

Review of the Francophone exchange meeting on participatory development in Francophone Africa

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Results and strategies for the future

compiled by Laura Greenwood

Participatory development in Francophone West Africa has been considerably developed and practised in the region during the last 10 years, primarily through the spread of the Méthode Active de Recherche et de Plannification Participatives (MARPP) methodology and associated network. During this time, a great many community based groups (CBOs), local and national NGOs, government agencies, research and academic organisations etc., have adopted participatory methodologies in their work. However, whilst there has been much spread in the adoption and dissemination of participatory methods in practice, there has been little development to support the exchange of information and experiences oriented towards good practice and learning between institutions and individuals involved in participatory development in Francophone Africa. This has resulted in a lack of analysis of participatory practice, duplication of effort and often, non-systematisation of good practice¹. In an attempt to address this situation and to facilitate networking and the exchange of information, a regional meeting was convened to provide Francophone practitioners the opportunity to meet and share their experiences around, and to discuss ways forward for, participatory development.

The Francophone Exchange was co-organised by IIED-Senegal – Programme du Sahel and La Fondation Rurale de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (FRAO) with financial support from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) – UK. This regional meeting was held on 25th-28th April 2000 in Dakar, Senegal and provided the opportunity for practitioners to reflect together on the experiences and results of participatory practice to date, drawing from their own varied experiences, and to identify strategies and challenges for participatory development in the future. One of its principle aims was to try to systematise methods, share innovation and enrich documentation around the use of participatory methods in the Francophone world.

The exchange brought together around 70 practitioners from primarily Francophone West African countries² including representatives from farmer organisations, community groups, NGOs, government and bi-lateral agencies such as the UN. The event itself was structured around plenary and working group sessions. There was also a Share-Fair running from the second day onwards, to enable delegates to present and exchange information about methods, work in practice, publications and

information services relating to participatory development in their specific contexts.

The objectives of the Exchange were:

- to identify the issues and challenges of participatory approaches in the context of Francophone Africa;
- to evaluate the experiences, strengths and weaknesses of participatory approaches in Francophone Africa; and,
- to develop mechanisms to establish a close and sustained collaboration between those Francophone institutions involved in participatory development.

The meeting was structured around the three themes: current practice in participatory development in Francophone Africa, strategies for the future and an exploration of the mechanisms required for better collaboration between institutions involved in participatory practice.

Current practice in participatory development in Francophone West Africa

Drawing on the ten years of experience of participation in the region, a wide range of varied case studies regarding current practice around participatory development in the region were presented. Through this, and the material presented at the Share-Fair, several critical issues were raised; such as, for example, how participatory methods be can scientifically validated. It was agreed that participatory methods have more strength when they are combined with other methods; that definitions of participation are very broad and experience based, and that organisations practising participatory approaches must also adopt them as part of their organisational structures and procedures.

Mechanisms for exchange between practitioners

Whilst there was considerable experience in the use of participatory methods at the meeting, it was acknowledged that there was a 'gap' in terms of supporting such good

¹ *Le Développement Participatif en Afrique Francophone: Bilan et Stratégies pour le Futur* – overview information about the workshop. FRAO/IIED 2000.

² Countries represented at the event included: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Togo and Tunisia.

practice. This was due to a lack of established mechanisms and structures for exchanging experiences between institutions and individuals which would enable them to draw from a wider range of experiences of participatory work in different contexts, countries and sectors.

In this context, academic/research organisations were discussed in some depth and one of the key roles identified for them was to act as intermediaries to facilitate information exchange, for and between practitioners in the region in order to support participatory practice. Over and above the role of research/academic organisations, roles were identified for practitioners at all levels in identifying ways for better inter-institutional learning and for establishing sustained collaboration in working practice between stakeholders in participatory practice. Issues such as translation and documentation in local languages, optimising the use of Information and Communications Technology, and institutionalisation of annual meetings for practitioners such as the Francophone Exchange, along with support for information activities in terms of funding, were emphasised as very important areas to develop. Suggested outputs included the following.

