

Standing up to the limits and challenges of participatory methods and approaches in Cameroon

Michael Boboh Vabi

Introduction

Community participation, a recurrent theme in discussions on conservation and development projects/programmes constitutes a very vast and complex field. The concept means different things to different people within development institutions. Although a clear definition of the concept would be helpful, unfortunately conformity in the use of concepts and terms may not be necessary as conditions of definition and especially application are not often similar. In projects/programmes where emphasis is on democratic values, community participation is perceived as a goal in itself. In projects/programmes where emphasis is on efficiency and effectiveness, popular participation is perceived as an instrument. In conservation-development interventions, community participation has become one of the underlying pathways for scaling up field experiences and lessons into national policies and legislation. In this context, the concept could be operationalised through different participatory methods and approaches; the final outcome being to enable rural dwellers to become active participants in the definition of strategies for improving local livelihood systems. It is in the light of this that there has been an extensive development and use of the tools and techniques for translating the concepts of community participation into reality. Correspondingly, many conservation and development projects/programmes in Cameroon have adopted participatory methods and approaches as strategies for involving community-based partners in conservation and development initiatives. This has resulted in the production of a multitude of descriptive reports about the socio-economic contexts within which conservation-development projects/programmes will either operate or are operating.

The Cameroon Programme Office of the World Wide Fund for Nature, like other mainstream conservation organisations, adopts a pragmatic approach to the definition and use of community participation. In the context of a supporting role to conservation and environmental NGOs in Cameroon, community participation is perceived as a strategy for involving forest dependent/dwelling people in conservation and (sustainable) development. Participatory methods and approaches and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) are used as entry points for mobilising community resources: *local knowledge systems of biodiversity including resource management skills and traditional institutions*. The PRA is

also seen as an instrument for initially appraising situations and determining collaborative conservation and development actions. This paper draws upon the experiences of working as a Farming Systems Rural Sociologist for over a decade within the Cameroon Institute of Agricultural Research for Development (IRAD), and later as Social Science Support Officer for WWF-Cameroon. The paper cautions less experienced users of participatory methods and approaches against exaggerated expectations of the role of participatory methods and approaches.

Using participatory methods and approaches to stimulate community participation in conservation and development interventions

The use of participatory methods and approaches in conservation and development interventions anchors on a certain number of assumptions:

- local communities have adequate knowledge of their environments;
- local knowledge is not often recognised, respected and sufficiently used;
- local resources exist which are not often effectively mobilised for development;
- intervention agencies often have resources which do not match local conditions.

From these assumptions, a number of principles in the use of participatory methods and approaches can be highlighted:

- *the human factor*. Development efforts only make sense if they are people-centred and respond to people's livelihoods systems;
- *role of development institutions*. Development institutions need to renounce the conventional roles of leaders to become facilitators of self-directed, learning-by-doing processes;
- *technical and institutional capacities of community members and their institutions*. Members of local communities and their institutions are not only beneficiaries of the fruits of conservation and development initiatives but are key actors in the process;

- *local communities as partners*. Indigenous local knowledge, skills and materials should be the basis for developing local capacities and specific approaches to local development.

In the light of the above, the use of participatory methods and approaches in the process of local development is expected to increase the understanding of the context within which development partners operate. This understanding enhances the prospects that conservation-development initiatives will be locally owned and therefore, institutionally sustainable.

Field applications and lessons from literature

Likelihood of faulty problem diagnosis

Quite often, when members of local communities are asked to identify priority problems, a shopping list of broad items described as "lack/absence of..." emerges. In most cases, local communities express the need for the improvement and/or construction of roads, schools, health facilities, and provision of credit. In general, they always tend to ask for more of the same thing as illustrated in a collaborative initiative of the International Centre for Research in Agro-forestry (ICRAF) and WWF-Cameroon pilot community forest site near Akonolinga in the Centre Province of Cameroon. In a problem diagnosis exercise in eleven villages of the pilot site, inhabitants expressed that they lacked trees essential for soil fertility rejuvenation. In future investigations, it was discovered that what was being expressed was the need for more nitrogen fixing trees, considering that ICRAF had already provided them to a neighbouring site. This pointed to the fact that prospects of identifying genuine community constraints and priorities during the short duration (often between 3 and 5 days) of PRA exercises and project identification missions using rapid assessment methods and approaches remain questionable. These relatively short periods of time tend to produce shopping lists of loosely related or even contradictory development needs and constraints. This is not an inherent limitation of participatory methods and approaches but a reflection of inexperience in the use and inadequate training in PRA. It is in connection to this that Chambers (1992) highlights the importance of both formal training and the mastery of the use of the tools and techniques of PRA. Unfortunately, the way the methods and approaches are used within conservation and development organisations in Cameroon and the Central African Republic is largely *tool- and technique-led*. Indeed, Okali et al. (1994) and Pijnenburg and Cavane (1997) observed that the PRA is being reduced to a recipe of tools and techniques which tend to falsify the diagnosis of community constraints.

