Methodology

How to plan a participatory development communication strategy.

Introduction

This part of the guide presents an integrated planning and action model for using participatory development communication. It includes ten steps that can assist you to plan and effectively implement a research or development process.

First, it is important to state that there is no single, all-purpose recipe to start a participatory development communication process. Each time we must look for the best way to establish the communication process among different community groups and stakeholders, and use it to facilitate and support participation in a concrete initiative or experimentation driven by a community to promote change.

It is important to adapt one's intervention to each different situation and to each specific group of participants with whom research teams or practitioners will work. This being said it is important to plan.

When it is question of using communication in the context of a development research or project, many development practitioners and researchers will want to start right away to identify the communication tools they will use (video, posters, radio) instead of planning the intervention as a whole. This practice leads to a lack of impact, since there is no way of knowing if the chosen media activity will contribute to the resolution of a development problem or to the identified goal. It also prevents participation and the involvement of community groups in the planning and implementation of communication activities.

If we want to support a participatory process, project or research identification and planning should involve representatives of the community and other stakeholders with whom the researcher or development

practitioner intends to work (for example an NGO, a department of natural resources, a community radio, etc.).

Participation in the planning process is important. The model presented here derives from the first models of development communication in which planning consisted in preparing and transmitting messages suitably adapted to target groups. We saw earlier that these first models have evolved considerably and now put the accent on two-way communication and participation. Therefore, if we want participants to become fully engaged in communication and development efforts, we must adapt this methodology and undertake participatory development communication that will foster dialogue and decision-making at each stage of the development process.

We have already stressed that using PDC demands from researchers and development practitioners a change of attitude. Traditionally, the way many research teams and practitioners used to work was to identify a problem in a community and experiment solutions with the collaboration of the local people. On the communication side, the trend was to inform and create awareness both to the many dimensions of that problem and to the solution community members should implement (from an expert point of view). We discussed earlier that this practice led to little impact, but many researchers and development practitioners still work along these lines.

Working with PDC means involving the local community in identifying the development problem (or a common goal), discovering its many dimensions, identifying potential solutions (or a set of actions) and taking a decision on a concrete set of actions to experiment or implement. It is no longer the sole responsibility of the researcher or the development practitioner and their organizations.

Using communication to support a participatory development or research process also means sharing both traditional and modern knowledge related to the analysis of problems as well as the identification of potential solutions. It also involves nurturing a process in which the experimentation design or implementation plan will be developed with the active participation of the end-users. This is the process we will be planning and nurturing.

Again, the model presented here must be used as a reference only. It has to be adapted to each different context. It is a logical process based on a prior familiarity with the local setting, begins with the expression of development needs in a given community, and involves specific stakeholders in addressing those issues, while supporting and accompanying this process of participation.

The methodological approach

Participatory development communication supports a participatory development or research for development process. We usually represent such a process through four main phases, which of course are not separated but are interlinked: diagnosis, planning, intervention or experimentation, and assessment (see Figure 1). Upon completing these phases we need to decide whether to return to the beginning of the process (diagnosis) and start another cycle; or iterate to a revision of the planning phase; or proceed with scaling-up, starting another planning, implementation and evaluation cycle.

The PDC model (see Figure 2) supports such a process with ten specific steps. The process of planning and developing PDC itself is however not sequential.

FIGURE 1: The participatory development or research for development process.

We can view those steps around a circle. This circle represents the process of facilitating participation through communication. It develops throughout the total process, during the interactions of researchers and development practitioners with the community. Moreover, all these specific steps are not primarily about applying techniques, but also about building mutual understanding and collaboration, facilitating participation and accompanying a development dynamic.

We can then place the steps of the PDC methodology on the perimeter of that circle because they all contribute to facilitating participation to the

participatory development or research for development process (see Figure 3). Some of these steps can be done in parallel or in a different order. They can also be defined differently depending on the context. It is a continual process and not a linear one.

