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The art of facilitating participation: unlearning old habits and learning new ones

By LYDIA BRAAKMAN

I always considered myself a facilitator, but only now do I realise that there is much more to it. The model of participatory decision-making will help to guide me when I facilitate future participatory decision-making processes.
Thai participant, RECOFTC Workshop[1]

Learning for change

Whether field workers work in health, agriculture, or forestry, nowadays it is expected that they can facilitate all sorts of participatory processes. This means they face the many challenges of making participation happen in often polarised multi-stakeholder environments. How to mobilise groups that don't want to sit around the same table? How to ensure that everybody has a chance not only to share their views but also their hidden agendas? How to make people listen to each other actively? How to make them understand and accept the different perspectives in the group? How to come to an inclusive solution?

This paper reflects on the experiences of RECOFTC (the Regional Community Forestry Training Center – see Box 1) in training people from over all over Asia in facilitating participatory decision-making processes. Often participants

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[1] Feedback from a participant working for a Thai NGO at the end of a two-week international course run by the Regional Community Forestry Training Center (RECOFTC), October 2001.

Box 1: Building facilitation skills efforts by RECOFTC

During the past couple of years the Regional Community Forestry Training Center (RECOFTC), based in Bangkok, Thailand, has worked with partners in Asia to develop participatory processes to support community forestry development, such as conflict resolution, enterprise development, and forest management.

While developing these processes, we started to realise that, regardless of what type of intervention is anticipated, there is the need for a good facilitator to make it happen. Negotiating management agreements, resolving conflicts, or setting up a cooperative all need effective facilitators. Gradually a facilitation component started to emerge and became an integrated component in both longer term capacity-building processes and in the international short-term courses run by RECOFTC.

More information about RECOFTC can be found at www.recoftc.org

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already perceive themselves as skilled facilitators. The paper describes how participants are challenged to revise their views, beliefs, and habits about facilitation and therefore participation. It also provides some brief examples of the type of strategies and methods we developed to make this change happen. The purpose of the paper is to share these learning processes with others who are interested in – and faced with the challenges of – building the skills of such facilitators.

Extension workers often believe they are responsible for giving advice to solve others' problems

Cartoon: Thierry Aubert

Box 2: Being content neutral
The main characteristic of a facilitator is that s/he is content neutral. Content neutrality means not taking a position on the issues at hand; not having a stake in the outcome
Source: Braakman, L. & Edwards, K. (2002)

Unlearning being the 'expert'

The remaining challenge for me remains how to be truly content neutral as a facilitator. I find it hard to hold back myself in order to give the group the chance to express their opinions. Although this was covered in the course theoretically, eventually it remains up to me to develop my own approach to face this challenge.
    Indonesian participant, RECOFTC Workshop[2]

The first obstacle we encountered during our training initiatives was that many participants perceived themselves as technical 'experts'. This is due to their formal education background and, in many cases, years of experience in the field. This is not to say that they do not acknowledge that villagers are knowledgeable but they do perceive that you cannot be a facilitator if you are not an expert in the topic at hand. This also applies to those who work mainly in the office or as facilitators of learning in workshops, etc. Those who come from an extension background are operating in a system which

requires them to transfer technical knowledge rather than mobilising existing knowledge or providing options and channels of communication to alternative sources of knowledge. This means they see themselves as the ones responsible for giving advice to solve others' problems.

The role of a facilitator as presented in the training (Box 2) challenges some very fixed perceptions among participants. Some feel that this dismisses the value of their own expertise and knowledge, and resist openly; others nod their heads but then in simulations often revert to providing strong advice to the group. Facilitators need to learn how, why, and when to intervene technically, and should not be afraid of joint learning processes where they are an integral part of developing new knowledge to meet villagers' needs.

At the other end of the continuum are those participants from NGOs who believe in 'being and living with the people'. These participants also find it hard to be content neutral and tend to take a position on issues at hand, often positioning themselves alongside villagers. These types of participants are not handicapped by the pressure of 'being the expert' but they do feel they are traitors if they do not align themselves with the villagers. They don't realise that, by taking a position, they cannot act as a negotiator, creating linkages and communication channels between the villagers and other stakeholders. This role of trusted and non-biased mediator is often badly needed by villagers and other stakeholders alike.

Therefore, participants with different personal and institutional backgrounds go through different emotional processes in dealing with this concept of content neutrality. Some have only feelings of discomfort, whilst others are resistant, or dismiss the concept outright.

Experiencing resistance from participants, we realised that we had to be better prepared to guide them while they struggled to internalise such personally related challenges. Varied approaches are needed to support participants more effectively through this change process, at a personal level, group level, and at different stages during the process. We developed a series of sessions to introduce the concept of being content neutral

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[2] A participant from an Indonesian NGO wrote this in her back to office report after participating in a two-week international course run by RECOFTC, in May 2001.

Box 3: Being a process advocate

The main role of a facilitator is in guiding the process. S/he should try to ensure a fair, inclusive, and open process that balances the participation of everybody and establishes a safe space in which all stakeholders can fully participate.

Most groups are very output- and task-oriented. They are not aware of the importance of the process. Facilitators, because they are content neutral, are in a position to guide the process. Facilitation is about movement, moving the group towards a common destination.