Community constraints often require multi-institutional interventions

When conducting a diagnosis of community constraints, many constraints are usually identified that go beyond the

mandates of single conservation/development organisations, especially those of mainstream conservation organisations such as WWF. Considering that problems identified and prioritised during PRA exercises usually have multiple causes and are influenced by many other factors, solving them requires concerted actions by a range of conservation-development organisations. Local communities can for example, undertake actions that increase agricultural production, but if there were no access roads to facilitate the evacuation of the surplus production to the market, such efforts would have little added value. This is a simple and straightforward example. But what of problems like insect and parasite attack on crops, drying up of watercourses in the dry season, hard/ infertile soils and lack of phyto-sanitary drugs? (Table 1) All these problems can not be embraced by a single organisation let alone a mainstream conservation organisation such as WWF. Therefore, constraints identified during open-ended diagnostic exercises using PRA are more complex than are often imagined. This calls for focus in the manipulation of PRA tools and techniques and explains why mainstream conservation agencies argue to narrow the scope and domain of their interventions.

Cost of promoting community participation

Genuine community participation in conservation-development initiatives goes beyond merely using participatory tools and techniques in project design and implementation; it implies developing meaningful dialogue with grassroots partners. This requires time and skilled professionals, making it an expensive venture. Because effective community participation develops from field sites where lessons and skills can be harnessed, it can be, and usually is expensive for conservation-development organisations. The intensity of efforts required for experimentation implies that users of participatory methods and approaches need to consider limiting them to field sites. Furthermore, results are usually site-specific and therefore not necessarily and easily replicable. For these reasons, returns on investment in the use of participatory methods and approaches become discouraging to project managers who do not have any commitment to process approaches to conservation and development.

In order to reduce, and even eliminate some elements of these costs, WWF-Cameroon, through an Institutional Strengthening and Capacity Building Project, promotes networking among the individuals and organisations involved in the promotion of participatory methods and approaches. The most common networking and information exchange mechanisms include the relationship-building workshops/seminars, exchanges of related reports, exchange visits, brochures/ journals, newsletters and computer-based electronic exchanges of information. While exchange visits offer PRA network members the opportunity to learn more readily from their peers than from outside experts, relationship building workshops/seminars have been instrumental in enabling individuals and institutions concerned to work together on common concerns in structured but informal and participatory settings.

Table 1: Ranking of Priority Problems by some Communities within a WWF-Cameroon Community-based Forest Management Sites

Problem Ranking	Solidam Zone (11 villages)	Mpako Village	Tape-Etufe Village
First	Poor state of access road	Poor state of access road	Absence of pipe-borne water
Second	Insect and parasite attacks on crops	Rampant crop diseases	Rapid population growth
Third	Drying up of water courses in the dry season	Absence of community hall	Soil erosion on slopes
Fourth	Infertile soils	Lack of electricity	Pest and disease attacks on crops
Fifth	Irregular supply of phyto-sanitary drugs	Frequent trespasses into the forest by strangers	Encroachment into the forest by farmers

Social formality and selectivity of information

Improving the quality of information available to conservation-development organisations is central to the use of participatory methods and approaches. While from the point of view of the users of participatory methods and approaches, PRA exercises are informal events, in social terms, they are highly formal and public. PRA exercises, for example, are group activities, involving important external agents, (and at times *white people*) and members of local communities. These exercises are conducted in public places, such as schools, palaces and churches. They require community members to present themselves to outsiders and information is discussed publicly, recorded, preserved and often still taken away. These exercises are not similar to the everyday activities of community members, especially women. This partially explains why female attendance is consistently either absent or generally lower than that of men as summarised from the different case studies in Table 2.

In a similar dimension, the formality imposed by less experienced users of PRA gives rise to the selective presentation of information/data. An analysis of many reports of PRA application in Cameroon, shows that community perspectives on development priorities are reflections of the views of the most vocal and financially/politically powerful community members. This situation is enhanced by the tendency to impose formal structures upon PRA exercises; community interviews followed by individual and/or focused group sessions and finally restitution sessions, encourages the expression of general interests and consensus. Indeed, the inappropriate use of PRA provides avenues through which vocal community members are given the opportunity to make private interests official by putting them into PRA reports. It is in