- Creation of a journal for participatory development in the Francophone world.
- Exchange visits between practitioners.
- Establishment of a database of practitioners and other information about participatory development.
- Establishment of links at organisational and national levels to develop a critical mass of support for participatory approaches.
- Creation of focal points (organisations) to support this process.
- Reinforcing networks and inter-network relationships.
- Better communication and better dissemination/publication.

Resources required to support the outputs suggested above were not discussed in depth in this forum – frankly, there wasn't the time. However, this is not a wish list, but rather a starting point; a basis from which to work and further develop ideas with the renewed commitment and enthusiasm from all the participants present. In addition, key roles have been identified for the conference organisers, FRAO and IIED-Senegal, to act as catalysts to support the development of these outputs in collaboration with other organisations in the future.

An interesting point to come out of the meeting was the acknowledgement of the practitioners as *consumers* rather than *producers* of information, along with a tacit agreement that quality information production must be encouraged and in addition, that documentation creation be supported at the grassroots level in particular. The flip side to this is, of course, ensuring that grassroots communities can also *access* information in an egalitarian way, but importantly, that there is information to access in the first place. The strength of participatory development is that it is established and developed through local

knowledge and working with local people/stakeholders, and thus, there must be mechanisms established to facilitate the sharing of information at this, and other, levels.

What are the strategies for the future of participatory development in Francophone Africa?

Obviously, the strategies for the future of participatory development is a very broad subject. However, in this meeting, four key points were raised. First, there has been a change of emphasis. Originally, participatory approaches developed on the periphery of development strategies, yet through their potential to truly involve and empower local people in their own development, they have been heralded as a successful strategy, and as such, have moved to the centre of development strategies. Second, there must be greater concentration on the impact of participatory approaches, particularly at the grassroots level and particularly in the long term. Whilst there is a huge amount of literature regarding the 'how to' in participation, there is less concerning the impact of it, and this is a key issue to discuss with regards to future strategies. Third, in this, the 'information age', new communication and information technologies offer many exciting opportunities for information exchange. However, Africa as a continent is lagging behind due to technical problems and access to hardware, reliable energy supplies etc., which in itself raises issues around the equality of access to information. New technology provides an extremely important communication channel to support participatory development and as such, must be integrated into the debate around participation. Fourth, the institutionalisation of participation is a key issue when discussing future strategies, in terms of comprehensive adoption and recognition of the methods and the development of a critical mass of support for them. It was acknowledged that a long-term vision is required. It is also important to think about how participatory approaches can change the structures of our organisations.

A key output from the Francophone Exchange was the construction of a statement of intent entitled '*La Declaration de Dakar*'. Key points from this mission statement are summarised in English below.

La Declaration de Dakar

Discussions during the course of the workshop as well as the materials on display at the *Share – Fair for Participatory Methods* prove that much progress has been made. At the same time, the participants recognised that certain challenges remain, the analysis of which have led to the formulation of a certain number of statements and recommendations to guide future work in the area of participatory development.

Regarding the development of national and transnational³ frameworks

The participants of the meeting stated that:

- Heterogeneity in situations from one country to another and the lack of linkages in communication between them creates remarkable regional distortions in terms of participatory development in Francophone Africa.
- These distortions justify the urgency of the development and the reinforcement of collaborative frameworks between institutions on both national and transnational levels, of which the aim is to engage in reflection, to support the development of new methodologies and to reinforce methodological convergence in the field of participatory development.

As a result of these statements, the participants made the following recommendations.

National frameworks of collaboration

- To identify and evaluate needs regarding institutional support and to reinforce organisational capacity necessary to start this process within three months. The findings will be submitted to IIED-Senegal and FRAO.
- To expand the limits of participation from the national framework level and to take into consideration exchange mechanisms including the grassroots level.

Transnational framework of collaboration.

