

12

Only playing with beans? Participatory approaches in large-scale government programmes

Christoph Backhaus and Rukman Wagachchi

· Introduction

Participation has been on the agenda of rural development for many years. However, in mainstream government rural development programmes and projects this has in the past often been either mere lip-service or it has only meant that villagers were asked to contribute to the implementation of projects with their own resources. It has seldom resulted in the active involvement of beneficiaries in decision-making about their own development process.

The success of participatory approaches have to date mainly been reported in the context of non-government projects. More recently, in an attempt to benefit from these successes, many aid donors, project appraisers and project implementers have increasingly included the use of participatory approaches such as PRA as a must in their project designs for large-scale government development programmes. The general notion (assumption) is that what has been good for NGO projects must also be good for government programmes.

There is, however, little significant (and documented) experience available which describes the transfer of participatory approaches to hierarchical organisations and to large-scale projects. The change required is often thought merely to be the adoption of some new methods. The paradigmatic changes involved are hardly understood and their implications not accepted (Gilmour and Fisher, 1991; Chambers, 1993). A hope prevails (perhaps unconsciously) that the change of attitudes and behaviour will automatically follow when new methods are adopted.

Considering the high expectations on the one hand and the speed of this transfer on the other, there is a high risk that donors and implementing agencies alike will sooner or later conclude that bottom-up approaches do not work and the idea might be abandoned again before it has ever had a fair chance to prove itself.

In this article we describe the experiences of Sri Lanka's North Western Province Dry Zone Participatory Development Project (DZP) in transferring participatory approaches from one institutional culture to another.

· Sri Lanka's North Western Province Dry Zone Participatory Development Project (DZP)

The DZP is fairly typical of a large-scale, foreign-funded investment programme where project appraisers, on behalf of donor agencies, have prescribed the use of participatory approaches (PRA and PTD) in a mainly government-dominated set-up.

The project is implemented through provincial government agencies, and is coordinated by the Regional Development Division of the Ministry of Finance and Planning.¹ The aim of the DZP is to facilitate a participatory planning process in 500 villages (located in 13 administrative divisions) over a seven-year period. Through this process, the aim is to establish Village Resource Management Plans for each of these villages. The government services can use these plans to assist resource-poor farmers by providing technical advice and funding for the resource management activities selected by them. The project assistance, however, is limited to a list of pre-

defined project components such as the development of water resources for irrigation purposes (micro tanks and agrowells), upland farming systems development, goat rearing, land regularisation and credit.

One and a half years after project inception, participatory planning processes have occurred in about 40 villages. In summary, the following experiences were recorded.

- Instead of mobilising self-help and increasing self-reliance, the PRA exercises have sometimes encouraged high expectations of villagers for project assistance. The first village resource management plans often looked more like shopping lists than mutually agreed village development plans. This might partly be because Sri Lankan government services and projects are commonly related to subsidies and welfare programmes. In addition, every village knows that the project is an investment programme which is supposed to spend large sums of money.
- Even where a genuine participatory planning process has taken place and the results are considered by both sides as mutually binding agreements, the respective officers often encounter great difficulties in sticking to their promises. As the administration does not consider the commitment given to villagers as a priority, it may not provide them with the time and the resources to fulfil their obligations. Thus the momentum gained might be lost when villagers find out that the government side does not stick to the agreements made.
- Although people accept participatory concepts and behaviour during training courses, once they are re-integrated into their old social and hierarchical system, many resort almost entirely to their previous styles and behaviour.
- Although many field officers incorporate PRA methods into their overall approach quite easily, this does not automatically lead to a fundamental change in their attitudes and behaviour or in a better rapport with beneficiaries. Many of them

are involved in several projects, each promoting their own approaches and methods. They have to wear the 'participatory hat' on one day in one village and the 'instructor hat' on the next day in another one. A good indication of this confusion is that officers can often be heard saying "today we go to village XY and do 'a PRA'".

- Some officers are tempted to make up results of 'participatory planning exercises' as they may earlier have cooked up data and/or results of conventional questionnaire-type surveys. Even if such practices are easy to detect, the damage is already done, since the trust of villagers for whom a 'participatory village plan' has been prepared is lost.

It would be easy to blame the attitudes and behaviour of individual officers for the difficulties encountered. However, among the eight independently operating teams (one per administrative division) responsible for facilitating village planning processes in the DZP, each one has so far encountered most of the difficulties listed above and has thus not lived up to the expectations. This points to more fundamental reasons for the shortcomings.

• **The institutional culture of GOs**

In order to understand the main constraints better, the principal differences between the institutional culture of NGOs and GOs have to be taken into account when attempting to transfer a new concept from one institutional environment to another. The objectives of these institutions, their institutional cultures and identities, as well as the forces driving them are entirely different.