Table 2: Attendance at PRA/RRA exercises by gender

Sites	PRA Activity/Tools	Participation by gender		Total
		Women	Men	
Ouambache ¹	Village resource/social map	–	60	60
Eligadou	Transect walk	–	05	05
Mogonie ¹	Village resource/social map	–	16	16
Hardé	Transect walk -	–	08	08
Yalla-Yalta ¹	Village resource/social map	–	40	40
	Transect walk	01	13	14
Magdémé ¹	Village resource/social map	–	32	32
	Transect walk	–	07	07
Tape Etufe ¹	Village resource/social map	30	40	70
	Transect walk	02	08	10
Mboko ^{1,2}	Village resource/social map	14	22	36
	Transect walk	01	04	05
Kpama ^{1,2}	Village resource/social map	37	30	67
	Transect walk	–	04	04
Sandimba ²	Village resource/social map	20	28	48
	Transect walk	–	04	04
Mpako ¹	Village resource/social map	02	34	36
	Transect walk	–	02	02

this context that Pretty et al. (1995) argued that the literature on PRA appears to reinforce weak and sociologically naïve notions such as the *community*. Experiences from both agricultural research and conservation interventions revealed that the interactive context of PRA often provided entry points for dialogue and helped in developing rapport with local communities. However, PRA tools and techniques did not prove helpful in identifying differences of perception among different tribal as well as different social groups; women, hunters, fulani cattle owners, intensive forest users, the Baka Pygmies, etc. Be it in on-farm research or community conservation, there was a need to constantly deploy efforts to identify distinct, and at times conflicting interests of the different tribal and/or social groups within local communities. In most of the sites where PRA exercises were conducted, public debates are not socially accepted phenomena. This required tact in the judicious selection of the tools and techniques of the social sciences and particularly of PRA. Users of PRA need to recognise and be aware of the fact that PRA exercises are social events likely to be influenced by social processes independent of the tools and techniques being manipulated.

Gender insensitivity in PRA applications

The presentation of local knowledge on maps, diagrams, tables, charts, etc. require aptitudes that appear to carve out PRA as the domain of men. During community interviews, for example, women have little knowledge of these and tend to be excluded from the mapping of the distribution of these resources. Also, many social issues of

¹ Villages in Cameroon

² Villages in the Central African Republic

cardinal concern to women (breakdown of household relationships and violence from husbands) cannot be represented on maps, diagrams or charts. On a more general note, PRA users who are not gender-sensitive apply PRA tools and techniques in ways that women's specific concerns are neither raised nor discussed. It is a usual practice to assume that once men's concerns are taken into consideration those of the women will be automatically addressed. Most women living in local communities do not often have the courage to present personal concerns in public and have to conform to the categories of concerns presented by men even when they are present in PRA exercises. The negotiation of protected area boundaries, for example, is often carried out in consultation with community-based institutions dominated by men. This highlights an important gender dimension in the use of participatory methods and approaches that needs to be recognised and targeted. Unfortunately, lack of skills in gender analysis coupled with the inappropriate use of the tools and techniques of PRA tend to reinforce the invisibility of important women/ gender differences. This suggests the importance of paying attention to the social context, timing and the appropriate use of tools and techniques of PRA in order to increase the opportunities for the participation of all social groups, particularly women, in processes of conservation-development. This includes creating contexts in which gender sensitive staff spend time with women, including home and field-based sessions (i.e. align the use of participatory methods and approaches with specific resource use). Other more informal ways of communicating knowledge, such as demonstrations or stories, are needed. Also, a wider range of sources of information on the perspectives of all social groups could be tapped including the recording of songs and proverbs.

Conclusion and policy implications

PRA and other participatory methods and approaches are being rapidly adopted by many conservation-development organisations within the Central African sub-region including Cameroon. This adoption goes along without insufficient preparation by staff to handle the challenges faced in the use of the methods and approaches. This paper was developed to draw the attention of current and potential users of PRA and other participatory methods and approaches to some of the limitations of PRA, and also to urge for caution in using participatory methods and approaches. The question of whether participatory diagnoses often reveal genuine community problems and priorities has been highlighted. Grassroots development partners tend to ask for more of the same things often presented in the form of shopping lists. Many priority problems of local communities lie beyond the scope and mandates of single conservation-development organisations, which are often limited by donors. By far, the most important issues emerging from the use of participatory methods and approaches in the process of conservation and local development include the minimal participation of women. As very few women often attend PRA sessions, their involvement is discontinuous. This raises

specific questions about the participation of all social groups whenever participatory methods and approaches are used to define conservation-development strategies for whole communities. State policies and legislation provide a framework for the promotion of participatory methods and approaches. Unfortunately, state institutions resist the full-scale adoption of the principles of participation. This obliges promoters of participatory methods and approaches to adopt more subtle attitudes in the translation of the concepts of participation into on-the-ground actions.

Acknowledgements

Many colleagues have contributed, directly and indirectly, to the ideas put together in this paper. These include Mr. Michel NDJATSANA of WWF-Cameroon, Mr. Francis TARLA of the Centre for Environment and Development (Maroua) and Mr. Peter MBILE of the International Centre for Research in Agro-forestry (ICRAF). I also thank members of the Cameroon Network of Participatory Approaches (CANPA) for their contributions in shaping my ideas on the whole question of participatory tools and techniques.

Responsibility for the views expressed in this paper rests with the author and not with WWF-Cameroon.

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