

8

**Snapshots from
‘Deepening our Understanding and Practice: a conference
on participatory development and beyond’...
August 25-27, 1999, Ottawa, Canada**

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Snyman**

• **Introduction**

Over 425 participants from 48 countries converged on Ottawa, Canada to deepen their understanding and practice of participatory development. The conference, organised and hosted by the Participatory Development (PD) Forum, brought together a diversity of actors: popular educators, grassroots activists, development professionals, donors, academics and youth from the North and the South. This three day international conference was meant to inspire critical reflections on the successes and failures of participatory development, as well as share experiences and skills for advancing the practice of participatory development.

The conference revolved around three themes: the Past, the Present and the Future.

- *The Past:* Revisiting the radical roots of participatory action to remind ourselves why we choose to use participatory approaches. For example, what has been the contribution of adult education, participatory research, feminist research and indigenous knowledge to the field of participation? How has past experience shaped the present state of participatory development?
- *The Present:* Critically assessing how far participatory concepts and practice have

fallen short of expectations. For example, what is the link between participation, poverty alleviation, empowerment and equity? What are the key links between gender and participation and how effectively has social analysis been integrated into participatory approaches? What innovative approaches, tools or techniques have been tried and what have been the results? What are the current and potential limitations facing organisations seeking to institutionalise participation in their organisation.

- *The Future:* What is beyond participatory development? How can we assess the new dynamics of a globalising world and the opportunities and constraints for people’s increased participation? What might the next generation of practice and scholarship of Participatory Development look like? How can future programmes, projects and initiatives reflect these changes? What lies beyond Action Research, PRA and PLA methodologies? How can development professionals and organisations be agents of true social change attempting to create the necessary conditions for people to achieve a better way of life using their resources in the context of their own social values?

These and other questions were explored through a variety of channels: keynote presentations in the mornings, 35 paper panels, 35 capacity-building workshops, 30 roundtable discussions, and popular theatre. In all, over 120 of the conference participants were

presenters and facilitators, sharing their experiences with other conference participants. In a plenary session on the future of participatory development, participants presented virtual slides of Participatory Development for the year 2020. Some of these virtual slides included:

- ‘A Northern context where civil servants are doing their jobs and serving the poor’;
- ‘People from the rich North no longer put themselves in the place of saving the world. Being facilitators and helping others is replaced with the notion that everyone is a facilitator and everyone has something to contribute to what we people need to survive’;
- ‘My rural people solving their own problems without outsiders’;
- ‘See political discourse and reports filled with more dance, poetry and music and less words’;
- ‘Thousands and thousands of facilitators from global South teaching Northerners how to build communities and communicate with one another’;
- ‘Corporations and government taking enthusiasm, ideas and notions and starting to walk the talk and not simply talking the talk’; and,
- ‘Blank slide representing space to use the best resources that we have which is perhaps within us’.

Conference participants also discussed in small groups the question: ‘What Would I do Differently?’ and shared their answers in plenary. Some of the many responses included the following:

- Get away from pre-set agendas
- Acknowledge differences
- Revisit and review the value of participation
- Do not try to define the problem for them - it must be their initiative
- Need to get NGOs, Government and Beneficiaries working together;
- Openness to view ideas and change rooted in accountability and ethics;
- Listening with commitment and engagement balanced with leadership and passion;
- Level power structure;

- Understand and respect local decision-making;
- Disempower yourself;
- Improve worldwide social movements; and,
- Factor in the possibility of failure.

