

# Tips for trainers

## Democracy walls

by **GIACOMO RAMBALDI**

### Introduction

Facilitators like monitoring the pulse of the events they have been organising and at the same time offering participants a medium where they can share their thoughts, creating opportunities for participatory reflections. This adjusts the flow of action and provides a

paper sheets. Typically a democracy wall consists of five large sheets of craft paper (1.2 m x 1.8 m) each one featuring one of the following introductions to open-ended statements:

- I discovered that ...
- I noticed that...
- I felt that...
- I learnt that ...
- I would like to suggest...



space to take stock of lessons learnt. In addition, sound practice calls for equal opportunities for all participants to express themselves. Creating spaces which favour focused and free expression of ideas while a process unfolds, is one way to go about it.

The idea of establishing physical open spaces where people could express themselves in a focused, structured and concise manner came to me while looking at a drawing found in *A Trainers' Guide for Participatory Learning and Action* (Jules Pretty *et al.*, 1995).

### Democracy walls

A democracy wall is a structured open space where people can post their ideas and opinions (Figure 1) using A5

### Purpose

- To provide a medium for individual participants to express themselves in a free, focused and concise manner;
- To generate a written, shared pool of reflections which can be used for further participatory analysis; and
- To obtain on-the-spot feedback during an event and be in the position to rapidly adjust facilitation to emerging realities and changing circumstances.

### Materials needed

- 5 large sheets of craft paper (1.2m x 1.8m)
- Drawing pins
- Masking tape (2 inches wide)
- Scissors
- Marker pens
- A5 paper sheets or metacards (at least 15 per participant)
- The five 'introductions' written or printed separately on A4 sheets of paper in large letters
- Glue stick

Figure 1. Democracy wall at work at a training at ITC, Enschede Netherlands.

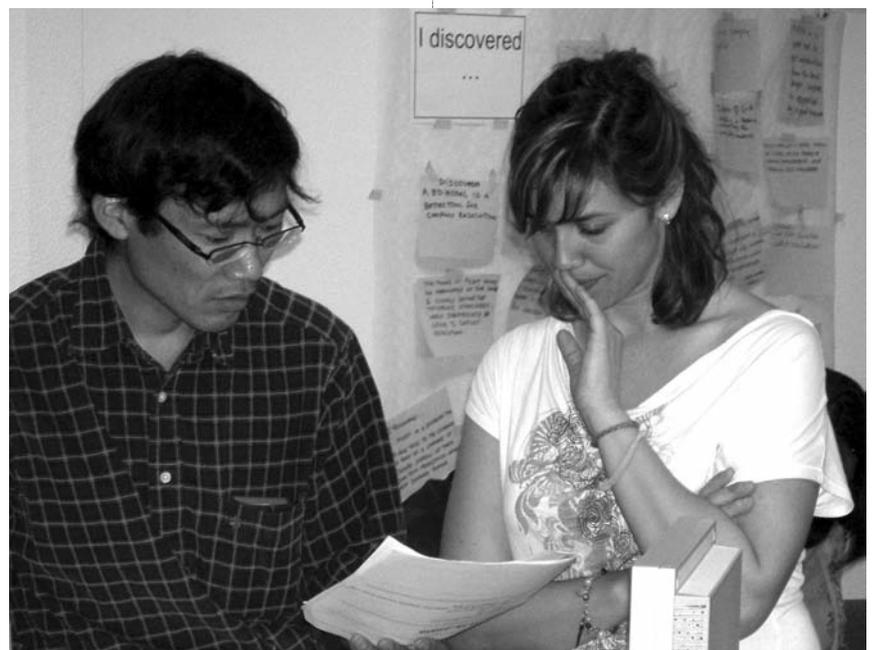


Photo: Jeroen Verplanke, ITC

**Figure 2. Multilingual democracy wall deployed at the 2007 Web2forDev Conference in Rome, Italy.**

When working in a multilingual environment introductions should be written in the different languages (Figure 2).

**The process**

A number of elements of the democracy wall have to be prepared ahead of the event.

The five statements 'I discovered that ...'; 'I noticed that...'; 'I felt that...'; 'I learnt that ...' and 'I would like to suggest...' are printed on A4 paper and glued at the top left corner of the sheets of craft paper.

Use masking tape or drawing pins to fix the craft papers onto a wall. The wall has to be large enough to accommodate all five or them (Figure 3). Each sheet should hang distinctively (ensure that there are 10-15 cm between each sheet). Sequencing (left to right) is important and has to be well thought out depending on the context in which the democracy wall is deployed.

If an event includes parallel sessions occurring in different rooms, democracy walls can be set up in each of the rooms. The facilitators may decide to harvest statements made at the end of the sessions or at the end of the day, or to leave them in place for the duration of the event. The intervals of harvest depend on how the organisers plan to make use of the feedback gathered on the walls in the facilitation process.

Metacards (A5 sheets of paper) are prepared together with maker pens and snippets of masking tape. Metacards are typically white but could be in different colours, depending on whether the facilitator would like to later disaggregate entries (e.g. by gender, by type of participants, or other). But in my personal experience, the simpler the



Photo: Anja Barth, CTA

layout, the easier the process is. If colour coding is adopted, I recommend using pastel colours and avoid strongly contrasting hues like red, blue, green, yellow, or black as these may impact behaviour depending on how colours are associated to meanings in different cultures.

