

A story to tell: 'hili li mama' meaning 'this mama...'

8

Mwajumah Masaihanah

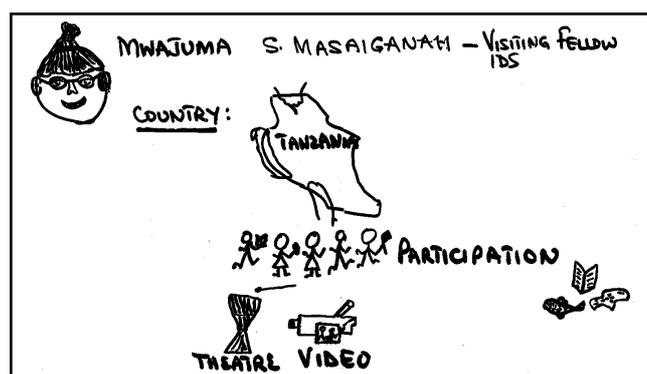
Reflecting on the past – my journey to participation

My journey takes you back to 1985 when, for the first time, I involved myself in Participatory Action Research (PAR) with fisherfolk communities in Tanzania, focusing specifically on women. Back then, I used to do things the way I was told by higher authorities, taking directions or sending messages to communities, be they right or wrong, no questioning! Using PAR and video as a way of communicating changed my way of looking at things, doing things; created a special interest in me for women and community issues, developed in me a respect for communities and in totality, changed my entire life.

A story to tell: 'hili li mama' meaning 'this mama...'

During my work with the communities in Mtwara and Lindi regions as a Rural Development Advisor and then as a Facilitator with the fisherfolk communities, we managed to learn from one another, create awareness in communities, create allies (even with politicians). This helped us to integrate with higher government authorities and lobby for policy changes. Our aim was to stop dynamite and other illegal fishing methods which claimed lives, left people maimed and threatened people's livelihoods. Nobody thought that we were doing the right thing because, to some people, banning dynamite fishing and taking measures to stop it was interfering with their trade. The dynamite traders and illegal fishermen could lose money by stopping the illegal deal.

Figure 1 Mwajuma's portrait (from the Popular Communications workshop at IDS, May 2000)



I will give just part of my life history working with bureaucrats and within bureaucratic systems, the hustles I encountered and how they helped shape my life.

I will narrate my story starting in December 1996, when I facilitated a five-day evaluation workshop with a group of fishermen in Sudi, Lindi district, as part of the RIPS¹ marine environment project. Our first meeting in Sudi village led to the Sudi declaration, which was made by fishermen and women from 12 coastal villages of Mtwara, Lindi and Kilwa districts. During this meeting they agreed to form a committee, called the Sudi Committee, to oversee the whole issue of marine environment protection in the area and raise awareness in all people in the area and at regional and national levels. This was to be done through mass meetings, leaders' (villagers') meetings, but using video as a medium of communication. This idea of using a video was just to start filming when we started the meeting and show back the video every evening of the day's workshop proceedings. This seemed to work, as people, villagers, came forward and volunteered to talk freely in front of the camera and expressed their concerns on the issue of dynamite fishing. This was because, first, video was new in these areas so it was a proud moment for the people to see themselves talking on film. Secondly, people had built trust in us and they knew that it would help us show their leaders what 'they', the people, say. Previously their fears were that whilst many researchers had been talking to them during the many meetings in their villages, all reports from such discussions were just put on shelves and nothing was done. The people were tired because these meetings benefited researchers and their bosses alone, leaving them with nothing.

So, using this kind of media, we assured them that their leaders would see exactly what they said without filtering the information. Therefore, we agreed with them that the Sudi Committee would use the video in their organised tours to create awareness. When we went back to the office, I happened to come across a report or a personal note written by my Chief Technical Advisor, Lars Johanson. It read '*...I have never seen in my life such great facilitation skills as displayed by Mwajuma in this*

¹ Rural Integrated Programme, funded by Finland and implemented with the Government of Tanzania

exercise...' From this, you can imagine how unbelievable it was for me and at the same time how good I felt. I developed and grew even stronger. But, this strength did not take more than four years before landing me into problems and friction with the Regional Authorities.

In January 1997, things started to turn really sour. After an evaluation workshop, the Sudi Committee, formed from the strengthened fisherfolk who had been at the workshop, agreed to meet and draft a constitution to start an NGO called 'Shirikisho' so that they could be independent to do things that concern their lives. In that meeting, one member reported that the situation in the neighbouring region of Kilwa was bad and had reached the extent that illegal fishermen had raised a flag on one of the islands stating, '*Kilwa Hakuna Serikali*' meaning '*There is no Government in Kilwa*'.