Highlights of various keynote presentations include the following:

- ‘Maintaining our sense of outrage over continued social injustices and how to have the freedom to act outrageously’ (Ted Jackson);
- ‘In order to be successful agents of change in the present and future, we need to learn how to really listen to each other’ (Budd Hall);
- ‘Participation and not having enough time. Have you ever read a tombstone that said: “I had enough time”’ (Patricia Maguire);
- ‘Today the only constant is change. Despite a return to our traditional roles, ruling elites afford participation to only a few and on value-laden bases’ (Madeline Dion Stout);
- ‘Participation must be seen as a dynamic process where initiatives are taken by the local population, guided by its own experience and using the means and resources (institutional and mechanisms) over which it can exercise effective control’ (Bara Gueye);
- ‘In the next 10 or 20 years, there is a potential for a higher increment to well-being by improving gender relations rather than through economic development and, if this is the case, it raises major questions about what we do as development professionals’ (Robert Chambers);
- ‘Our belief system is based too much on problems’. We need to look at people’s strengths, opportunities and what works and build from there - the basis of Appreciative Inquiry. (Malcolm Odell);
- ‘There is a need for two interlinking core elements in participatory development practitioners: doubt and critical reflection.’ (Irene Guijit); and,
- ‘How do we advance unless we face what stares back at our collective selves in the mirror, unless we look with courage and honesty at what we have accomplished, and most important of all, WHY we

haven't accomplished what was promised' (Pablo Leal).

Various initiatives emanating from the conference include a potential network of Participatory Development practitioners from Africa; a conference in Asia in the year 2001, a special edition of the Canadian Journal of Development Studies dedicated to participatory development, and a handbook of various workshops facilitated at the conference.

In their evaluation of the conference, participants noted some of the following highlights:

- 'I've realised that we are not alone in our work.
- The conference 'confirmed the global dimension of participatory development';
- 'I was able to meet others working in similar situations and learn';
- 'I learned a lot more about the way I should start thinking about participatory development, and have learned some hands-on techniques';
- 'Careful about creating a bandwagon--the issues are complex to resolve';
- 'Participation is not an end in itself';
- 'The search for a breakthrough of what works continues'; and,
- 'We have begun a dialogue that should/must continue'.

With regards to organising another conference, participants had many ideas for improvement of proceedings, such as, for example, replacing keynote presentations with popular theatre, encouraging more participation from community leaders, making a childcare nursery available on-site for mothers and fathers, having fewer sessions, and a larger auditorium. As one participant noted, the main auditorium did have 'the crowded Indian bus feeling'. Some others would have liked more opportunities for critical thought to discuss issues of 'power, globalisation and transnationals as it relates to participatory practice' or to simply critique where we are and where we are going.

For the closing plenary, participants took part in an experiential exercise which aimed to reinforce the idea that changes we may initiate

or facilitate, in our communities, organisations and institutions, will have an impact on the systems within which we live and work (see the training tip by Shaw and Patterson to follow).

The conference closed with the following quote from Margaret Mead: '*Never doubt that a small group of people can make a difference, in fact it is the only thing that ever does*'.

Any net revenues generated by the PD Conference will be placed in a PD Trust Fund that will support and encourage participatory initiatives in Canada and internationally.

NOTES

Conference review compiled by Françoise Coupal et al. Email: coupal@mosaic-net-intl.ca

Readers interested in downloading copies of papers, abstracts or keynote speeches can consult the PD Forum web site at <http://www.web.net/pdforum>. Please consult periodically for updates to the web site.

• Training tip from the PD conference

Organisers of the conference were looking for an exercise that would close the conference on a positive note, one that would demonstrate to participants that they do have an impact in the systems and organisations in which they live and work, no matter how small the initiated change might be. We chose to use an exercise that has been developed in the corporate world and that illustrates the impact of change within systems. Participants were asked to form a large circle and then to silently select any 2 individuals within the circle, not letting those individuals know in any way that they had been chosen. To begin the exercise, everyone was asked to form an equal sided triangle with their two chosen persons, where they were one point on that triangle, and their two chosen individuals were the other two points. The size and placement of the triangles constantly changed, since there was little chance that participants had chosen the same individuals from the group of approximately 150.

The activity continued for several minutes, and when it was stopped, participants were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- what happened within the 'system' (the larger group)?
- what did you notice?
- how might this relate to our work as practitioners of participatory development?

For many, it was an excellent visual representation of the impact that any movement they made had on the larger group or 'system'. Only a small step in any direction would cause the entire group to shift and reorganise. This exercise has been used with groups ranging in size from 15 to 350! It is fun and energising, with a lot of movement and attention required to maintain any chosen triangle.