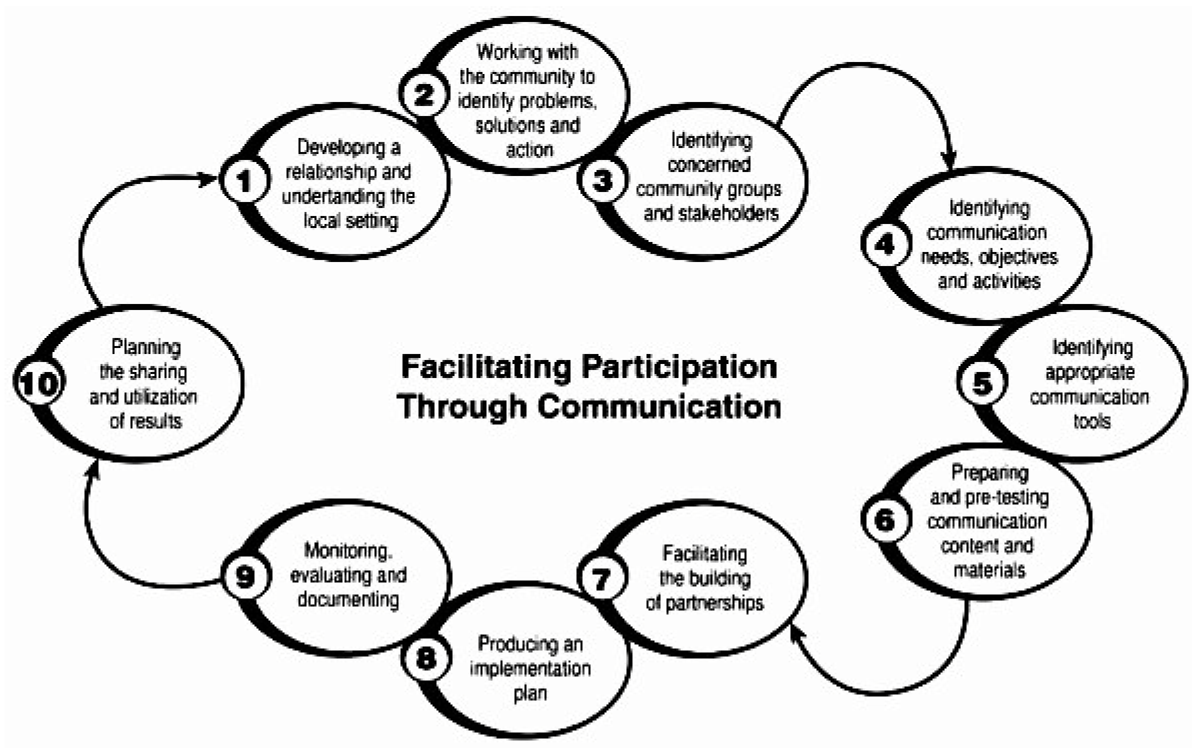

FIGURE 2: The participatory development communication model.

Hence it is important to consider these steps as reference points in a global and systematic process. With this reserve in mind, here are the ten different steps we usually go through to plan and implement participatory development communication:

Step 1:	Establishing a relationship with a local community and understanding the local setting
Step 2:	Involving the community in the identification of a problem, its potential solutions, and the decision to carry out a concrete initiative
Step 3:	Identifying the different community groups and other stakeholders concerned with the identified problem (or goal) and initiative
Step 4:	Identifying communication needs, objectives and activities
Step 5:	Identifying appropriate communication tools

Step 6:	Preparing and pre-testing communication content and materials
Step 7:	Facilitating partnerships
Step 8:	Producing an implementation plan
Step 9:	Monitoring and evaluating the communication strategy and documenting the development or research process
Step 10:	Planning the sharing and utilization of results

Step 1: Establishing a relationship with a local community and understanding the local setting

Establishing a relationship with a local community is a process that will develop all along the way, through the interaction of research teams or development practitioners with people of that community.

