

Sustaining participation: what are the challenges?

A review of the Uganda Participatory Development Network (UPDNet) annual meeting
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The Uganda Participatory Development Network (UPDNet) is a member of the Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA) Network¹. This article reviews a recent UPDNet workshop, held in August 2000, where members met to discuss the issues and challenges of sustaining a participatory process.

Introduction

The Uganda Participatory Development Network (UPDNet), a loose network of organisations, institutions and individuals who are interested in promoting the use of participatory development techniques in Uganda, recently held a two-day workshop on the theme *'Sustaining Participation: what are the challenges?'*.

The workshop brought together about 100 participants from civil society organisations, government institutions and projects, local government, academic institutions and individuals, all of whom shared their experiences in sustaining participation and related challenges, through specific presentations, group work and plenary discussions. There were ten presentations that focused on three levels of sustaining participation; at organisational, community and policy levels.

The presentations and the ensuing discussions brought out a number of intriguing issues regarding sustaining participation, some broad areas being listed below.

- Limitations of the organisations
- Concepts
- The nature and process of participation
- The limits of participation – as one participant put it, *'by the time you are finished with your participation approach in your organisation, the poor are dead'*
- The involvement of stake holders

At the end of the two-day programme, participants summarised key issues and thoughts as follows.

Best practice for sustaining participation

Work methods

We almost all agreed that our own work methods had to be reviewed or enhanced to sustain participation. Key rationales are listed below.

- We must be participatory in our own organisations (participatory planning, management, managers being more transparent, being given challenging tasks etc.). We need to be participatory in all aspects of our work; furthermore, we need to build a culture of true participation.
- Identifying and involving 'beneficiaries' at all times and in all aspects of projects/programmes. This includes all those activities/processes that often happen without them at the outset (such as, for example, developing new ideas and initiatives and sharing budgets). Partners must own the agenda, both in terms of objectives and strategies to achieve these objectives and also in terms of phasing-out strategies discussed at the outset.
- Recognising the diversity of partner 'communities' and recognising that in Uganda, communities are not homogeneous: different people have different interests.
- Putting a premium on the utilisation of local resources, both material and human (this has implications on how we work, when we work with partners, flexible project planning horizons, etc.). Some workshop participants were arguing for abandoning the concept of 'project' altogether.
- Ensuring that, in all the above, there is enough time/space for reflection, learning and re-planning. Enhancing the capacity of the 'participants' to meaningfully participate, building learning opportunities and enhancing informed inputs by partners is part of this process.
- Flexibility and consensus: we need to create room for adjustments, and share, and make space for, different views while trying to resolve issues. We are all team players aiming at the same thing.
- Skills: participation is complex; we need good skills and political courage to facilitate processes that will be sustained and that challenge inequities.

¹ For further information on the RCPLA Network, please refer to the RCPLA Pages at the end of this issue.

Defining and understanding participation

- We need to remember that participation is a continuous process; but may not be appropriate in all circumstances.
- Different situations demand different approaches to 'participation'. Participation should not be imposed: it should be 'optional' and 'democratic'.
- Participation should be sustained to a level which is compatible with the vision of the initiator/partner.
- Defining participation in terms of the actual benefits of participating.
- Remembering that participation requires time!

Networking, forging alliances

- Networking at all levels
- Involvement of various networks, CBOs and government organisations.
- NGOs sharing experiences through workshops etc.
- Participation of all stakeholders can be realised.
- Integrate development activities into local government structures, accepting the benefits of sustainability as well as the challenges.
- Networking in terms of collaboration with NGOs/CBOs/Donors and holding workshops

Controversial issues

During the workshop, certain important issues regarding the sustainability of participatory approaches were identified and discussed. Key outputs from the discussions were as follows.

The rationale for participation: We need to look further and deeper at why we embrace a participatory approach. Participation can be controversial. For example, there is a tendency to push participatory approaches among the communities with which we work, but often, our own organisations may not be run in a participatory way. We seem to place ourselves as community advocates by encouraging their participation. However, if we are more concerned with the industry that feeds us without commitment to the right conception and application of participatory approaches, we are exploiting the communities with which we work.

Volunteering: The key issue here is the offering of tangible incentives to community members participating in a voluntary capacity. In the long term this may affect the spirit of participating, i.e. people participating on a voluntary basis without remuneration, thus leaving a question mark on whether this involvement can be relied upon in the long term, hence impacting on the sustainability of participatory processes. The extent of volunteering is also a controversial issue, raising questions of incentives given to beneficiaries/volunteers and the like. How can their involvement be ensured, so that the

process of participation can be sustained? Regarding volunteer involvement from communities, is it a bad thing to give incentives (material or otherwise) to help sustain participation?. This returns us to the issue of whether the product or the process is more important.

Working with others: Government/NGO Partnership and transparency/accountability. Harmonising participation and the transaction costs.

Defining participation: What are its limits (if any)? Participation is good but needs to be guided and controlled to some extent. A key question is how participatory are participatory processes?

This review has been presented to share some key issues emerging from the UPD-Net workshop on Sustaining Participation. If you would like further information on the workshop, a copy of the workshop proceedings or further information on the work of UPD-Net, please contact the author at the address below.

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