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- **Walking the talk: reflections and directions**

On the second day of the conference, organisers scheduled a plenary session called *Reflections and Directions*. We wanted to create a session that would be somewhat experimental in nature, would create an opportunity to harvest some of the experience and knowledge in the room and would encourage participants to think of future directions for participatory practice.

The plenary group was asked to form breakout groups of no more than 6 people and to spend some time reflecting on the following question: 'What would you do differently in your participatory practice?'. The programme committee of the conference organisers had discussed this question at length. It was deliberately ambiguous, in the hope that it would encourage discussion from a wide range of perspectives and experience. We hoped that policy makers, students, academics and practitioners, from both North and South, would find the space within the context of that question to express their views. After one hour, the groups of 6 were asked to join together in groups of 18, and to share the

results of their discussion. Each group of 18 was asked to nominate one person who would represent this larger group's views at a workshop the following morning, where feedback for the closing plenary would be prepared.

Friday morning's session began with approximately 20 representatives from the afternoon breakout groups. The objectives of the workshop were established: to prepare a creative presentation of the output of the previous afternoon for the closing plenary of the conference. Participants debated among themselves whether a presentation that used a metaphor (a skit/ group sculpture/ etc.) would adequately represent the richness of the data produced, while recognising that it was logistically impossible to present back to the plenary the full output of the previous day's work.

The plenary session, where the output was reported, was chaired by one of the workshop participants. Each participant took a minute or so to talk about the feedback from the breakout sessions, and to give some impressions of the process used during the morning. These were tough sessions to facilitate. Many people had difficulty understanding the process. Evaluations of the session attributed their frustration with the task to our lack of specific direction and their lack of commitment to the process. Were our expectations too high? Were the numbers too great to enable meaningful participation in the short time available? In the end, we feel that it was a very informative and useful learning situation, both in terms of the output produced, and the process used. Would we try it again? Absolutely. It was an opportunity for both the facilitators, and the conference participants, to enter the 'learning zone' and to experience the confusion and uncertainty that many of the participants in our participatory programmes and projects know all too well.

Full transcription of the conference proceedings and output from the breakout session can be found on the PD Forum web site (<http://www.web.net/pdforum>).

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Please note that the authors welcome any comments and feedback you may have on this report.

• **Feedback from some conference participants**

We have saved this final section to include some points and comments from some participants who attended the workshop, and who would like to share these with the Readership of the *PLA Notes*. We start this section with some comments from Tag Elkhazin from the Subsahara Centre for Consultancy, Canada, in which interesting points concerning development and South/North dynamics are raised.

- *It became evident to me that the North has realised the failure of its 30 years approach to development in the South. Not only that, but something needs to be done immediately, and something different.*
- *It also became clear to me that the South is now so well enlightened that they would have their say one way or the other. An example of this was in a circle meeting under a tree, on the last day of the Forum. Over 20 African practitioners in the Participatory field decided to form an African network. The number has since grown. The ideas and energy so far generated are admirable. South Africa is coordinating the network. We intend to have the founding conference next June 2000.*
- *In spite of the representation from 40 odd countries, it was not enough. This is a forum that should have had stronger southern representation.*
- *There was a priceless wealth of knowledge assembled for the 3 days.*

- **Tag A. Elkhazin**, Subsahara Centre for Consultancy, 1981 Montclair Ave, Gloucester, ON K1W 1H9, Canada. Tel: +1 613 834 7817; Fax: +1 613 834 4930; E-mail: subsaharagroup@home.com

Maritha Snyman of the University of Pretoria talks about the conference, which, by bringing people together, has led to opportunities that could be fundamentally important in the development of the African continent.

As a South African, the most enriching personal experience of the conference was the way in which I was embraced and accepted by the African delegates, as well as the realisation that although Africa is a big and diverse continent, there are many problems that we share. Almost from the first day of the conference, the African delegates formed a group in which their own problems and visions were discussed. This type of discussion resulted in a meeting of all the African delegates on the last day of the conference with the purpose to establish a Participatory Development Forum for Africa. It is envisaged that within this forum, specific development needs pertaining to Africa could be discussed. The very positive and enthusiastic spirit of this meeting might perhaps be a small step on the road towards the African Renaissance.

