

2

‘Trading places, trading ideas’: Review of the second ‘Dare-to-Share Fair’ on participatory development

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● Introduction

The formal atmosphere of the foyer and conference hall at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, home to the Netherlands Development Agency DGIS, found itself transformed. Based in The Hague, The Netherlands, on an average day the ministry building, would have people quietly cruising through, but on the 13th and 14th October 1999, it contained a noisy, bustling and at times, quite festive, market place. The subject of the event was sharing experiences around participatory approaches to development and learning from the field how to assist people in their development in such a way that they actually own the process. The catch phrase of the event was ‘Dare To Share’.

A brief history of the fair

Trade fairs and markets all over the world attract people from near and far as buyers and sellers of goods. But fairs have also been good media for information exchange and innovation. In the field of participatory development, the time seemed right to stimulate an exchange of ‘approaches that work’ among many people. If held close to the donor organisations, a fair-like set-up could enhance a trickle-up effect towards policy making circles within governments and large NGOs, thus having an advocacy role for participatory approaches to development. So in 1994, the idea to hold a fair that would ‘showcase’ participatory development was born at an informal meeting of European practitioners and researchers working in this field. This event was named ‘The Dare to

Share Fair of Participatory Development Approaches’. It was decided that Fairs would be held in the ‘homes’ of European donors in different countries to state the case for participation.

The first Dare To Share Fair was held in 1995 in the German town of Eschborn, the home base of the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ). This event was described as a success. The second Fair would be organised in the building of another major donor, DGIS, the Dutch government’s development aid agency. It took some time to organise this, as the organisers explained: “*We needed to build support within DGIS. Eventually, we got commitment from key people in the various departments*”. DGIS and the Dutch development organisation SNV¹ funded the Fair and were actively involved in its organisation, together with the consultancy firms FMD and ETC Ecoculture. During almost eight months, a small core group consisting of representatives from all four organisations met regularly for the conceptual preparation and to take the main decisions.

FMD and ETC carried out the main organisational tasks, including the world-wide mobilisation of organisations and people working with participatory approaches, sending out invitations, selecting participants for possible sponsorship, dealing with the budget and administrative matters and all other practical and logistical aspects of organising such an event. For this they prepared an extensive scenario, which may be useful for those involved in organising such events in the future. During the last months in the run up to

¹ A government funded organisation with an independent policy-making board.

the Fair, support was provided by a group of designers who helped create posters and draw the market layout. They put much emphasis on developing an attractive, stimulating and lively environment, where visitors would be directed by clear signposts, ensuring that no participating organisation would end up in a hidden corner. The area of the market within the ministry was compact, with some additional common space for a café, where people could meet, rest and discuss any issues which had been stimulated by the organisations exhibiting their work. The main aim was that the Fair should be wholly interactive, affording participants and visitors the maximum opportunity to engage in a broad variety of exchanges with participating organisations and representatives from across the world.

The objectives of the 1999 Fair were by and large the same as those in 1995:

- to present ways of formulating and implementing development programmes that use participatory and interactive approaches, with a special focus on experiences from Dutch-funded development programmes in this case;
- to demonstrate the effectiveness of these approaches and take away some prejudices that still exist towards participatory methods;

- to enable the various groups present at the Fair to exchange their methods and ideas; and,
- to identify and analyse future challenges as regards further developing and implementing these approaches.

A market of ideas

There were representatives of 43 organisations from approximately 25 countries in four continents; action researchers, popular educators, project directors, grassroots activists and consultants. There were stands, graphs, charts, photo-exhibitions, maps drawn by local people and products from the areas represented. A variety of presentation media, including papers, flyers, slide-shows, books, games and CD-ROMS etc., were used to deliver a message; the message being simply that 'development, whatever that may mean, shall be done in cooperation with the people who are the intended beneficiaries - or it shall not be done'. Away from the market place, in some quieter corners, there were videos, workshops and an Open Space, where anyone who felt compelled to do so could raise and discuss a subject. Jargon filled the halls and rooms: Participatory Action Research, Process Approach, Mesas de Concertación, Rapid Appraisal of Knowledge Systems, Groupe de Recherche et d'Appui pour l'Autopromotion Paysanne, Farmer's Field School etc..

Figure 1. Presenting participatory work and information at the 'Dare-to-Share Fair'
[Photo: L. Greenwood]

It provoked Pauline Ikumi of NETWAS Kenya into saying:

"I hear all this different terminology. But I think we're all talking about the same thing".

