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In search of a meaningful participatory training methodology

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The project

India has about 0.73% of the world's sodic lands, and Uttar Pradesh State has 1.2 million hectares of sodic wastelands. This area accounts for 10% of the total cultivable area of the State and about 17% of the salt-affected lands in India.

Funded by the World Bank, the Uttar Pradesh Sodic Lands Reclamation Project (UPSLRP) covers 10 districts in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and aims to reclaim this land. In its pilot phase completed in March 2001, about 68,400ha of sodic-affected lands covering 156,000 families were reclaimed. In the second phase 150,000ha covering 350,000 families have been selected for reclamation.

The project attempted to involve communities/farmers at every stage – in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation – through the formation of farmer organisations at village level. Projects such as the installation of shallow wells for irrigation, the building of drainage networks, chemical amendments made to land with gypsum, and crop/horticulture production, have all been initiated by such local farmer organisations.

The challenges

The project implementation was based on participatory approaches and methodologies. The principal implementing agency, Uttar Pradesh Bhumi Sudhar Nigam (UPBSN), a

government company, with the help of local NGOs, was expected to play a facilitative role. The major challenge was how to encourage UPBSN officials to change their role to that of catalyst/facilitator. Like many government officials, they were used to working in a top down, authoritarian way and believed that they were more knowledgeable than local people. Participation, eliciting ideas from others, had never been part of their working style.

These attitudes were reinforced by the strong caste, class and feudalistic cultures that prevail in the northern states of India, especially amongst the officials of government agencies. Local culture teaches them to discriminate on the basis of caste/class i.e. higher or lower caste/class. Similarly, Hinduism (the dominant religion) plays a major role by creating the belief that the present state of affairs (suffering, poverty, etc.) is due to the ill deeds of one's last incarnation. The high level of job security enjoyed by people in government jobs further insulates them from any pressure to become more accountable to local people and practice new attitudes and behaviour.

NGO staff are not immune to these attitudes either. The high demand for NGO involvement in large-scale development projects by donor agencies forces NGOs to deploy people/staff without ensuring that they share their philosophy of 'serving the people'.

Here in UPSLRP, complete role reversal was required. Staff were expected to develop attitudes and behaviour that respected local people's knowledge and experience, and to encourage the powerless and resource-poor to talk freely and thereby share their experiences. It meant that they had to develop an ability to accept their own mistakes.

Finding a solution: training

UPBSN took up the challenge of upgrading knowledge and skills, and of bringing about change in the behaviour of their staff. Intensive training programmes for all actors, including participating farmers, local leaders and different levels of project officials, were initiated but the results of this exercise were not very satisfactory. The problems faced were:

- field-level project workers were more concerned with physical works like on-farm development, boring, drainage networks and the distribution of inputs;
- both government and NGO officials had their own agendas and were working towards their own objectives rather than project objectives;
- participatory methodologies and techniques were being followed mechanically as blueprints, and creativity and innovation were missing;
- project workers were creating and reinforcing a sense of dependency in the communities, with disempowering effects;
- field officials were performing training and extension activities to fulfill targets; and
- even after repeated training, there was no change in the attitudes of project workers at different levels.

The above problems were due to several factors:

- monitoring focused more on physical targets than process;
- field workers were not mentally prepared to transfer power to communities;
- field workers believed that communities could not manage their own affairs;
- field workers still saw themselves in the role of 'giver' rather than as facilitators;
- means were becoming ends; and
- personal goals and development objectives did not converge.

The training became an externally determined exercise that resulted in a static transfer of knowledge rather than being a needs-driven, internally determined exercise.

A new approach

Since the earlier training had not worked well, UPBSN decided to try an alternative approach. A series of training workshops were organised for different categories of participants, from district level to ground level workers. Participants focused on their personal attitudes, strengths, skills and development, and

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linked these to project objectives. The aim was to:

- create win-win situations, so that individual participants, the communities and the project would all benefit;
- show how personal goals can be achieved through achieving project objectives;
- make training sessions enjoyable and interesting for the participants and the trainers/facilitators;
- help participants in the analysis and decision-making processes;
- inspire participants, so that they are motivated to use creativity in developing participatory approaches and techniques instead of following blueprints;
- build each individual participant's leadership qualities and facilitation skills, and develop positive personal as well as professional attitudes towards human resource development.

Strategies and process

Our professional performance consists of knowledge, skills and attitudes, but in practice training tends to focus on knowledge and skill development rather than personal attitudes. In most cases, attitudes are dealt with in the context of adopting participatory methodologies or ways of involving communities in the process - but the individual's attitudes to personal success are hardly dealt with.

Attitudes are not permanent but they are very stable. They are the result of both a lifelong learning process, and the norms and culture of the society in which we live. The process through which we learn new attitudes is fundamentally different from learning knowledge and skills. Since attitudes are very personal, only the individual can change them. Developing positive attitudes for achieving personal goals is the most important part of training. The training workshops therefore offer learning opportunities to build positive attitudes and then integrate knowledge and skills through hands-on practice. They begin by building positive attitudes, own-strengths and weaknesses, developing interpersonal skills, success and a sense of purpose in life.