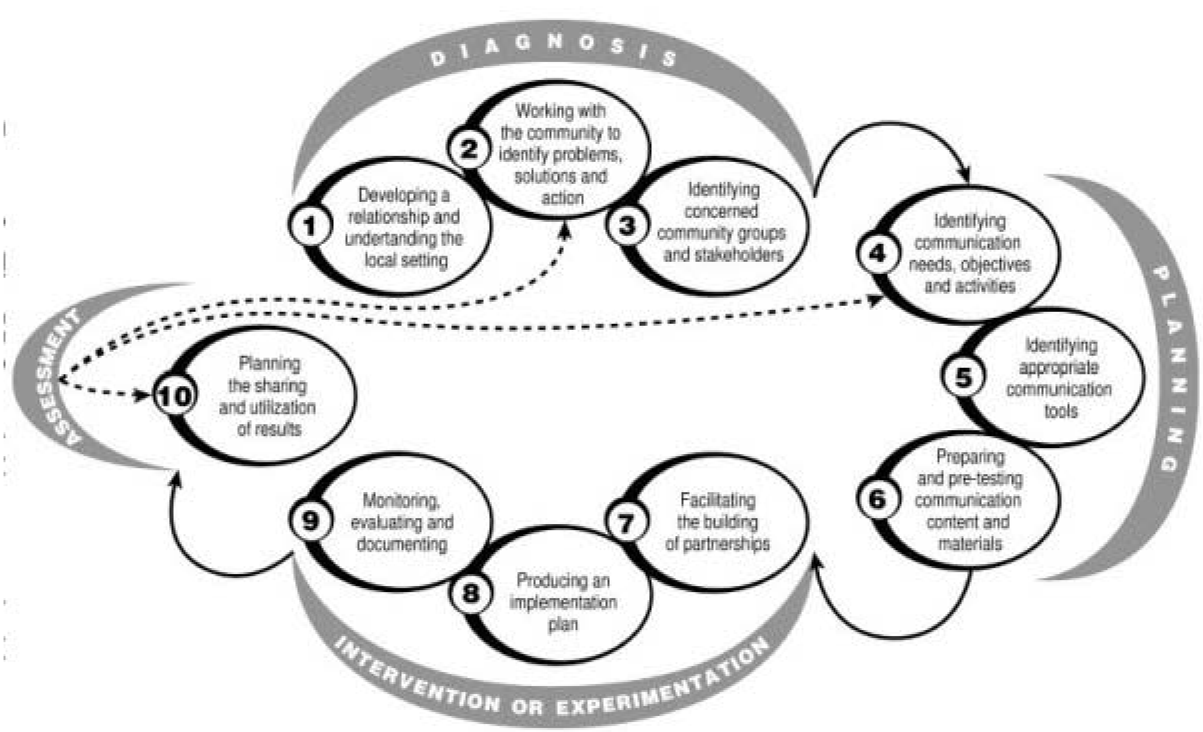

FIGURE 3: The PDC model integrated with the research for development process.

Building relationships between researchers, practitioners and community members is essential to involve people in participatory processes of research or development.

At the beginning, it refers to collecting preliminary information on the community and its environment, entering the community, getting to know the people and the resource persons in the community, developing a more thorough collection of information with the participation of the local people and resource persons, and facilitating a dialogue with them.

But what it really means is building a relationship, developing collaboration mechanisms, facilitating and nurturing the exchange of information and knowledge, negotiating roles and responsibilities, and most importantly, building mutual trust.

We will discuss the tasks involved here separately but of course, they are not sequential and overlap with one another.

Consulting existing information and planning the approach of a local community

Generally, it is researchers or development practitioners who approach a community; the other way round also happens but not very frequently. So in the first situation, there is a process of selection and there is a preliminary collection of information to support this process.

CHOOSING A PARTICULAR COMMUNITY TO WORK WITH

How does one choose a particular community or specific communities to work with? There are many considerations. Often, researchers will target specific communities because they are representatives of certain characteristics important for the research. Development practitioners will often target a community where they feel the need for intervention is more

acute. Both will take into account opportunities for resources or travel to the field. There can be many reasons. Two of them merit special attention.

One important factor to consider is the agreement of a community to work with a research or development initiative. In many cases, the authorities of a specific community will give their agreement without the community itself being aware of this, and without understanding the implications in terms of participation and involvement in a concrete development action. This often leads to artificial situations. So before selecting a specific community to work with, it is better to discuss this in the field with different community groups and resource people, and explore the interest and potential of such work.

A second factor to consider is the link between working with a specific local community and the possibility of extending results either to other communities, or to the policy environment. This can also play an important role in the selection process.

CONSULTING EXISTING INFORMATION

Let us also mention that in many contexts, statistics and other information from secondary sources are not accurate. So visiting resource persons knowledgeable of the community setting or of the problem involved should complement and supplement the information. The selection itself should only be finalized after contacting and discussing with community members.

