Community participation with the disabled: training in Yemen

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Introduction

Through this article, I would like to share with the readers a workshop that I ran in June 2000 on using PRA for community participation from a gender perspective. This two-and-a half-day workshop was designed for Oxfam partners in Yemen, with the following objectives:

- To introduce community participation as a tool for more sustainable development work.
- To develop an understanding of the role of Oxfam partners as facilitators for community mobilisation and participation.
- To introduce the participants to the PRA tools and their relevance to their work.
- To enhance mainstreaming gender analysis in Oxfam partners' work.

Yemen

The Republic of Yemen lies on the south-west corner of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Red Sea, between Oman and Saudi Arabia (Figure 1). The terrain of Yemen includes a narrow coastal plain backed by flat-topped hills and rugged mountains; and dissected upland desert plains in the centre slope into the desert interior of the Arabian Peninsula. Yemen is mostly desert; hot and humid along the west coast; temperate in the western mountains affected by seasonal monsoon; and extremely hot and dry in the east (desert).

The population of Yemen is 17 million (24% urban and 76% rural). On the Human Development Index, Yemen comes as country number 133. The following are some development indicators:

- Life expectancy at birth is 56 years.
- Infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live birth) is 82.
- 46% of children under five years of age are malnourished.
- 39% of the population has access to improved water sources.
- 56% of the adult population are illiterate (23.9% of men and 76.1% of women).

Figure 1 Map showing location of Yemen

(Map by courtesy of: www.theodora.com/maps)

Participants

The participants in this workshop presented a diversity of backgrounds: urban and rural, men and women, NGOs, government (ministry of planning: NGO department), and Social Fund for Development[1]. They also presented a diversity of fields of work:

- Women's development (training, income generation, literacy, health and environment, education, income support, basic services, women's rights).

- Marginalised communities, providing basic services (health, literacy, housing), health and social activities,

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[1] The Social Fund for Development (SFD) was established in 1997 as one of the measures to cushion the effects of the government's reform programmes on vulnerable groups, especially the poor. The SFD was formed as an autonomous agency with financial and administrative independence, governed by a Board of Directors, representing the government, NGOs, and the private sector under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister. The SFD seeks to reduce poverty by improving living conditions and providing income-generating opportunities for the poor.

income generation, women's empowerment, kindergarten, enrolling children in government schools.

- Disability (for blind, mentally retarded, and physically disabled): providing rehabilitation services, vocational training, teacher training, social work, inclusion in social services especially in education (basic and higher education).

- Social Fund for Development: community development (health, education, agriculture, environment, water), small loans, capacity building, planning, monitoring and evaluation.

This diversity was enriching to the participants, as well as to the process of learning. Participants contributed their wealth of experience in diverse fields of community development; raised many issues relating to both the potentials and the difficulties of using PRA, which brought reality closer to the discussions; and also allowed group and individual learning to take place in an atmosphere of fun!

Community participation

The main focus of the workshop was on promoting community participation in the various development interventions undertaken by local partners, through the use of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools. However, since PRA tools have now moved beyond the "rural" arena, I would like to refer to it here as participatory approaches. The analysis of community participation took place in three stages:

- Firstly, breaking down the word "community". Communities are not homogeneous entities. We need to consider who has power (leaders, money lenders, land owners, etc.) and who does not have much power (poor and marginalised people); also social differentiation in a community (men and women, boys and girls, race, ethnic background).

- Secondly, exploring the concept of participation (who participates in what, and how).

- Thirdly, reflecting on the changes in the role of partners as a result of the new approaches to understanding and working with communities using participatory approaches and tools.

This analysis allowed the participants to bring out much of their real experience of the diversified communities they work with. As a result, participatory approaches were not discussed in isolation of the specific contexts that they would be applied in, at a later stage. Within these contexts, participants identified two major obstacles to community participation using participatory approaches: the opposition by the powerful in a community and donors' agendas.

The opposition to real participation by the powerful in a community

Through focused and small group discussions, participants identified some strategies for dealing with such opposition, such as:

- Involving the opponents in the functioning of a project.
- Involving the beneficiaries in the planning and running of projects.
- Defining the role of government at a local level.
- Transparency in terms of project resources.
- Knowing the government plans.
- Strengthening the role of an NGO as a facilitator.
- Exploring donors' views in terms of capacity building of NGOs.
- Appropriate choice of participants in an NGO from the community.
- Taking all these issues into account at the stage of planning (before conflicts arise).

Donors' agenda

The majority of participants in this workshop represented local NGOs, who receive funding mainly from foreign donors, including Oxfam. Participants recognised that these donors tend to have their own agenda in terms of philosophy, development approach, and methodology of work. Participants expressed their serious concern about coping with donors' constant changing agenda, that does not seem to allow enough time or space for local partners to develop their own identity and methodologies.

Examples were given about how donors tend to focus on certain approaches (forms for funding proposals, gender analysis, PRA) and require that partners follow the same approaches with the same pace. The capabilities, limitations, and obstacles facing local partners do not seem to be taken much into account by donors. As a result, community participation can become a burden for both NGOs and community unless donors take its requirements into account.