The development of behaviour and attitude has a major bearing on the effectiveness of participatory approaches. The new process tries to enable participants to bring about a positive change in self-image, values, behaviour and attitude

Box 1

Objective: to develop an understanding of how important attitudes are for attaining success

1. In a general session, participants are asked to identify qualities and traits one should possess to be successful in different areas of life.
2. The facilitator writes on the board all the qualities/traits suggested by participants. This continues until all comments or suggestions are expressed (care is taken not to repeat any qualities/traits while writing on the board).
3. Participants are then asked to classify the qualities/traits into three categories: knowledge, skills and attitudes. Some qualities/traits may fall into one or two or all three categories.
4. Now the facilitator counts the number of qualities/traits under each category and calculates percentages. In our experience, knowledge and skills together account for 15–30% and attitudes for 70%–85%.
8. The facilitator concludes that attitudes are more important for being successful in life, but hardly any effort is made to educate our attitudes, while throughout our life we keep on improving knowledge and skills.
9. The facilitator then ask participants to think about what they see as their purpose in life and their own definition of success:
 - Why am I here?
 - Where am I going?
 - What needs to be changed to accomplish the life I desire?
 After completing this exercise the participants are asked to share their feelings in a group, depending upon individual willingness.

through various exercises. The goal-setting process, as part of the new approach, also enables participants to identify personal benefits if their personal goals as well as organisation objectives are achieved. During the process participants realise that most of the personal benefits are the same in both cases, and that many personal goals are automatically achieved in pursuance of development objectives.

This process takes 1.5–3 days depending upon the participants. The focus then shifts towards facilitation skills, participatory approaches and methodologies, and achieving development objectives, using the following steps:

Step 1 Building positive mental attitudes, discovering own self-image/esteem, using various individual and group exercises, stories, quotations and proverbs.

Step 2 Knowing yourself: identifying own weaknesses and strengths, mind and habits and developing philosophy and purpose of life through exercises.

Step 3 Learning about participatory approaches and techniques, identifying their weaknesses and strengths, and practicing with the community.

Step 4 Identifying community activities in the context of the project, learning about project objectives and matching with personal goals.

All the above steps are done using various tools and techniques through classroom exercises, and in the field with the community. At least 50% of the time is spent with

Box 2

Know yourself

1. What are the five things you do best?
2. What five characteristics describe you best?
3. Identify five things that would contribute to your happiness.
4. What are the five things you would want to improve?
5. What are three important things you have done for someone else?
6. What three things do you dislike about yourself?
7. Identify five important people who have helped you most.
8. What is the best thing that has ever happened to you?
9. What three things do you like about yourself?

the community. All the exercises are documented and presented before the large group. The day finishes with at least an hour of reflection, with a focus on the individual's personal benefits.

In the case of participatory tools and techniques, examples or demonstrations are avoided. Instead, problems are assigned to small groups; the group will then decide how best to conduct the task they have been assigned to do with the community. Local games and approaches are encouraged in analysis and in decision-making processes.

The entire process involves many individual/group exercises. However, some of the exercises used for personal development towards positive attitudes are shown in Boxes 1, 2 and 3.

After training, some of the reflections of participants included:

'Today I understood the meaning of MK Gandhi's quote "You must be the change you wish to see in the world"'

'We can make a difference.'

'After training I have realised that I have more strengths than weaknesses.'

'Training has changed our perception of life.'

'Now we are in a better position to follow participatory approaches.'

'I can change my destiny through changing my attitude.'

'Personal goals are self-achievable if we pursue organisation goals.'

'Our forgotten human values have been restored.'

'We had been busy in preparing community development plans but had never thought of preparing our own plan for life.'

Lessons

- Building positive attitudes and focusing on personal development is paramount in creating a conducive learning environment and for learning self-discipline.
- Exercises on building personal attitudes and setting goals for one's own success in life helps transform participants, something that is not possible with several sessions on participatory methods and approaches.

Box 3. Construct your own self image profile		
I am		I need to be
Brash		Modest
Selfish		Giving
Timid		Assertive
Vague		Concise
Inhibited		Free/spontaneous
Indecisive		Decisive
Talk too much		Listen more
Cold		Warm
Self effacing		Confident
Lacking in energy		Energetic
Self-conscious		Unaffected by others
Suspicious		Believing
Artificial		Genuine
Tense		Relaxed
Aggressive		Assertive
Bad tempered		Happy
Rude		Cheerful
Dishonest		Honest
Fearful		Brave
Trouble maker		Co-operative
	Excellent	Needs improvement
Posture: slumping		
Facial expression: too animated		
Gestures: excessive		
Speech: monotonous		
Walk: awkward		
Manners: irritating		
I consider myself to be...		
I desire my image to be...		

- Inspiration through personal development planning helps participants to build creative capacity as well as innovation. In one training workshop at least ten local games were used with the community for planning, dissemination of tech-

nology, and monitoring and evaluation.

- A self-development approach helps to develop leadership abilities, facilitation skills, and decision-making abilities, helps to increase self-confidence and self-respect, and reduces dependency on others.
- The mechanism itself is dynamic: whilst participants themselves work towards solutions, they are also continually helping the facilitators (trainers) to evolve the training design.
- Reviewing, and reflecting upon, personal attitudes and behaviour using success stories, quotations and exercises is important in making the workshop enjoyable and interesting, and in shifting from feelings of reserve and frustration to a sense of rapport and fun.
- Training becomes more meaningful to participants.

Challenges for facilitators

- Before conducting such courses facilitators need to have done sufficient homework and practice. Behavioural changes and changes in personal attitudes are also essential since facilitators become role models for the participants.
- Concentrating on human values and universal truths of human life, inspiring personal attitude-building, and bringing personal and development objectives into line is a great challenge for any facilitator.
- Developing suitable success stories, quotations and exercises for personal analysis, and adapting them for different types of participants, is important for creating an appropriate self-learning environment.
- When conducting training sessions, facilitators need to continuously evaluate and modify their approach and choose tools and techniques according to the situation.

What next?

This methodology has now been used when working with farmer organisations, and in organisational development for NGOs, and the results are very encouraging. However, the real challenge is how to make policy makers and training managers feel the importance of changing attitudes and behaviour in such large-scale development projects.

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