BEFORE GOING TO THE FIELD

Researchers and practitioners should develop a prior understanding of the local setting before going to the field and conducting formal meetings with a given community. Without such prior knowledge, it is often very difficult to build a sound understanding of the setting, even by conducting participatory rural appraisal activities.

This being said, it is often difficult to assemble all this knowledge. Doing so requires time and money (if only to cover travel and accommodation costs), and may demand skills that not everyone possesses. As a result, activities are often based on an incomplete understanding of the setting in which the researcher or the practitioner is trying to act, and of the problems she is trying to address. Research teams and development organizations must be aware of this and should plan time and necessary resources to understand the setting more thoroughly.

Hence the identification of relevant sources of documentation and resource people and/or organizations that know the community very well should be the first item to be considered.

In addition, when several communities are involved, the manner, order and time necessary in approaching them must also be considered. The schedule should be established taking into consideration the working and seasonal calenders of the different communities. The difficulties of access to some communities, especially during the rainy season, should also be considered, since they will have a direct effect on the amount of time researchers and practitioners will have at their disposal to work with the communities.

INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH OR DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE TO THE COMMUNITY

Attitudes should also be given proper attention: it is not the same thing to identify three or four different field sites where a research team will work and establish a working relationship with a certain number of communities.

How will the research or development initiative be introduced to the community? Usually, the process begins with researchers or development practitioners having a set of preliminary planning meetings with the local leaders. A first visit will present the research or development initiative idea to the community leaders and ask for an agreement to discuss the idea and work with the community. Often, another visit to the community leaders will be useful to review the research or development initiative proposal before introducing it to the community.

All this takes time and should be given careful consideration. Often, this phase of the research or development initiative does not receive the attention and time it deserves.

Conducting a visit to the authorities

In many settings, a visit to the authorities in the community is part of what is required in order to enter the community. It is often important to visit both political authorities and traditional authorities, in order to inform them of the research or initiative, ask for their cooperation, and understand their perspective on what is being initiated. This should be done modestly and respectfully and is often better achieved with the help of someone from the community making the introductions.

The role of the researcher or development practitioner

As discussed earlier, in the context of participatory development communication, we must see ourselves as communication actors and realize that our way of interacting with others will influence the way people will or will not participate in the research or development initiative. In that perspective, it is important to facilitate a two-way mode of approach: the research team or development workers approaching a community through community leaders and community groups, and the community approaching the research team/development workers. The intention of establishing a dialogue should prevail over the demand for collaboration.

Attitudes and perceptions

Many researchers and development practitioners have been trained to perceive community members as beneficiaries and as future end users of the research results. A shift of perception at that level is also desirable. We have to recognize that the delivery of technologies to end users (like farmers and other community dwellers) simply does not work. A first desirable change is to consider community members as stakeholders in the development process, not as beneficiaries. So approaching a community also means involving people and thinking in terms of stakeholders' participation in the different phases of the research process as a whole.

Discussing agendas

It is important at this stage to recognize that the interests of communities, researchers and development practitioners are not similar. Generally, researchers and development practitioners come to a community with a specific mandate. So, if we want to start from the needs and priorities of the communities, it can only be done within a specific category of needs. This has to be clarified at the first moment of approaching a community. When resource people come from the outside into a poor community, people will present them with all their problems. They will not make a distinction between different categories, such as soil fertility, health, and credit facilities problems because it is all part of the same reality for them. Because you cannot address all of those issues, the scope and limitations of your mandate must be fully explained and discussed with community members.

Avoiding the danger of raising expectations

In so doing, researchers and development practitioners must be aware of the danger of raising expectations in local communities. To counteract this risk, it is important to be clear on your mandate with community members, to discuss possible negative and positive outcomes of what they will be doing together, and to involve community members in activity planning.

Talking about short-term and medium-term impact may also be useful. Some communities lose interest in a given project when they do not see any concrete "benefits" coming from it.

Finally, there is the issue of financial and material advantages for participating in research or development activities. First, we should try to find substitutes for the word "project". Whenever researchers or practitioners come to a community to discuss a "project", many people tend to see an opportunity of great sums of money and material advantages. These considerations should be addressed at the beginning of the relation with the community.

