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Developing participation

by Anil C Shah

with a response from Kudakwashe Murwira

• **Introduction**

Participatory approaches can be put to many uses: to appraise a situation, to gather facts and perceptions, for planning and for monitoring and evaluation. As a development practitioner I have been concerned with negotiating terms of collaboration with village communities, establishing the common ground between the agenda of a local community and that of a development agency.

Early development programmes claiming the use of 'participatory approaches' often had a fixed agenda and pre-determined targets. The development agencies desired that 'beneficiaries' participated in their programmes and appreciated the agency's efforts. Generally, these one-sided approaches have failed. Development agencies have had to evolve to understand the diversity in and within communities. This requires consensus building between the development agency and the community.

I have been employing participatory approaches and technique for the last decade, to learn about local communities' perceptions and knowledge about issues, to understand their priorities and to find a meeting ground to negotiate terms of collaboration. This is only possible if the development agency is flexible, not in its basic objectives which may be non-negotiable, but in its systems and procedures. It should not be under pressure of time-bound targets. The following experience will illustrate and

substantiate the application of participatory approaches in furthering development programmes.

• **Check dams for ground water recharge**

In 1993, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme India, AKRSP(I), faced a problem about farmers' readiness to participate in, and contribute to, AKRSP's check dam scheme. The water table in the wells was going down. The solution that was demanded by farmers was the construction of rain water harvesting structures, such as check dams, that would recharge the wells. This objective was supported by AKRSP.

However, the government had previously constructed such structures for free. Under the AKRSP scheme, the farmers had to contribute themselves and there was uncertainty about which farmers would benefit and by how much. AKRSP field staff complained that they spent too much time trying to persuade farmers to contribute to the scheme.

In response, AKRSP set out to conduct a participatory learning exercise in Chandavana village to develop a method of dialogue and negotiation that would bring the AKRSP and the farmers closer together. The intended outcome was to:

- understand the importance of well irrigation on the economy of the village and the impact of falling ground water levels on agriculture;
- to examine farmers' views about the links between check dams and water tables;

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- to work with farmers to assess the performance of check dams constructed previously and examine how the quality of new structures could be improved.

Water resources: location and history

The first exercise was to gather a common picture of the water resources of the village. The villagers were able to quickly draw a map indicating the flow of water in the village and the location of wells. This included the location of existing check dams on the streams.

The second exercise was to bring out the knowledge of the farmers about the history of well development in the village. Table 1 indicates the number of wells constructed, the depth where water was found, the cost of sinking a well and the certainty of striking water over a 40 year time period. The table shows the rapid increase in the number of wells constructed from a mere 7 in 1950 to 400 in 1990. Over the same time period, the water level has fallen from about 30 feet to more than 100 feet and the cost of irrigation wells has risen significantly. On the other hand the certainty of striking water, which was almost 100% till 1970, has decreased to 50%. This means that even after investing in a well, there is an equal chance that water may not be found and the money is wasted.

Ground water scenario

The time series analysis revealed the need for ground water to be recharged through the construction of check dams. However, there were already 4 check dams in the area. These had been constructed by government agencies and only one of them served the purpose of storing water and contributing to groundwater recharge. The remaining 3 were poorly constructed and water flowed through the foundation and even through the walls. The farmers wanted these check dams, which were on good sites, to be reconstructed. Regarding new check dams, the farmers wanted these to be constructed by AKRSP as they had already constructed several check dams of good quality in the area. After long discussion, however, the farmers agreed that they had the *real* long term stake in ensuring quality in the construction of check dams. That took us to the next exercise.

What makes for good quality in construction? The farmers discussed and noted on a chart the following essential features of a good quality check dam:

- Storing of water without seepage;
- Sturdy construction which should last at least 25 years;
- Arrangements for de-silting and repairs; and,
- Prohibition of pumping of stored water.

Table 1. Time series on analysis of the experiences in Chandavana village, Junagadh District, Gujarat, India

Year	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990
Number of wells	7	100	150	200	400
Depth of well where water will be available	30'	30'	45'	100'	150'
Expenditure per well (Rupees)	3000	5000	10000	12000	1,30,000 (including submersible pump)
Certainty of striking water	100%	100%	100%	80%	50%

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The last phase of discussion, after these exercises were conducted, established a consensus. AKRSP and the farmers agreed that even though AKRSP had technical staff, unless the farmers were involved in ensuring quality during construction, the structures may not be as good as the farmers desired. It was then agreed that the farmers could select members among themselves who would constitute a construction committee. AKRSP would train them in the technical aspects of construction, thereby ensuring quality construction. The farmers also agreed that they would raise funds and contribute to the construction to convince AKRSP of their commitment to the project. The fund would be available to the farmers for meeting the repairs required after the check dam was completed.

Since this first experience, AKRSP is following this participatory approach in other areas. It has helped to conduct dialogues and arrive at negotiated agreement about farmers' participation in and contribution to the construction of other check dams. The number of check dams constructed over recent years has increased, from seven in 1993 when this exercise was developed, to 13 in 1994, 16 in 1995 and 40 in 1996. According to the feedback I have got, the success rate of the exercise is high. An indicator of success is that there is hardly any need for such exercises now. Village communities approach AKRSP with proposals for check dams, with readiness to participate, in terms of their responsibility and contribution.

