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## Sharing experiences of participation in Latin America: a workshop report

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### • Introduction

The first regional meeting on participatory development to be held in Latin America took place in Mexico, in August 1995<sup>1</sup>. For the first time, over 100 practitioners met to exchange experiences and discuss future strategies. Most countries in Latin America were represented and the meeting revealed for the first time the full extent of the spread of participatory methodologies in the region.

The aim of the meeting was to identify common problems, issues and interests, foster greater co-ordination between the different institutions and set up a regional network for furthering the spread of participatory methodologies.

### • Issues discussed

Three main issues were discussed:

- Historical and political aspects
- The new professionalism
- Scaling up from micro to macro

#### Historical and political aspects

The variety of participatory approaches discussed at the meeting reflected the long history of participation in Latin America. An eminently political dimension characterises the

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<sup>1</sup> The 'First Latin American meeting for sharing experiences on participatory appraisal and community planning' was sponsored by the *World Resources Institute*, *Grupo de Estudios Ambientales* (a Mexican NGO), and *Centro de Estudios Sociales de la Realidad Economica y Social* as part of the *Forest Trees and People* programme of *FAO-Bolivia*.

meaning of popular participation there with the work of Paulo Freire (popular education) and Orlando Fals Borda (participatory action research) being very important. The influence of PRA is much more recent.

Discussions were had about the wave of democratisation that is occurring in the region and which is encouraging the institutionalisation of participation. For example, in Bolivia there is a Law of Popular Participation that encourages the use of participatory methodologies in development and because of this grassroots actions are supported, with NGOs playing a vital role.

This example was received with mixed feelings. Most participants believed that use of participatory methodologies will itself greatly strengthen the process of democratisation. The only concern was how to make the most of the opportunities and institutional spaces that were being opened.

Others argued that the institutionalisation of participation has led to a process of vulgarisation in which it has been co-opted. This was seen to have diluted the political basis of the original philosophy of participation into a 'basket of tools' to be used *ad hoc* within existing frameworks. Thus, 'conscientisation', a heavily loaded term, was seen to have given way to 'participation'. For this reason it was suggested that remembering the history of participation in Latin America may counteract its dilution.

#### The new professionalism

Participants agreed that the concepts of a 'new professionalism' and 'conscientisation' both advocate the need for role-reversal and a change

in the way development is perceived. They require a 'bottom-up' understanding of development, a strong personal conviction of what participation means and an ability to 'hand over the stick', allowing the 'researched' to take the lead.

The difficulties of working according to these principles in Latin America were highlighted by those practitioners who had to deal with power dynamics and social exclusion on a regular basis. As participatory projects inevitably cast light upon all sorts of exclusions and injustice the problem was seen to lay in the practitioners' inability to harmonise social groups and manage inequalities often exacerbated by opposing political allegiances or different religious/ethnic identities within communities.

### Scaling-up from micro to macro

The main concern shared by all was how to ensure participation throughout the project cycle. In connection with this the role of NGOs at the micro and macro levels was questioned. Although most NGOs in Latin America have played an important part in denouncing social injustice and public inefficiency they have often failed to go beyond denunciation, into long-term policy-making at government and international levels. Greater coordination, therefore, was not only advocated between all NGOs in Latin America, but also between NGOs, government agencies, and international organisations.

It was recognised that in order to take the opportunities offered in the drive to institutionalise participation, a series of short, medium, and long-term actions have to be identified. Most importantly, it was hoped that with democratisation a consensus between micro and macro level interests will be possible.

### • Networking in Latin America

The issue of sharing experiences and findings was fundamental to the meeting. It was recognised that unless sharing occurs the full potential of participatory development will never be realised.

Networking on the Internet and using e-mail was suggested despite the drawback that most of the smaller organisations, and the people for

whose benefit all this is, will be excluded. For example, in Bolivia and in Mexico there are already such networks with a number of databases being shared amongst users. The next step there would be to open a discussion group on the Internet. Translation to and from English would also enable communication with networks existing elsewhere.

### • Conclusions

Latin American networking was greatly encouraged by this first meeting. Although, as expected, no consensus was reached, all participants agreed that the essence of participation, irrespective of the methodology employed, was to allow people to be the subjects, and not the objects of development. It was also agreed that the role of participatory development in Latin America has to be strengthened so as to support the process of democratisation.

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