Agreement should also be made to recognize whenever compensation is justified and what form it should take. It is important here for research teams and development practitioners to be clear on this issue in order not to raise the financial expectations of community members.

Understanding culture

Among the problems that researchers and development practitioners may face in the course of their work are cultural barriers and systems of beliefs.

Cultural and religious characteristics, and the ways people approach and discuss subjects or take decisions, can vary greatly from one region to another, especially when it comes to specific social groups (women and children, for example) or ethnic groups. It is very important that you identify these cultural elements for each specific group involved in the development of the research process. Once again, it takes time to understand and appreciate these factors, in a context where there is usually little time available.

Resistance to change and the force of local customs, habits and taboos are other cultural aspects that can often pose significant obstacles. It is essential to understand and appreciate their real influence. Here again, we cannot overestimate the importance of taking sufficient time to know the community and discuss with people.

Some teams try to have some of their staff spend more time living in the communities among local farmers and organizing and participating in social activities in the communities. This can make a big difference for the outsiders in understanding the community and for the community to understand and know better those researchers or development practitioners. Visiting the village elders and collecting information from different groups are also good practices.

It is not always possible for research teams and development practitioners to do so however, as often it was not planned at the beginning of the project. This should be given better consideration.

Using local language

Language barriers are another difficulty. The use of a local interpreter can help, but a local moderator may also be needed to facilitate group discussions in the local language.

There is also the issue of the level of language. The way a topic is dealt with, the vocabulary used, the ways different groups and individuals perceive a topic will differ from one place to the next and from one group to another.

Taking time into consideration

Participation demands not only a change of attitudes from researchers and development practitioners, but also from community members. In order for people to participate meningfully in the development process, they must first develop the perception that they can make a difference, moving from a passive attitude of waiting for donors to an attitude of self-help. This takes time and does not happen in a matter of days or weeks.

Apart from attitudes, participation also demands that community members develop confidence and skills that help them participate meaningfully and effectively in research or development initiatives. Time, again.

Finally, in some contexts, community members are strongly influenced by market trends and self-interest comes before community interests. This is often linked to a breakdown of traditional systems and beliefs, in which individuals seek to use the resources as fast as possible to gain better income. So, for improvement to take place, people need to start working together again as a community. This also takes time.

Therefore, expectations regarding the achievement of research or development objectives should be tempered, taking into consideration these factors.

Understanding the local setting

As we saw, understanding the local setting goes hand in hand with the process of entering a community. But there are also some specific considerations to take into account. Facilitating communication and community participation first depends on a thorough understanding of the

local setting in which the researcher or development practitioner wants to work. This also includes gathering information and knowledge related to the problem corresponding to the specific mandate of the researcher or the development practitioner.

Traditionally, communication was about whether people understood the message. But the focus should be recast the other way: how well does the researcher or practitioner understand the setting in which she is planning to work and the people she wants to work with?

This process of understanding involves the following aspects that we will now discuss.

Entering a flow

Any intervention happens in a temporal dimension. So it is important for the researcher or the development practitioner to understand that her action is connected in a certain way with a given context of past and present development initiatives.

Those initiatives may be past or present projects lead by NGOs or international organizations, but they can also be local initiatives developed by community groups and organizations. The knowledge of these interventions and of the other actors involved in these will be very useful, not only to develop potential synergies but also to understand the attitudes of community members and other stakeholders toward the "new" initiative.

Collecting and sharing information

Classical research tends to be extractive. Researchers have been trained in doing data collection at the beginning of a research initiative. Similarly, many development practitioners have been trained to collect information to feed into the design of a project.

Researchers and development practitioners working with a participatory development communication approach should try to collect and share information together with community members and associated stakeholders. The idea is to associate them to the different phases of the research or project so that researchers or development practitioners are not only receiving information from community members, but are also building a process with them.

In sharing the information they have on a local setting or development problem, researchers confirm if they understood correctly the information

provided by the local people, and the people obtain a broader perspective of their community through the information that has been put together. This broader perspective also helps in involving people in the identification of a problem or a common goal, the analysis of the causes, and the decision-making on an initiative to be carried out.