As we were also using media to put pressure on the government to change the policy, I told this story about Kilwa to a news reader on Radio One. The next morning it was like a hot cake, repeated in the headline news for about a day and a half. After looking for me the whole morning, the Kilwa police left a message that I should report to them. I reported but took along with me the Secretary of Shirikisho. In case something happened to me, then they should know and act quickly.

The police wanted to know why I had made such statements. I said yes, that I had and the reason was that the police were not doing their job. I said that this was highlighted in the evaluation workshop and that in ranking, the police were given zero in efficiency. I explained that I was only telling what people say. After long discussions, they agreed that they are having problems. In a way, it was getting difficult for them to perform their duties because the dynamite problem was an inside job. Then they said that it was the Police Commander that had instructed them to bring me to the police station. I said " *Yes, here I am and if only you put me in now, try it, you'll see what happens. The people will retaliate to your actions*" . I told them we knew much more of what was happening than the police knew and if they wanted to get anywhere, they had to work closely with us. The first agony was over, but I knew I was being monitored.

We decided to record the whole process by video, even the follow up of what happened six months after the evaluation workshop. We made a video documentary and organised trips to visit the Regional Commissioners of Lindi and Mtwara; the Ministers of Communication and Works, Natural Resources and Tourism, the Environment (both in the mainland and in the Isles); the Attorney General and Agricultural and Industries Supplies Company Ltd.; and other companies which are directly or indirectly related to the sale or keeping of dynamite and natural

resources. During all these trips, we took video as a means of documenting the process. Many trips of the same kind were made to meet leaders like the then Prime Minister and Vice President who visited the area. In both incidences it was hard for us to get a chance to show them our video or talk to them, as nobody took us seriously. But in all occasions we did actually manage to provide these leaders with a video documentary called *Bahari Yetu Hatutaki* – meaning 'Not in Our Ocean'².

In February 1997, during the parliamentary session, four Sudi members, plus myself, traveled to Dodoma to meet the Prime Minister, together with Members of Parliament (MPs) from the southern coastal area. To our amazement, they had talked to other members of parliament from the south and they had agreed that the problem did not concern only the coastal constituencies but the entire southern region, because that was their only source of protein – fish from the sea. So, the MPs received us as a team, and made plans to meet the Prime Minister (PM), Mr. Sumaye, the next day. In the morning we attended the parliament session as guests and in the afternoon, we had a very fruitful meeting. I went with the group from Sudi, not as a member, but to document the process. One of our aims was to document and make a video for the purpose of training and educating the masses and policy makers.

So, our meeting started with the current Minister of Regional Administration and Local Government, an MP from Kilwa, introducing the team to the Prime Minister. He said, " *Mr. PM, in front of you is a team of four members of the Sudi committee and a group of southern MPs who have come to see you on this issue. Seeing us here as a team, you should understand that we are fed up with the situation...*" . The PM asked, " *You have said four members, but I can see there is one other person. Who is she?*" . I introduced myself as a facilitator of the process and that I was only there to document what was going on using video and audio on behalf of the communities. During this meeting, the Sudi committee members gave the Prime Minister their video with documentation of the whole process and argued for him to take action, which he did! During this process we also asked for permission to film the meeting session and he permitted us to do so. We explained to him that it was important for the Association to document and that our final video would provide documentation of the whole process.

² The Sudi Committee was strengthened by removing unfaithful members who were said to collaborate with dynamiters and replaced them with other stronger members. Among the twelve members was a woman called Mwanashuru who features very much in the video and who proved to be very strong and maintained her position in the committee. The title of the video is derived from her words of wisdom.

As facilitator of the process, I never contributed to the discussion in any way. I only documented the process. This group was empowered so much that they needed no outsider to speak for them. Generally the video had a big impact on people to come out and speak because holding the microphone was a way of empowering them and giving them a voice. It draws people nearer as they tend to believe more in what *they* say, rather than in what *we* say for them.

After listening to the team, the PM reacted by asking them whether they knew the people who were involved in illegal fishing. They said yes. He asked whether it was possible for them to give him names of all those involved and they said they would do that in a month's time, that he would receive the names.

The Prime Minister, Hon. Sumaye in his address to the team had the following to say: "*In any war of this kind, without sincere and genuine cooperation and commitment from the communities, it will not be easy for the government to succeed. But the government also has its part, which it must play, which must be done fully. But we citizens must do our part. I am quite sure if we had had this awareness for many years, this [the problem] would have without doubt been eradicated.*" .

When we went back, the villagers, through their village environment committees, brought in over two hundred names of suspected dynamite fishermen from Lindi and over three hundred from Mtwara. On top of each list they wrote '*siri*,' meaning '*confidential*,' because of the sensitivity of the issue and the risks involved in naming these people. I compiled this list, printed many copies, and gave them to the Chairman and Secretary of Shirikisho to sign. They gave them to the southern MPs, who took the list to the PM and to all the Government Ministers and Members of Parliament concerned.