- To create a transnational framework of inter-institutional collaboration.
- To give a mandate to IIED-Senegal and FRAO to finalise the conceptualisation of this framework and to steer its early development.
- To create working groups around central themes such as documenting the impact of participatory processes, extension of ICT⁴, the development of methodological innovations etc. FRAO and IIED will have the responsibility of defining the terms of reference, encouraging the participation of stakeholders and facilitating and identifying working group co-ordinators.

Regarding the impact of participatory approaches

The participants of the meeting at Dakar have recognised that, despite advances attained so far, the reinforcement of experience will depend largely on their capacity to document and to show the impact of participatory approaches in the improvement of the living conditions of local people. To this regard, it is recommended that a mechanism be established which will allow the identification and measurement of the impact of participatory approaches in the Francophone African context. To establish such a mechanism, the participants propose that the Sahel Programme of IIED should be the main co-ordinator of this activity. Therefore, IIED-Senegal is requested to engage with this activity as soon as possible and to involve organisations present (or not) at the meeting to develop terms of reference for a programme on the evaluation of the impact of participation in Francophone Africa.

Regarding the methodological 'starting point'

- Some decisive steps have been taken regarding the conception and the diffusion of participatory methods.
- It is necessary to validate individual and collective experiences which show areas of common strength and complementarity.

Through this workshop, there is a call to decompartmentalise institutions and to facilitate methodological renewal. It is suggested that FRAO and IIED could help the production of concepts with greater reference to current practice in participatory development. Proposals for such must be completed by the two institutions by the next meeting.

Regarding information and communication technology (ICT)

The essence of ICT is one of the major concerns of these last two decades. Radio, television, telecommunications (fixed and mobile), electronic networks, notably the internet, are no longer merely simple support structures or neutral technologies for the diffusion of information. They are not only transporters, but also producers, of information, and as such, play multiple roles.

- Liaison role (between individuals, groups and communities).
- Development role (of ideas, of culture and of causes).
- Advocacy role (becoming aware of and moulding public opinion).
- Organisational role (establishment of networks etc.).

These different functions make ICT not merely an important issue in the debate but also a key parameter in the exercise of all political, intellectual, cultural and economic power. Taking control of these powerful tools is required in order to promote participatory development. With this perspective, the workshop participants propose that FRAO, based on its experience, initiates a reflection of the use of ICT, so that it is not seen just as a 'fad' but as a set of real tools to further develop methodological and conceptual approaches to participatory development.

Regarding publications and the dissemination of information

The participants recommend the creation of closer linkages between FRAO and IIED-Senegal on one hand and between the institutions and other organisations attending the workshop on the other. Recommendations include the following.

- To face the difficulties related to the collection and diffusion of information, a greater link between the RCPLA⁵ Network and the communication work of FRAO is recommended. For practical reasons, FRAO and IIED-

³ 'Transnational' in this context means international, but more precisely, cross-border, and not subject to any one nation's laws or rules.

⁴ Information and Communications Technology.

⁵ Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA) Network. See the *RCPLA Pages* at the end of this issue of *PLA Notes*.

Senegal must reflect on mechanisms required for better communication between their different networks.

- Regarding the dissemination of information in newsletter format, co-publication of an information bulletin on participatory development is suggested. Furthermore, IIED-Senegal, FRAO and other organisations, which have higher capacity for publishing materials, can share this initiative. It is suggested that FRAO and IIED-Senegal reflect on the practical modalities concerning format, regularity and languages of diffusion for such a journal.
- In the first instance, a website relating to the meeting will be created and housed at FRAO and will provide access to all the papers, to the journal and to additional information.
- It is also recommended that the papers prepared by the participants be edited and widely disseminated. IIED-Senegal and FRAO, as well as other institutions, are invited to find resources necessary for such an output.

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Notes

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Documents from the exchange are also available from the IIED Resource Centre for Participatory Learning and Action (resource.centre@iied.org) and the IDS PRA Reading Room (contact Jane Stevens at JaneS@ids.ac.uk)

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