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From participatory rhetoric to participatory reality: training for institutional transformation

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• Training and institutional change

For more than a decade, many institutions have promoted participatory approaches for research and development, and remained hopeful that these might be employed on a wide scale. Such sentiments are frequently included in the national plans produced by planning agencies, in the project appraisal reports of donor agencies, and by the heads of implementing agencies themselves. But this participatory rhetoric is rarely backed by more than the introduction of a few training courses or perhaps the addition of a new type of personnel (e.g., social mobilisers). The results are often erratic and temporary as bureaucratic institutions try to embrace participatory approaches without changing their operational procedures and organisational culture.

To implement participatory approaches successfully, training in and of itself will have few direct or lasting impacts. It must be viewed as part of a broader process of institutional transformation. Only then can an agency make the transition from being a bureaucratic, top-down organisation to one that is more strategic, process-oriented, people-centred and enabling.

Making the shift

To become less bureaucratic and more enabling, an agency must examine every aspect of its work and determine whether its programmes and procedures are capable of responding to the needs and priorities of local people. Does an agency's staff have any reason to care whether they are providing an effective service, and if so, whether it is valued by the

people? Do participatory approaches for appraisal, analysis, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation result in the selection of viable projects, programmes and processes. Do internal structures and management systems support effective problem solving? Do existing budgetary procedures allow local adaptation and flexibility in investment and disbursement? If the answers to these questions are 'yes', then there is a strong chance that the organisational procedures and institutional priorities of an agency will be flexible and open enough to allow the transformation process to begin.

Changing institutional priorities alone will not make this happen, however. Donor support often hinders the development and application of participatory approaches as much as bureaucratic procedures. The typical mode of investment and expenditure followed by most donor agencies continues to make it difficult for programmes to employ participatory approaches effectively. Their emphasis is on disbursing funds and showing measurable results quickly. By contrast, constructive dialogue, joint analysis, participatory planning - all of the elements of a participatory approach to development - run counter to this way of thinking. Instead of 'front-end loading' of capital investments and expenditures, there is a need for a more gradual release of funds only after a substantial period of consultation with and capacity strengthening of local groups and institutions. This means that the initial investments will often be quite small in terms of capital improvements, but significant in terms of human resources development, including training.

These and other conditions that determine whether a particular institution's programmes and policies can be effective at all - irrespective of whether 'participation' is involved - will need to be examined concurrently with efforts to introduce a new participatory approach to any research or development activity. The case of the Production Through Conservation Programme in Lesotho offers a useful case in point (Box 1). Each of these changes must constitute an integral part of the whole - all contributing to change involved in an organisational learning process in which errors are detected and embraced, alternative solutions examined and tested, adjustments are made and competing interests confronted and negotiated.

The role of training

Training is only one of many components that shape and influence the institutional learning process, albeit an important one. For it to have a lasting impact, training in participatory approaches must be part of a wider programme of human resource development. It will not only need to focus on preparing agency personnel to use certain innovative field

methods, but also improve their communication and analytical skills.

It will encourage staff members to take increased responsibility for their own learning, and support the development of competencies such as adaptable, transferable skills. It will focus on learning 'how to learn' rather than absorbing facts (Bawden, 1989; Macadam and Packham, 1989; Ison, 1990). It will need to foster a relaxed and open environment in which staff from different levels in the institutional hierarchy feel comfortable and thus able to work together constructively. The experience of the Soil and Water Conservation Branch of the Ministry of Agriculture, Kenya, demonstrates this well (Box 2).

This process will mean concentrating on attitudes, behaviour, and principles, as well as key methodological concepts and techniques (Pretty and Chambers, 1993; Chambers, 1992). Finally, it will have to become a learning, as well as an enabling institution, remaining flexible and open to new ideas and new procedures, and adapting to ever-changing conditions.

BOX 1

PRODUCTION THROUGH CONSERVATION PROGRAMME, LESOTHO

The Production Through Conservation (PTC) Programme of the Ministry of Agriculture, Lesotho, which is actively working in three southern districts of the country, is promoting a Participatory Village Development Planning (PVDP) process as a basis for involving local people in the planning and implementation of resource management and agricultural development activities. The participatory village development plans help determine the annual work programme and budget for each District Agricultural Officer (Khatiwada, 1993).

