The Snowball

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Introduction

One important element at the Mapping for Change conference was the use of parallel working group sessions. These followed the main plenary sessions in the mornings. Each session was devoted to a different topic relating to the morning's discussions. On each of the three conference days, participants were able to choose an afternoon session they wanted to attend.

During these sessions participants focused on different aspects of the day's overall topic. The working groups responded to specific framework questions, which set the scene. On the first and second days, delegates were divided into three groups; on the third day, they were divided into four groups. Afterwards, all the working groups reconvened in a final plenary session to present the summaries of their discussions (Table 1).

But with over 160 participants, the working groups were large. There were only 90 minutes in which to discuss complex issues. So a simple and effective tool was needed to facilitate the discussions.

Table 1: Programme of parallel sessions

Day 1	**Topic 1: Enabling and disabling environments for PGIS/ community mapping practice – plenary**		
	Working group 1	Working group 2	Working group 3
Day 2	**Topic 2: Methodological issues**		
	Working group 1: Methods for representing local knowledge/mental maps (what is a community? How to approach community issues? Understanding issues of power; adding authority to ISK etc.)	Working group 2: Supporting cultural heritage preservation and identity building among indigenous Peoples and rural communities.	Working group 3: 'Participatory numbers': issues of scale, accuracy and sensitivity in PGIS practice.
Day 3	**Topic 3: Implementation issues (best practice) and ways forward**		
	Working group 1: Land and resources rights and entitlement.	Working groups 2 and 3: Participatory land use planning (PLUP), collaborative natural resource management (NRM).	Working group 4: Networking and communication.

The conference organisers had chosen a single method for this, called the Snowball.

Snowballing

Snowballing (or pyramiding) involves participants working first alone, then in pairs, then in groups of four, and then in groups of eight.

The participants work on an issue by responding to particular questions, e.g. lists of keywords, or answers to a valued question, or they are asked to agree or disagree with a given phrase. The participants are also asked to give the reasons for their responses.

The facilitator then asks a representative from each group to present the outcomes of their debate to the other groups, by placing their findings (one each on separate pieces of paper or card – meta-cards) on large sheets of paper, put up on the walls.

At the conference sessions, two people facilitated each session and a note-taker was chosen to write up the findings at the end, to present at the closing plenary session each day.

Participants discuss and sort cards

Martin Sekeleti from Zambia and Rahab Njoroge from IIRR collating cards on the wall

Photos: Mike McCall

Method

1. The facilitator opens the session by introducing a specific question or questions for discussion. For example, on Day 1, each working group was asked to consider the following question:

In your experience and knowledge, what internal and external factors and conditions influence PGIS practice?

These are already written on large sheets of paper pinned to the wall or projected onto a screen. The question should be as clear and unambiguous as possible.

Participants begin individually, by writing down her or his individual responses (to discuss it later with a partner). You can write on meta-cards, or you can use a notebook.

Time needed: keep it brief – three to five minutes depending on the length and complexity of the question, and on the age and experience of the participants.

2. Participants join together in pairs and discuss their responses with their partner. They may reach a consensus agreement on the responses. If not, they should be clear about what are their differences, and why. Using A5 meta-cards, the pairs write down their thoughts – for example, funding, training, etc. Not more than two to five words per card if possible.

Time need: five to ten minutes.

3. Pairs join together into groups of four. All meta-cards are put on the floor in the middle of a circle. Cards are grouped and re-written if necessary to capture similar content. Repeat the same process as for step 2. This new group shares its thoughts and reflections and any new ideas each pair has brought to the group.

Time need: five to ten minutes.

4. Groups of four may join together into group of eight, and repeat the process, or until the session has reached 'critical mass' – i.e. there are only a few main groups left. But eight people is a big group and may not be suitable for easy discussions, although at the conference groups were as big as 16 people.

Time need: five to ten minutes.

5. Next, the groups sort out the cards on the floor, showing the issues they have identified. As before, the cards can be easily mixed and sorted and re-organised etc. into sets or groups of types of response. Use new cards to make main headings for each group of answers. Participants do this themselves, with help from the facilitator. This stage is not easy – sorting the cards into logical but distinct groups or sets with appropriate headings (names) requires organisational, conceptual and verbal skills.

Time need: ten to fifteen minutes.

6. When everyone is agreed on the responses and the grouping of the responses, the facilitator asks a representative from each group to stick the cards on to the wall (with masking tape, pins, etc.), so that everyone can see them. The representative explains the group's reasons for the responses.

Time need: five to ten minutes per group.

Participants Peter Minang, Robert Chambers and Peter Kyem collectively re-organise the cards on the floor into headings.

7. At this stage, and if there is time or it is felt appropriate, the groups can collectively re-organise the cards on the wall into headings/types of response, as done in step 6.

Time need: ten to fifteen minutes.

8. The note-taker then writes up the session findings, ready to present at the closing plenary session. An easy way to record the results is to take a digital photo of the cards on the wall.

Advantages

- This tool allows for easy comparison between the findings of each group.
- If used in subsequent parallel working group sessions, the participants are already familiar with the tool.
- Full involvement – everyone is involved in the first three rounds of single, pairs, and probably the foursomes.
- It is more inclusive and participatory than e.g. a plenary meeting, a general discussion, or a question and answer session.
- Shy participants feel more confident about giving their views in pairs or in small group because they must begin with writing down their own response. There is limited eye contact, as cards are grouped on the floor and the focus of discussion is centred on them.
- It is focused on an issue and questions of interest (at least to the organisers and facilitator).
- The original questions come from outside, i.e. the organisers – but the questions could have been developed in a participatory way.

What the participants thought of the working group sessions….

I learnt more from the parallel workshop sessions than from the plenary sessions (except of course from key-speakers). I regret the workshops were divided in four parallels tracks. I think two would have be enough with a better pre-selection of the communications for the plenary session.

All the participants contributed very well especially in working group sessions. We learnt a lot from others, and made contacts.

Needed more time dedicated to question periods and presentations. Perhaps re-thinking the workshop activities – they were too rushed... include a period for focus groups of similar backgrounds i.e. NGO groups, aboriginal groups, governments, academia, etc.... This would bring those with similar ideas together to brainstorm. It would focus the discussion during the workshop activities.

The level of participation, exchange and communication among participants was very high and contributed to a learning process to many if not all participants. I did find it unfortunate on some occasions though, that I missed some interesting presentations in other working groups while participating in another one.

The sessions were well planned, and the smaller workshops gave one the opportunity to debate about things with other attendees.

The methods adopted for group discussions allowed for all of us to participate and share our views on issues.