- **Professor Maritha Snyman**, University of Pretoria, Department of Information Science, University of Pretoria, Republic of South Africa. Email: mesnyman@postino.up.ac.za

Next, Robert Verbruggen of Medecins Sans Frontières, Belgium, states that a strength of participation is that it has relevance across many sectors, regions and different situations. He states that interesting learnings can be drawn by uniting such experiences, through fora such as the PD conference, from both the North and the South.

On the conference

This Conference was without any doubt the most enriching and inspiring experience I have enjoyed since I temporarily left fieldwork for a study-break. What a relief from the dismal careerism and 'technical fix' thinking we are often exposed to, both within agencies and academia! The most encouraging aspect for me was the conscious celebration of 'equality in diversity' across disciplines, backgrounds, hierarchies, continents, gender and ages. I consider this an important test for the movement's capacity to effectively foster a new

type of mutual learning relationship based on respect, away from the usual domination of power, money and hierarchy.

On the political relevance of Participatory Development

This was the one worry I had upon leaving Ottawa: how will we handle the evident political dimension of PD across individuals and organisations as diverse as a religious NGO and the Zapatista movement? I had the feeling that the political message, though very present in the keynote speeches, was 'covered with the blanket of love' in a lot of the sessions and group discussions - and did cause tensions indeed where it wasn't. I am afraid to see the network fall apart before it can get strong enough to represent a real counter-power. Yet I remain optimistic because the movement for participation has:

- 'history' on its side - reading as a gradual process of emancipation of people from power;- and,
- a major strategic strength in that it is profoundly non-confrontational - which I believe is the only way to hollow out the current dominant world order - from within.

- **Robert Verbruggen**, Medecins Sans Frontières, Forelstraat 34, Gent 9000, Belgium. E-mail: rverbru@mailhost.tcs.tulane.edu

Next, Shyam K. Bhurtel of The Association of District Development Committees of Nepal (ADDC/N) says that the conference experience showed a strong degree of unity with other colleagues working in different contexts and regions, sharing similar issues around participation.

On a personal level, the interaction reinforced my own conviction on what I am doing in the area of decentralised local governance and development in Nepal. It was also interesting to find so many colleagues from different parts of the world, sharing the same dilemma and collectively trying to develop a vision and mission, or in a way trying to reinvent themselves. Many debates revolved around the North and South, but what matters the most to

make them meet each other is critical and appreciative inquiry.

- **Shyam K. Bhurtel**, Executive Secretary General, Association of District Development Committees of Nepal (ADDC/N), Home email: sr@bhur.wlink.com.np.

Carlton Sulwe of Care International in Zambia raises the question of ethics and good practice in participatory development and reinforces the importance of critically assessing why participatory approaches are being adopted and to constantly be aware of the consequences of participatory development at all levels.

The PD conference came at the right time as we approach the new millennium. As the themes focused on the past, present and future, it was a moment to reflect, learn and share our experiences and current development.

- **The Present:** *there is need to practice our practice ethically as the danger of abusing participatory development processes is eminent especially when everyone is becoming an 'expert'. This may be due to popularity of PD approaches and the 'interest' shown by donors in them. The questions that we need to constantly ask ourselves include: participation for whom?; Why participatory approaches?; and what do we need to achieve that cannot be achieved in any other way? What are the unintended consequences of empowerment? If we are empowering the community, who are we disempowering and how are we doing it?*
- **The Future:** *there is need for Universities and other PD NGOs/institutions to network closely and not perceive each other as rivalry ('Toxic universities'). There is also need to have sustainable institutions if participatory approaches are to be sustained, institutionalised and internalised.*

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If you have any feedback to any of the issues raised in the above commentaries or indeed, attended the conference yourself and would like the opportunity to raise some other issues in the debate around Participatory Development and future directions, please forward them to the Editorial Team at IIED. We look forward to hearing from you.