After a couple of months, the PM visited Lindi with his list of dynamite fishermen. Going into villages, he checked with the crowds as to whether the list was correct. The crowds roared that it was true, that the people mentioned were doing dynamiting. Then the PM said that the Regional Commissioners would have to make sure that these people stop dynamiting or they would be taken to task. And when he went to office he wrote back to them officially. One Regional Commissioner said to another, "*Hili li mama ndilo limetushitakia. Lazima tumshughulikie!*" meaning "*It is this woman who has made us be taken to task, we are getting orders, we have to deal with her*". They were talking about me. Another arduous journey begins.

During the RIPS Steering Committee meeting the next day, the Regional Commissioner picked me directly. He said, "*I want Mwajuma to tell me, who told her to go to Dodoma*

with the group and how did they get the money to travel? I want to know who approved them to get that money. I hope they did not use the money from the Lindi RIPS office address? Who gave them authority? Do you think that you are going to stop dynamite fishing? After all this is a Mafia thing, how can you? That Mudhihir Mohamed who is helping you; he used to work in the President's office for a long time, why didn't he stop it? What is he going to do now?"

I think that the Programme Co-ordinator did not expect him to talk like this in the meeting. He stood up to reply in my place, but I told him, "*I am going to take it myself, please sit down*". I told the RC that we went to Dodoma with RIPS money and that we followed all the normal procedures. The management committee, which comprises the two desk officers from the government side in the two regions, approved the trip and so the government was aware of our intentions. I told him that I was speaking on behalf of the people and that I had dual roles. I have a role to serve my organisation as a facilitator of a process, but also I have a role as a Tanzanian to safeguard the interests of Tanzania. And when I am working, I am observing those interests. I told him that I was wondering why he did not react to our first trip in 1994. Was it that nobody took action and that now the Prime Minister took action, they feel embarrassed? I said, "*I have done it as a facilitator and facilitation can bring negative or positive impacts depending on who is affected. And I did not regret for that, and I take the responsibility*".

I am proud for working so hard and risking my life and even I can bear having risked my children's lives. My 14-year old daughter was beaten up by thugs in front of the Regional Commissioner's residence, obviously organised by the same group who in the same night went to raid a dynamite armoury in Chipite, Masasi in Mtwara. It was done deliberately to derail my attention from them and she was hospitalised and has never come back to her normal self again. I was to lose my job. I decided then it was not time for me to work safely within the government system, the time was not yet ripe for that. But I am proud of all what happened, because the people were empowered to speak their minds. The government changed the policy and under the Civil Rights Ordinance, the army is keeping patrol of fishing in collaboration with the village committee members who are being changed every three months. This ends part of my story being told.

I have given this example, not that I want to accuse anybody, but I just want people, the government and the new generation to know that, without changing attitude and behaviour in our institutions and without putting our own interests last, participation will be a dream. People's empowerment will remain rhetoric to the last days of this

world (if there is any to come)! For our governments are still the same. Same! Same! Same! And for women, they should know that working as a woman, you are looked upon as '*Hili li mama...*'

During this period, we also used radio especially during our meetings and trips. We did ask for a radio reporter from Radio Kanda ya Kusini (Southern Zone Radio), and specifically Mr. Edward Kahurananga who was one of our good allies in this whole process from when we started. He used to broadcast every activity that the committee was involved in or regarding any information on dynamiting or dynamite victims that were reported to us during the whole period of the struggle. This also helped a lot in creating awareness to the community in Tanzania in other areas which had similar problems. This was also used extensively and was the reason (if you read my story properly) why I was called to the police station in Kilwa. The reason was that the authorities heard us attacking them through the media, that the people say '*the police are ineffective*'. So generally, popular media is of vital importance in people's empowerment if their voices are to be heard.

With the experiences above and the many others which I did not give here, I was moved to look critically at the issue of empowerment, participation, rights and what are the processes of government; laws, policies, acts put in place for us (its people). We need to look critically at whether these processes are benefiting the people of Tanzania in a way that protects their livelihoods and empowers them socially and economically. We need to analyse how and whether the current systems have offered women and the poor what they are supposed to offer, according to what is stipulated in government policies and regulations, for the benefit of the people and the country's benefit at large. And we need to always look at whether the voices of the people are heard in the democratic process.

Mwajuma Masaiganah, Mwasama School, PO Box 240, Bagamoyo, Tanzania.

Tel: +255 52 44 00 62 or +255 811 540 928

Email: masaigana@africaonline.co.tz