From top down to developing participation

What has this exercise achieved? Certainly not true empowerment where villagers decide and prioritise development proposals with minimal external support and facilitation. Only a few development programmes are sufficiently flexible to accommodate local priorities and extend unrestricted financial support to them. Many development agencies may not even be equipped to handle the diverse portfolio of projects that may arise when communities plan for themselves. Rural development programmes mostly have some focus, almost preconditions, for extending support. The challenge before a development agency is to work out the terms of

collaboration that give villagers a sense of project ownership and commitment.

This means that the village community is helped, step by step, through a sequence using their own experiences to reach a vision of development which has inspired the programme and motivated the development agency. As David Mosse points out in *'People's Knowledge In Project Planning'*¹ even 'participatory planning often conspires to produce consensus, concealing underlying differences of interest and motivation'. If participatory approaches are conducted mechanically, without sensitivity to local variations, there is a possibility that 'it may not be grounded socially in a coherent set of social ties and common interest, and PLA may revert to RRA.'

But what is suggested here is a process of bringing people's knowledge of the local situation to the surface and leading them to appreciate the movement from their short-term, individually-focused perspective to long-term community based goals and action. As Mosse would like, this may develop the 'villagers' own awareness, skills and confidence in problem analysis, and planning.' Such participatory approaches would take an agency far from the usual agency-planned targets, in which people are coaxed or lured to participate with very unsatisfactory results in terms of post project care, management and impact.

Literature on participation highlights the discovery of the hidden capacities of villagers to map, make diagrams, score and rank. While a development practitioner is interested in discovering villagers' talents and creating a relaxed rapport that increases the quality of information, participation should not be an abstract concept. Participation should help negotiate a match between the community's agenda and that of a development agency. The experience described here is about developing participation which is based on the following premises:

- that a development agency has developed a programme, usually after studies and

¹ ODI Agricultural Research and Extension Network Paper No. 58, July 1995

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experiments, which it considers to be good for an area or certain groups;

- that the local community would largely be in agreement with the goals of the programme;
- that there is need to help the local community/groups to analyse their problems and past experiences and work out the implications of various options for resolution; and,
- that an agreement is reached with the development agency about the adoption of the programme and modalities of collaboration.

This may not be full empowerment, but is an improvement on a top down approach, which requires that local community/groups to 'take it or leave it'. 'Developmental' participation is hopefully a long stride along the way to community-led development.

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Developing participation: a response from Kudakwashe Murwira

Anil C. Shah makes a lot of valid points in terms of what is needed to enhance participation. Anil points out the need for flexibility by development agencies in terms of systems, procedures and time bound targets. I would also like to add that development agencies should also be flexible in their roles and it is this point that I address below.

Development agencies usually take the lead in selecting communities which are underprivileged, disadvantaged and poor. Thus whatever alternatives have been found to work in this community are assumed to be appropriate for other communities. In terms of projects, development agencies usually select projects based on their values and competencies. Communities are rarely provided with opportunities for deciding what sort of projects they would like to initiate. Instead development agencies expect communities to participate in their own agenda.

For me, the only process of participation which leads to empowerment begins with the development agent analysing the local community situation and building an understanding of the interactions between existing local institutions and other service providing institutions. Strengths and weaknesses of these institutions in performing their roles and responsibilities should also be analysed. Community values of wealth should also be established and assessed against individual households in the community. This information should inform the development agent of the distribution of wealth in a community and can be used to target the priority needs of the community.

Once the needs of the community have been identified, then these needs should be brought to a forum where various institutions, and both men and women, are represented. The development agency should assume the role of a facilitator in this forum. The communities should be provided with the opportunity to make informed decisions and prioritise their needs.

Once the community has identified its needs, the facilitator should be able to assist the community in reflecting on their traditional and current practices in addressing these priority needs. This reflection process helps to instil confidence in the community in their own knowledge and skills, and enables them to explore new solutions. In the process of developing solutions, ideas should flow from both the community and the development agency, but in the end, it should be the community making the decisions. However, the community is not homogenous and there is a real need to ensure the involvement of all sectors of the community at every stage of the process.

The major strength of this process is that the development agency is only a facilitator. The agency facilitates a process of:

- building the capacity of the community to identify their own problems, to search for solutions and to manage technical change;
- building the community's confidence in their own knowledge and skills;
- enabling the community to identify their own weaknesses and find ways of

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strengthening their ability to overcome these weaknesses; and,

- providing technical options which the community can evaluate for their appropriateness (affordability, acceptability and availability).

both sides to see the vision translated into reality.

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There is a danger that if the development agency takes the role of an 'expert', then the community depends too greatly on the agency and expects it to provide solutions. There is a need to balance how much a development agency can share with communities without restricting their ability to cast their eyes much wider in search of solutions or reflect on how much they can improve upon what they have learned.

Elements which contribute to the success of this process include:

- the ability of the NGO/development agency to make its vision of the community into a shared vision with that community;
- the ability of the agency to win trust of the community over a short period of time;
- the ability of the agency to adapt itself to work with the priorities of the community;
- the use of PRA tools which are relevant to community specific situations;
- the ability of the agency to lead from behind; and,
- the attitudes and behaviour of agency staff.

Many communities are not willing to participate in programmes initiated by development agencies because of the ways these agencies present themselves to communities. It is important that agencies start the process by learning from the community before they can share their experiences. Learning, listening and sharing help to improve the relationship between communities and agents of change by building mutual trust and confidence.

Nobody has learnt to drive by watching from a passenger's seat. If communities are to take charge of their own development, a process has to be put in place to ensure their full participation. They have to own and control the process through practice. However, this is not an easy process. It requires time, transparency, flexibility, dialogue, reflection into the past, patience, shared vision and total commitment on