The PTC grew out of an earlier programme that was decidedly top-down in its orientation. In contrast to that initiative, the PTC has already achieved a breakthrough in addressing rural farm families' needs. First, it has consulted directly with villagers, not just their representatives, in a spirit of enquiry, dialogue, and participation, to help reach objectives decided by local groups. Second, it has taken an interdisciplinary approach to respond to the multi-faceted problems raised by farm families. Third, the DAOs, with the support of Ministry headquarters, have begun reorganising their offices so as to facilitate the Programme's work, and placed strong emphasis on the training of staff in participatory appraisal approaches.

According to a recent evaluation mission (Shaxson and Sehlo, 1993: 3): *'Only one of these alone, or any two in combination, could not have achieved the remarkable synergistic effect which has occurred as a result of all three being undertaken together. The entire process has been greatly facilitated by decentralisation of responsibilities to the DAO's office'*.

BOX 2

SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION BRANCH, KENYA

In the late 1980s, after nearly two decades of ineffective programmes, the Soil and Water Conservation Branch (SWCB) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock Development and Marketing (MALDM), Kenya, launched the Catchment (or Area of Concentration) Approach. This was an attempt to improve soil conservation coverage and gain greater local support for conservation initiatives. The objective of the Catchment Approach is to concentrate resources and efforts within a specified catchment (typically 200-500 hectares) for a specific period of time (generally one year), during which all farms are laid out and conserved. Small modifications and maintenance activities are then conducted by the community members themselves with the support of local extension agents.

Training has played a crucial role in the continuing transformation of the SWCB. Today, senior officers who were trained in the participatory methods and procedures in one or more of a series of national PRA workshops since 1989 are now training their own staff members to employ them in catchment analysis and planning. The Branch has produced detailed field reports of the work conducted in most of catchments in which it has initiated participatory planning. These reports are now used, together with slides of past field experiences, by the officers to train their own teams (Pretty, Thompson and Kiara, 1994).

The motivations that SWCB staff have brought to these changes vary considerably. Those initiating the process in 1989 brought a vision of a more people-oriented approach to soil and water conservation. As the program expanded, many of the soil conservation officers at the provisional, district, divisional and field levels supported it because they were concerned with quality work and saw the participatory approach as an improved means of reducing land degradation, conserving productive resources, and most importantly, collaborating with local people. After nearly five years of field tests, methodological adjustments, and national and local staff trainings, the Branch is now beginning to develop and institutionalise the capacities to use its participatory Catchment Approach on a broader scale. Thus new institutional norms and conventions have been created which emphasise interdisciplinary teamwork, interdepartmental collaboration, active farmer participation in all phases of catchment planning, thorough documentation of the process, and phased training of staff.

• Key lessons

The examples from Lesotho and Kenya illustrate that it is possible to alter the operational procedures and institutional cultures of large, bureaucratic, public agencies. A second and equally important lesson is that such a transformation is neither easily nor quickly achieved. These cases also indicate that the transformation of these public agencies into strategic, enabling institutions requires:

- a policy framework supportive of a clear role for local people in development;
- strong leadership committed to the task of developing organisational systems, capacities and norms;
- long-term financial commitments and flexible funding policies from key donor agencies;
- careful attention to and patience in working out the details of systems and procedures - each involving careful analysis and the negotiation of competing interests and perceptions;
- creative management, so that improved practices and procedures, once developed, can be implemented effectively;
- an open, supportive, yet challenging organisational climate in which it is safe to experiment and safe to fail; and,
- a flexible, integrated, field-based training programme over a sustained period.

Clearly, institutionalising and operationalising participatory approaches is an extremely complex and problematic business. Change and stability are inextricably linked to any open management system; the challenge for large

public institutions attempting to employ participatory approaches is to facilitate the emergence of new ways of knowing and behaving so as to manage change creatively. This will offset growing concerns over the co-opting of the term 'participatory' by those with short time horizons who may be promoting stasis and the status quo rather than change and evolution.

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