Using PRA and related techniques

Many researchers and practitioners now use participatory techniques, such as participatory rural appraisal, to actively involve members of a community in quickly gathering the maximum amount of information on the state and management of natural resources, and basic social, economic and political data.

The exercises can include the use of different techniques like collective mapping of the local area, developing a time line, ranking the importance of problems inside a matrix, wealth ranking, doing observation walks, using Venn diagrams, producing seasonability diagrams, etc.

The use of PRA as a collection of techniques for putting together this information in a limited time, is a powerful tool for facilitating the participation of community members. But it can also be used restrictively, when the techniques are not fully appropriated by the participants and remain techniques used by the research team only to gather information for their own purposes.

The main idea in using PRA is to collect information quickly with the participation of community members and to share it so that everyone becomes empowered by that information and can participate better in the analysis and decision-making processes. When this does not happen, and when researchers or development practitioners go back with the information without nurturing this empowerment process, the technique is not applied as it should. In fact, such a process can be detrimental because researchers and practitioners then think that they are doing participatory work, when in fact, community members are only "being participated".

A general knowledge of the local setting

Knowledge of the local setting includes knowledge in terms of natural resource mapping and natural resource management practices, but it should go beyond that. It refers to general knowledge on the community and its environment: not just geographical, environmental and ecological, but also demographic, linguistic, religious, cultural, political, economic, social, educational issues, livelihoods and aspirations, and others.

Particularly, we will want to be able to answer the following questions:

- What is the history of that local community?
- Who are the different groups composing it and what are the main characteristics of those groups and of the relations between them?
- What is its social, political and administrative organization?
- How does this local community relate to the different orders of authority at the local, regional and national level?
- What are the major power relations and existing or latent conflicts in the community?
- What are the main socio-economic activities?
- What about health and education?
- What are the main development problems and the main development initiatives?
- What are the main customs and beliefs regarding the research team or practitioner's topic of interest, etc.

Collecting information on communication issues

In this preliminary phase of the research or development initiative, efforts should also be made to identify the different specific groups in the community. It is important not to consider community members as a homogeneous group. It is better, after an initial community meeting, to plan specific meetings with different community groups or members and ask for their own specific perspective.

Also, in the same way that they collect general information and do some PRA activities to gather more specific information, researchers and development practitioners should also ask some communication questions which will help them in a later stage to design a communication strategy. The following information will be very useful:

- How could we identify and describe the different groups composing the local community?
- What are the main characteristics of these groups and the state of the relations between them?
- What are the main customs and beliefs concerning the management of land and water (or other topic associated with the research or development intervention)?
- What are the effective interpersonal channels of communication (views expressed by opinion leaders or exchanged by people in specific places) and the institutional channels (local associations or institutions which play an important role in circulating information) that are used locally by people to exchange information and points of views?

- What modern and traditional media are utilized in the community?

As we shall see further on, all the above information will feed into the communication plan.

Developing strategies to identify reliable information

Many community members, approached in the process of collecting information, especially poor farmers, will not speak their mind in response to the questions they are being asked, but say what they think the researcher or development practitioner wants to hear. So validating the information and also developing strategies adapted to specific groups are especially useful. For example, there may be more chances in getting reliable information through a discussion with poor farmers led by a farmer rather than by an impressive outsider from the city.

Developing collaboration and partnership

These first stages of approaching a community and collecting and sharing information are also a first opportunity to identify resource persons and organizations working in the same area and to involve them in the process. It can be an NGO working with the same community, a rural radio or a theatre group, etc. It is always better to do so in the beginning, where people feel they can play a role in the design of the research or intervention than after, when they perceive themselves as mere contract providers.

Building trust

To close this part of the discussion, we must stress the importance of building trust and understanding between the researcher or development practitioner and community members.

During the implementation stage, it will also be important to maintain the motivation and interest of the participants. We cannot expect this to happen by itself without support. Participatory research or development activities will often be launched in a rush of enthusiasm, yet we must be aware that this is only one phase of a long and complex process that demands sustained attention and dedication. It is essential to be prepared to reinforce this climate of confidence and share the activity's objectives among all participants.

In that sense, the preliminary gathering of information is a way for you to start developing a dialogue with the community and involving local people and resource persons in the process.