Masking tape snippets (see picture) are prepared for use together with marker pens in numbers sufficient to allow participants to freely contribute (to avoid participants having to queue to get a marker pen or tape to stick their card on the democracy walls with).

At the beginning of the event, participants are briefed on the purpose of the democracy wall and invited – at scheduled intervals – to enter statements on the five elements of the wall using the metacards.

It is important to specify that metacards should accommodate **only one** concise statement written in **capital letters**. Being able to read the card from a distance of 3-5 metres is extremely important. Statements



Photo: Nynke Kruidrink, IICD

**Figure 3. Facilitator preparing the democracy wall during the Web2forDev pre-conference workshop, Rome, Italy, 2007.**

should be formulated as a continuation of the introduction e.g. 'I learnt that...' and followed by the statement on metacard.

If some workshop participants are illiterate or cannot write because of physical or visual impairment, facilitators should ensure that full

Photo: Giacomo Rambaldi, CTA



**Figure 4. An Ogiek elder contributes his thoughts (written with the assistance of a student) to a democracy wall during a participatory mapping exercise. Nessuit, Kenya, 2006.**

assistance is provided. Those assisting should be known and trusted by the impaired. If communication occurs in a language unknown to some of the participants or facilitators, a translation may be written at the bottom of the metacard.

Depending on whether the participants are used to publicly expressing themselves in writing, facilitators may have to start the process by proactively distributing metacards and marker pens to participants or offer them the opportunity to fill in the cards in private (e.g. during a coffee break). Usually the process is self-propelling and once the first cards are stuck on the walls others are increasingly eager to contribute with their ideas (Figure 4).

Depending on the purpose of the exercise, the facilitator may group and eventually rank the entries and facilitate a discussion around emerging reflections. The outcome of the discussions may feed back into the process or serve as guidance for

future activities or improvements of the process itself ('I would like to suggest ...')

**Advantages**

- The tool offers equal opportunities of expression for all participants – the outspoken and the shy, the literate and illiterate.
- It establishes well-defined spaces, which favour focused and free expression of observations, reactions, ideas, emotions, suggestions or complaints while the event unfolds.
- Statements displayed on the democracy walls may induce coalescing ('Hi, others share my opinion and sentiments'), and encourage people to contribute opinions and stimulate reflections.
- From a process management perspective gathered statements are easy to compile (e.g. in a PowerPoint presentation) and emerging issues can be fed back into the debate to enhance reflection and improve analysis.
- From a process documentation

perspective the gathered statements are important testimonies and on-the spot snapshots of perceptions.

- Democracy walls offer participants the opportunity to share their views and opinions privately, without the need to speak out in public.
- Statements displayed on the walls allow facilitators to get the pulse of an event and adjust accordingly.
- After grouping (optional), statements featured on the democracy walls can be presented at the closing session of the event and offer further food for thoughts, reactions and comments on future directions.

**Reading the walls**

Selected statements made by elders during a participatory mapping workshop held on Ovalau Island in Fiji (2005):

*I learnt new things about my village. I learnt names of places, names we do not use anymore, names that our elders used and I am so glad that I and future generations have learnt and will use them again.*

*I discovered that if we look after our environment and our 'Vanua', our source of wealth, we will be able to combat poverty.*

*I felt this workshop has been useful for all the people of Ovalau – young and old, even our children have learnt new things. It is a big step forward for them and for all of us.*

*We now have a better understanding of the whole Ovalau landscape and this will be very useful for development planning and resource management.*

Selected statements made by trainees during a participatory mapping workshop held in Nessuit, Kenya (2006):

*I learnt that there is hidden truth that can be processed by the community in mapping.*

*I felt I never thought we could make it .... The tracing, cutting, gluing etc. but after finishing the blank model, I felt we were there. It was a turning point to the whole project.*

*I noticed that you don't get bored when working with people from different professional backgrounds.*

*I noticed that people must work together to achieve their goal.*

*I would like to suggest that participatory 3-D models be done on other hunter-gatherers land (Yiaku and Sengwer).*

*I would like to suggest to include in the plan of activities internal meetings (e.g. in the evening of each day) for discussing about the day and clarifying the activities of the day after. Keeping all updated of what is going on.*

Selected statements made by participants at the Web2forDev conference in Rome, Italy (2007) :

*I felt that blogging feels very lonely when everybody else is talking*

*I learnt ... how to blog, ...how to tag; ... what a wiki is ... and what I can use it for ...*

*I noticed that we have to come up with a description of what is understood by web2fordev*

*I discovered that Uganda is really mashing it up ...The UK can learn a lot from what happens there*

*I would like to suggest allocating more time between sessions*

*I would like to suggest creating an Africa working group on Web 2.0*

---

**CONTACT DETAILS**

Giacomo Rambaldi  
Senior Programme Coordinator  
Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural  
Cooperation (CTA)  
Wageningen  
The Netherlands  
Website: [www.cta.int](http://www.cta.int)  
Email: [rambaldi@cta.int](mailto:rambaldi@cta.int)