Instead of theoretically analysing the differences between the institutional cultures in detail and then academically concluding on the implications for transferring a new paradigm from one to the other, we propose to apply some of the key philosophical principles behind PRA to the transfer of participatory concepts to government organisations. One of the philosophical pillars of PRA is the importance of understanding and accepting

people (and organisations) in their own situation and environment. Change should be induced by going through a participatory process of discovery jointly and learning from each other. Promoters of PRA unanimously agree to apply this view to rural people and project beneficiaries, but seldom to government officials working with rural communities.

To apply a PRA attitude not only to project beneficiaries but to all people and organisations involved would have a number of implications for the planning and implementation of large-scale 'participatory' government projects. We describe these in turn below.

Implications for project planning

A government agency cannot be expected to implement a participatory project successfully and instantly. The initial focus should be on the development of human resources, which applies to government staff as well as beneficiaries. In the beginning, expectations for rapid achievement of physical targets and impact should be very low, otherwise there is the risk that some people will later use the project as proof that "*participation does not work*".

An orientation or transition phase (which might require two to three years) is needed to enable staff to learn and to adjust, and for strategies to be developed and tested (Box 1).

A blue-print approach should be avoided in favour of a process-oriented strategy. Although this is commonly claimed, it is seldom really practised because donors and project appraisers do not really believe that the people responsible for implementation will be able to develop and adjust their own strategies and instruments. Instead, they are generally expected to copy some methods and apply them mechanically.

The adoption of a participatory working style in a hierarchical organisation has to be a continuous, step-by-step process. It requires experienced and qualified people as facilitators of a process of discovery and learning. Formal staff training, although important, is not sufficient. Continuous backstopping and

coaching are more suitable. For this process, the usual short-term inputs of consultants and trainers are of limited usefulness. What is required are persistent 'change agents' coming from outside the organisation who are available over a longer period of time.

BOX 1 HOW THE NATURE OF ASSISTANCE AFFECTS PARTICIPATION

In grant-based Technical Assistance (TA) projects the orientation-phase is already quite common. However, loan-based Financial Assistance (FA) projects do not normally include an orientation-phase because they fear a negative effect on a project's cost-benefit ratio. If donors and planners responsible for FA projects cannot overcome these constraints, the solution might be to fund the initial two or three year phase of a project, when people and strategies are being developed, through TA. If a sound set-up for beneficiary participation is in place, the funding can be continued with Financial Assistance. Such a symbiosis would provide both TA projects with greater leverage and FA with the local, process-oriented project preparation they need but are not able to finance (Rauch *et al.*, 1993).

Implications for project implementation

Presently PRA practitioners or the promoters of other participatory approaches (most of them coming from an NGO-background) often consider the typical attitudes and behaviour of government officers as 'wrong', and blame them for being too slow and unable to change. This view might be justifiable from the perspective of rural people and project beneficiaries. However, it shows a lack of willingness to understand and accept people in their situation and it excludes the development of a joint learning process.

An insistence on a 'proper' approach to PRA makes it difficult for people to gradually absorb the new ideas and to develop their own concepts. For example, visualisation methods are a key element of PRA, but they have to be adjusted to the specific situation. In Sri Lanka, especially in the DZP project area, villagers are almost 100% literate. That is why they sometimes referred to PRA exercises conducted in their villages as "*playing with*

beans". They did not understand why they were asked to use such 'primitive' means, despite being able to work with pen and paper. There are many valid reasons for working with seeds or stones and in the sand instead on paper. The danger is, however, that due to such remarks, some project officers jumped to the conclusion that sharing by visualisation does not work in Sri Lankan villages and wanted to return to the more familiar methods of extracting information in interviews and putting it down in their notebooks.

As the first signs of success begin to show, credit for this should be given to those who may have been sceptical, but who nevertheless have attempted new strategies.

• Conclusions

The issues raised here should by no means deter anybody from increasing people's participation in rural development projects. We wanted to point out, however, why it would be unfair to see participatory approaches as the panacea for all problems and deficiencies of past and present rural development projects. The changes required to realise true participation in large-scale government development projects are so fundamental that due time and resources must be provided in order to give the approach a fair chance to survive its present stage as the 'newest flavour' in project design.

- **Christoph Backhaus** and **Rukman Wagachchi**, North Western Province Dry Zone Participatory Development Project, New Secretariat Building, Dambulla Road, Kurunegala, Sri Lanka.

NOTES

1. The project is funded by a loan provided by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and through a Technical Assistance grant from the German Government, which is implemented through the GTZ.

REFERENCES

Chambers, R. 1993. *Challenging the Professions: Frontiers for Rural Development*. Intermediate Technology Publications, London.

- Gilmour, D.A. and Fisher, R.J. 1991. *Villagers, Forests and Foresters. The philosophy, process and practice of community forestry in Nepal*. Sahayogi Press, Tripureshwar, Kathmandu.
- Rauch, T. et al. 1993. *Regional Rural Development. RRD Update. Elements of a Strategy for Implementing the RRD Concept in a Changed Operational Context*. BMZ/GTZ, Eschborn.