined as "a dynamic process of goal-oriented cultural and structural change facilitated by pro-active indigenous communication transactions amongst local people...." It is a process whereby their cultural heritage and practices are shared, evaluated and modified in order to recognize ethnic diversity and live in harmony with differences. This perspective seeks to activate a horizontal communication process that can question the forces responsible for their deprived lives, research and reflect upon the issues, and enable people to act upon cultural and structural conditions of dependency that have been formerly legitimized.

The *cultural renewal* perspective attaches high value to participatory forms of communication. Participatory action for development is expected to bring about structural change and redistribution of power and resources, which if accomplished would result in cultural renewal and delegitimization of cultural exploitation. The Cultural Renewal Model interfaces two processes—development and cultural renewal. It is based on the assumption that the development process must continually build within it mechanisms that recognize and harmonize cultural diversity. People of diverse ethnicity, cultural practices, religious orientations, and value orientations must live peaceably with each other in the same communities, sharing the same pool of community resources.⁶

Cultural Conflict Resolution

One is reminded daily that cultural conflict has created great chasms in human relationships in many parts of the world. Conflict is an inescapable aspect of human behavior, usually based on

incompatible points of view, ideologies and beliefs. Rival factions, organizations, and communities have built up animosities, over centuries or otherwise extended periods of time. It is almost always a struggle for power and control over one another. Unfortunately, seriously conflicted cultural contexts are often the ones that are potential sites for necessary development action.

Conflict can be either constructive, or destructive. It must be kept in mind that no change is possible without conflict—the greater the change, the greater the conflict. This is the challenge to participatory communication. The development facilitator, as a catalyst communicator, can enter a conflicted community and readily recognize conflicts. Bringing the people together and giving them tools to address their differences is the first order of the day. Creating an opportunity for them to talk about and share their differences will quickly lead to the identification of common interests and aspirations. Participatory Video (PV) has played a vital role in this process throughout communities on all continents. Chapter 17 highlights projects that have used PV to facilitate involvement in participatory communication and development processes. There should be no illusions however, that this can be a laboriously long and risky process.

Media Issues

There is no doubt that western media has been an intrusive cultural force. As television has become available in developing countries, so has western software. By the time local broadcasting capabilities are developed, they are often modeled after western programming. Social change in these countries is heavily influenced by socio-cultural patterns depicted in imported media. Western movies and music have impacted youth culture, in particular. In development, training models and the media used within them are obviously culture specific.

There is general agreement that much of the mass media material distributed is highly likely to violate local cultural values. Lees and Ojha (1999) have shared their experience of this violation while working with street children of Mumbai (Bombay), “dispensing” videos that were made by an international organization.

We began our work in India charged with making use of two video productions on HIV and drugs, putting them in the hands of adults working with street children in Bombay. Early on, the team of eleven of these children convinced us that it was important to move beyond interpretations of the videos, beyond AIDS and drugs. They convinced us that the real subject of our work was children’s lives, and that sense cannot be made of drugs of AIDS without understanding how they fit into their lives. It became a question of meaning, what HIV means and what drugs mean to street children. Understanding children’s lives meant asking the team to teach us how they interpret their own lives and how they understand their own behavior. It also meant learning how street children interpret the world of adults who they see every day (p. 121).

Essentially the children rejected the videos. The project then became one of enabling the children to develop their own media to use with their peers, to address their problems.

The model that has evolved from Jim and Sonali’s experience, and similar ones from other sensitive development professionals like them, gives first consideration to the situation-specific factors of the cultural context. This becomes a driving force for applying participatory communication models in all aspects of action projects as well as in developing media messages focused on problem solving issues.

Preservation and Progress

A question that has been widely debated in development circles is whether it is possible to preserve cultural traditions and at the same time promote progress, modernization and change. The societal bonds of a common culture and pride in ones heritage can foster a powerful bond among people and be a stabilizing force in a community. Common bonds can often ease the stresses and strains of poverty. Cultural identity is nurtured through rituals, community festivals and a variety of celebrations. In rural communities it is these events that bring people together.

Preservation in no way needs to impede progress. It is possible that a focus on cultural preservation may in fact be the key to

progress. Heritage provides a secure foundation for development endeavors that individuals and communities deem useful to their progress. The greater the cultural diversity in a community, the greater the effort to evolve mutually agreeable directions will be. As in any argument for diversity, the outcome is likely to be more creative and meaningful.

Vision and Challenge

The challenges for involving people in the participatory process are many and new ones will continuously evolve. At the same time the door to new opportunities and possibilities is open. Building human capacity is time consuming and progress can be excruciatingly slow. Successful projects in the future will recognize this fact and the goals set will allow a longer time span for accomplishment. In the future there needs to be recognition of the fact that projects need to be small and localized in order to allow participants a safer, more comfortable relationship with fellow community members. These "mini" projects can offer greater feelings of satisfaction and in reality, be more effectively managed and controlled. Small successes produce capacity, confidence, and courage to tackle larger, more complex development plans of action. Communication media—video, radio, and the Internet—will provide the mechanisms for linking and sharing the outcomes of these projects.

While local level action and control of projects is achievable and manageable, there must be mechanisms and programs that can move wider segments of the population toward shared goals. Undoubtedly, the role of a participation facilitator will become more crucial. Participant facilitators must, therefore, be competent. Greater challenges will require greater capacity and skills on the part of these persons to use the tools of technology and be able to apply transformation process skills effectively. These facilitators will need to understand the interface of culture and development, and be sensitive to the cultural diversities that at times may divide people. Most importantly they must understand "process" as a "product." Chapter 3 discusses this in greater detail.

Probably the greatest challenge for development facilitators lies in allowing people to grow and develop in ways that they

themselves see important and useful. Imposing expectations and personal values must be avoided. Facilitators will need to conduct ongoing self-assessments to keep their process facilitation role free from personal bias.

Development projects will become more sustainable in the future because of people's involvement in the process. There will be local "buy-ins" from the beginning and more formalized "signing-on," making a commitment to participate. Facilitators will increasingly respect and seek out indigenous knowledge and involve indigenous people in participatory planning, participatory research, participatory project implementation, and participatory evaluation. Participatory communication, message-making, and use of media tools will under gird all of those participatory processes.

The vision? If it is to be sustainable, development will become increasingly localized, participatory, relevant and appropriately situated in order to make necessary linkages to regional and national development support systems that can lead to acquisition of resources.

Notes

1. Website Addresses: <http://www.fao.org>, <http://www.worldbank.org>
2. FAO, (2002, p. 1).
3. World Bank, (2002, p. 1).
4. Gumucio-Dagron, (2001).
5. Nair and White (1999) presents a useful analysis of the roles and characteristics of the Catalyst Communicator.
6. In Nair and White (1994) is a complete explication of the Cultural Renewal concept.

References and Select Bibliography

- Alexander, K.C. and K.P. Kumaran (1992). *Culture and Development: Cultural Patterns in Areas of Uneven Development*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.