And talk they did. As always, the interactive method most frequently used was 'The Conversation'. Policy makers from the North talked with practitioners from the South, activists made contact across the continents, researchers exchanged views.

The end of the Fair consisted of a different type of activity: 'The Auction'. All visitors were invited to come to witness six presentations of different participatory development approaches and then judge them by piling on bids, auction-style. Coloured cards representing Dutch money were used for that purpose. The audience, consisting of a heady mix of development bureaucrats, international students, organisers and participants, was also asked to synthesise the six approaches into one new participatory approach. But time had started to run out and the technical services department of the Ministry, which had been instrumental in the smooth running of the event wanted the venue cleared and swept. Around 100 representatives at the stands had been able to present their case to a total of some 400 visitors.

● **Scale matters**

A wealth of experience, a wealth of variety in local organisations, and mostly shared visions and objectives were on display in The Hague. But they remain local and relatively small. There seem to be few concrete success stories of community-based development, management that has been scaled up, and even less documentation around participatory processes that were started locally and have been successfully scaled up. There is a gap to be filled because scale clearly matters. Several examples of the possibilities in this area were presented at the fair and follow in the next section.

1. Large-scale in-country focus

In Sri Lanka, the massive Mahaweli Programme is the single largest integrated

rural development programme in the country, run by the government and supported by several foreign donors. It revolves around a huge irrigation scheme. Landless peasant families were resettled into the area and at the household level, the implementation is making use of participatory methods, LEISA² agriculture and local community organisation. The results appear to be encouraging.

2. Regional focus

This is what organisations such as ALFORJA, the Central American public education organisation, have been doing, each in their own regions. Alforja has a mission: to build a political culture that changes power relationships. Alforja's community worker, Emma Hilario from Costa Rica, explains: "*We work with people's organisations, trade unions, government workers, teachers and local authorities. Citizen's participation in shaping their own environment is not only a civil duty - it is in fact a civil right. Civil organisations are trying to break through the traditional ways of doing things*". Sometimes it works: ALFORJA (the name refers to the small bag of utensils and other necessities people take with them when they go and work in their fields) has managed to ensure that women can own land in Costa Rica.

3. Repetition and/or replication.

This is especially useful in terms of applicable research, like biotechnology research from Zimbabwe, Kenya, India and elsewhere. UPWARD³ is a regional Asian organisation involved in locating and harnessing homegrown practices of crop improvement in tubers (root crops). Along similar lines, there is agro-research going on in much of Francophone Africa, assisted by the Free University in Amsterdam. Farmers Field Schools can be found all over Asia and have now been introduced in Zanzibar. Exchanges like this Fair facilitate the spread of useful ideas and may facilitate adapted replication. And, finally, development workers can of course tap into practices that have been around

² Low External Input and Sustainable Agriculture

³ Users' Perspective with Agricultural Research and Development – this organisation attempts to incorporate the perspectives of farmers, traders, food processors and consumers in its research agenda.

for a long time in a large geographical area. A Cameroonian consultancy firm did just that: it harnessed the age-old African revolving credit scheme called the 'tontine', which is especially popular among women, and turned it into a credit scheme for agriculture and hawking.

● Is the message getting through?

The Western model upon which the development models are based has been successfully exported to most parts of the world but underneath this perceived universal acceptance, many local, indigenous practices and beliefs remain. In the past, the under performance (some would call it failure) of development projects was, at least in part, blamed on the beneficiaries, who were hampering progress by stubbornly clinging to their old ways. That notion is slowly being abandoned; witness trends among donors towards attributing value to local culture and supporting decentralisation in many countries, shifting the focus away from the centres of administrative power, often inherited from colonial times. Some space has become available for the views of the intended beneficiaries, and for what they have already achieved prior to any 'developmental' intervention. As David Millar writes in his contribution to *Food for Thought, ancient visions and new experiments of rural people* (Compas, 1999), "*When we intervene...what we encounter is a 'best option scenario'... an endeavour [that] would continue with or without us*".

There appears to be growing support for participatory development among major donors who set aside part of their budgets for this kind of activity. Equally, some of the work that is done by the various organisations in the UN system (UNDP and UNICEF among others) appears to have a participatory agenda. International research institutes are supporting participatory development. Dutch minister for Development Co-operation, Eveline Herfkens, who opened the Fair, officially, noted that progress has also been made in terms of accepting participation in the world's leading donor agency, the World Bank.