PRA for the disabled

The main challenge to this workshop was in modifying PRA tools to accommodate the specific needs of certain participants (one participant with physical difficulties and two participants who are visually disabled). The challenge here was two-fold:

1. Difficulty in finding energisers that do not involve seeing or moving around:

- An adaptation of fruit salad[2] was used which was called *Daosha* (this means noise in Arabic). In this exercise you name people: sing, shout and whisper. When the person in the middle calls out one of these three words, those participants with this word would act it out (i.e. sing, shout or whisper their real names). When you say *Daosha* everyone does everything at the same time.

- Other energisers were in terms of minimum physical stretching: start from your feet/roots (organisations' philosophy and history), passing by the various steps (activities they are involved in – stretching arms to the front as if making steps), and then reaching up for the sky (achieving objectives).

2. Difficulty in combining visualisation (for sighted people) and non-visualisation (for non-sighted people) principles when using participatory approaches and tools. Strategies to overcome this difficulty included:

- Meeting of the two blind participants before the workshop to explain the process and the activities as well as go over the programme in detail. This meeting was much appreciated by them.

- Each participant had a 'seer' throughout the various sessions to make sure that they were fully involved in discussions, activities and presentations.

- Within activities and discussions, there was a conscious attempt to: address people by names; explain activities in details; and verbalise rather than pointing at things.

- At the end of using each participatory tool there was a reflection in terms of strengths, weaknesses, uses, and variations. This reflection also included ideas on how to adapt the tool to be used by non-sighted people.

In terms of the participatory approaches and tools themselves, tactile materials were used. For example, in mapping the community, glue was used to draw with, then grains (lentils or rice) or some powder was spread on top to make the maps more tactile. Dow (flour and water and a pinch of salt, no yeast) was used to illustrate the
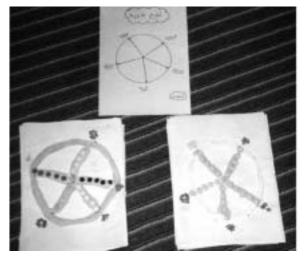
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[2] This is an energiser, where group members sit in a circle with the trainer/facilitator standing in the middle. All members are named after some fruits (for example: apple, melon, orange; etc.). The person in the middle calls out the name of one fruit. All the participants with this name must change chairs, including the person in the middle. One person will be left in the middle (without a chair), who then repeats the process by calling out another fruit. When "fruit salad" is called out, then everyone must change chairs. (For further details and other exercises, see *Participatory Learning and Action* by Jules Pretty, Irene Guijt, John Thompson, and Ian Scoones. 1995.)

Figure 2 Social mapping: drawing with a glue pen, then spreading rice and lentils on the lines to make the map more tactile for the non-sighted participant to go over it with the help of another participant

Figure 3 Using dough with non-sighted participants to illustrate daily routines in men's and women's lives

Figure 4 Workshop evaluation form: for sighted participants (two-dimensional) and non-sighted participants (three-dimensional)

daily schedules of men and women, with other materials such as paper clips, pins, grass, and grains.

These modifications to participatory approaches and tools provided a rich environment for learning for all involved: Oxfam, Oxfam partners (participants), and the workshop trainer.

Training approach

The conventional approach to training in participatory approaches is to explan theoretically what participatory approaches are and what the tools are, then practise the tools in the field. The main feature of the methodology for running this workshop was starting the learning about participatory approaches by "doing the tool" first then reflecting on it, and ultimately backing this knowledge and practice with background information on participatory approaches. Unfortunately, time did not allow for field practise.

I, personally, found the latter approach more in line with the philosophy and principles of participatory approaches: starting from where people are and building on their knowledge and experience. In addition, tools were not given their known names until the end of reflection. The purpose of this was to allow the participants to name the tools on the basis of what they had experienced, and what was relevant to their local situations.

Role and special skills

The discussions throughout the workshop challenged the participants in terms of their role when working with communities. It was realised that the role would need to change from a "decider-and-doer" to a "facilitator-and-listener". As a result, participants acknowledged the need for developing and improving certain skills and attitudes to be able to take up such a role. These skills included: communication skills (including listening skills), gender analysis, and how to run a focused discussion. Attitudes required included: flexibility and adaptability, patience, observation and common sense, absorbing anger, not ignoring but involving all sectors of a community and knowing how to deal with them, being aware of not raising community expectations, honesty and transparency, respect for community traditions, ability to bring different opinions together, listening more than talking, transfer of knowledge and experience to the community, and acknowledging the knowledge of people in the community.

Conclusion

As expected, two-and-a-half days was too short for participatory approaches training, especially for participants with first time exposure to participatory approaches. There was a shared recognition that this workshop would require some follow-up with the participants. This would imply a systematic approach to supporting partners, which would include: encouraging them to keep a record of their application of participatory approaches and tools and concepts of community participation when working with communities; exchanging visits between various projects to share learning, difficulties and coping mechanisms; and a refresher workshop for the same participants in six to eight months' time.

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