"But," she added immediately, "*We are not there yet. There is still not an interactive*

dialogue at the bilateral or multilateral level". And on the role donors should play she said: "*We should hand over and retreat. We are not good at this. I'll admit: I'm not good at it. We really must stop knowing better*".

She advocated a fundamental and comprehensive change in donor mentality, including at DGIS itself. Among her concluding remarks was this one: "*I would be very happy if I could implement this in my own Ministry*". It will be interesting to see how the implementation will take shape at DGIS.

Still, blockades and barriers remain. Chris Rey of the Centre for Development Cooperation services at the Free University in Amsterdam thinks it has to do with peoples' mind-sets.

"It has partially to do with the educational background of people. Scientists feel superior to farmers. They have always gone out to teach and to train. What we do now is to train researchers how to discuss, eye to eye, with the farmers".

It is a problem that is echoed by ETC India's Ravi Prakash: "*Researchers feel they know all the problems and the solutions too, at the same time not recognising that farmers do know*".

FMD's experience in facilitating the setting up of a biodiversity research programme in the Philippines is also indicative: the people in the country set the research agenda and their Dutch counterparts can make contributions to this process. For some Dutch researchers from universities, this was the first experience with demand driven research. For them it was not always easy to accept that Filipinos knew very well what research needed to be done .

The same mental barriers exist in the policy-makers of the world's development bureaucracies. In spite of some very real commitment, some awkward questions must be asked: 'Who selects the regions and the countries where development will be done?' 'Where and by whom are the Terms of Reference for field trips written?'

Fairs like these do demonstrate that the belief, still widespread, that local groups have no capacity to participate in these highly complex decision-making processes is in urgent need of

a permanent resting place. NGOs also fall for their own mythologies. Sharmeen Murshid of the Bangladeshi consultancy firm Brotee puts pay to some of the pretenses doing the rounds there. *"We differ from NGOs in that their focus is on the poorest of the poor, the disadvantaged women. We do not kid ourselves. We will say that we will work with the literate group in a village so that in the process they will learn participatory work, together with their people. So the village will take responsibility of their poor. We don't pretend to be responsible for the poor"*.

So the question 'Is the message getting through?' can therefore be answered with a qualified 'Yes.' Paul Mincher of IIED (the International Institute for Environment and Development), says: *"Nobody at IIED is really satisfied at the moment. I think we must get our message out further, communicate better"*.

• A future fair - lessons learned

Pauline Ikumi said: *"I am learning from others. There are a lot of similarities and things I see here I will have to adapt to the local situation. But these exchanges really work"*. This bears testimony, if any were needed, to the interactive character of the Fair. To her and many of the Southern representatives, the added value of these two days had been that they had learnt from each other. In terms of the four objectives stated earlier, the ones concerning presentation and exchange were attained. Prejudice, which according to the second objective, was to be removed, is likely to persist and it is illusory to think that one event like this can take that away. This may be an identifiable future challenge, something the event was also supposed to have elicited as per the fourth objective.

The next Dare To Share Fair is planned for 2002 and ideally should build on the experience gained so far. Two observations were sent to the organisers after the Fair. *"There should have been more time to discuss major issues"*, read the first. *"Many workshops were mere presentations"*, was the second. A further remark concerned the amount of events on offer. *"Too many interactive events were going on in parallel"*.

Some workshops, fora or discussions were better attended than others and delegates missed events because they had to choose.

The organisers have, in the meantime, completed their own evaluations. Here are some more ideas that may be useful for the planners of a new Fair. First of all, they noted that having had the Fair at the ministry was a feat in itself. The excited atmosphere that had been hoped for in the big foyer indeed materialised. The stands looked good, the atmosphere was lively. The cooperation among the organisers was seen as positive and the fact that many visitors from outside the building could attend (especially the international students) meant that even more South-South exchanges were possible than previously envisaged.

Clearly, publicity was one of the main concerns during the evaluation. The number of ministerial visitors in attendance was slightly disappointing. One reason for this could have been the lack of adequate publicity. While small Dare To Share displays had been placed on all the tables in the large ministerial canteen, it was unclear what the Fair was about, as one ministry official observed. Putting up posters was restricted within the ministry building, making it less obvious that there was something special going on. The organisers concluded that it would perhaps have been better to hire professionals to do the publicity for them.

In sum, the second Dare to Share Fair was a qualified success: there was much enthusiasm among the direct participants and organisers, while the response from the intended visitors could probably have been better, given the right amount of publicity. The next Fair will hopefully demonstrate whether the results achieved on the ground have continued to trickle up to the level of the policy-makers.

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