Source: Braakman, L. & Edwards, K. (2002)

"Expertise can be developed in process as well as in content. However, most participants have not thought about this, and training them in anticipating the dynamics and scenarios involved in differently designed processes is a challenge"

Many workshop participants see themselves as 'experts'

Cartoon: Thierry Aubert

in a very gradual but challenging way. Vivid and heated discussions among participants are part of these sessions. It is very important during this process to provide participants with concrete ways of seeing how their knowledge is not being dismissed, and the value of presenting themselves as a neutral body in designing and guiding a participatory process.

Learning to be a process advocate: a new concept for many

Many evaluations of development activities refer to weak design and facilitation of participatory processes. Conflicts that arise can often be attributed to lack of joint decision-making and participation in identifying solutions and actions. Despite this, few agencies and individuals have considered who will design more effective multi-stakeholder processes and what

knowledge and qualities are needed to do this. In most situations, experience of process is assumed, based on subject matter expertise, and little attention is given to who designs the process and how.
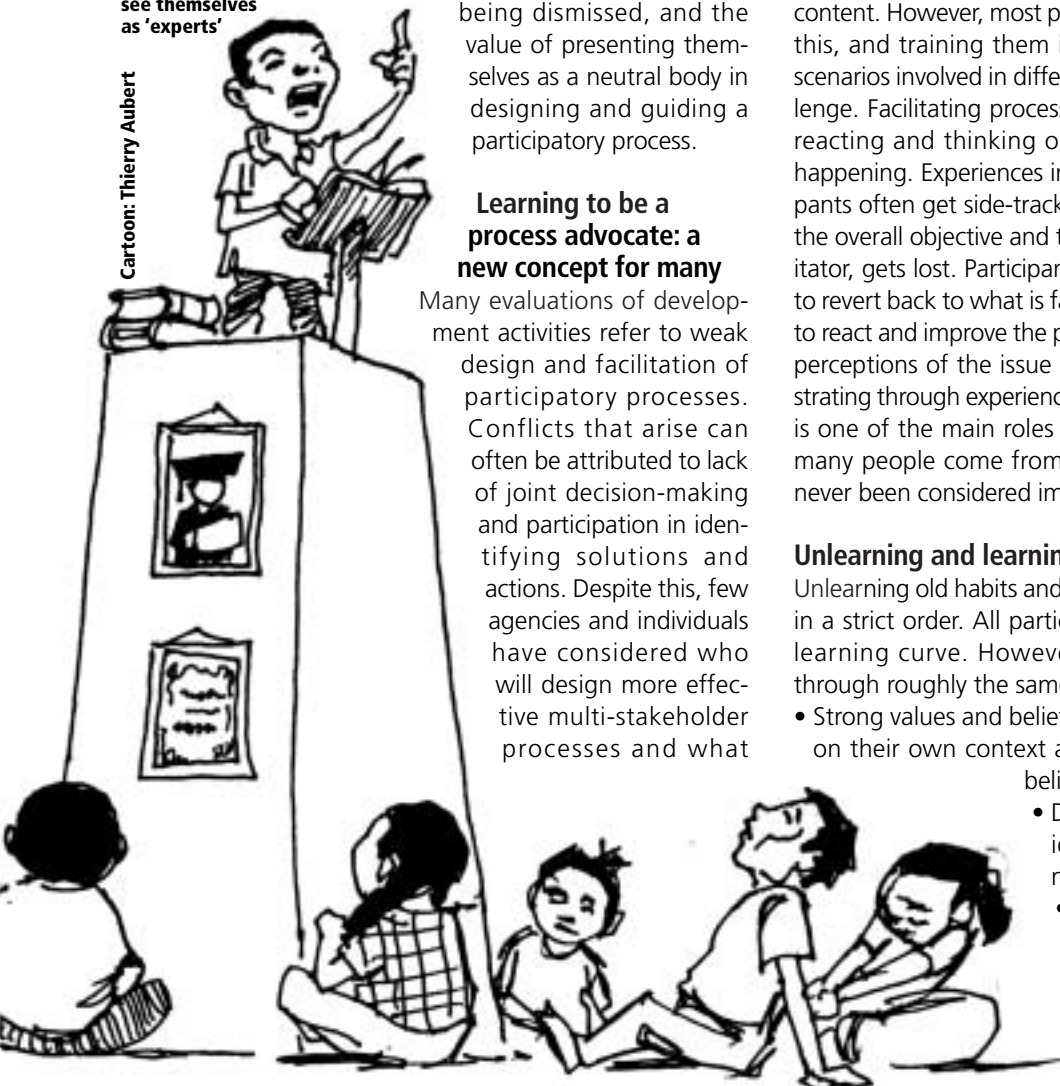
Expertise can be developed in process as well as in content. However, most participants have not thought about this, and training them in anticipating the dynamics and scenarios involved in differently designed processes is a challenge. Facilitating process involves some planning but also reacting and thinking on one's feet while the process is happening. Experiences in training have shown that participants often get side-tracked as the group diverts itself from the overall objective and then the group, including the facilitator, gets lost. Participants practising facilitation then tend to revert back to what is familiar. Instead of focusing on how to react and improve the process they refer back to their own perceptions of the issue at hand and give advice. Demonstrating through experience that keeping the process on track is one of the main roles of the facilitator is difficult when many people come from backgrounds where process has never been considered important.

Unlearning and learning: a continuum

Unlearning old habits and learning new ones does not occur in a strict order. All participants follow their own personal learning curve. However, an average participant goes through roughly the same process:
• Strong values and beliefs about what facilitation is, based on their own context and experiences, usually with the belief that 'the expert gives advice'.
  • Disbelief and resistance against the idea of facilitators being content neutral.
    • Starting to realise the need to be content neutral in order to be trusted by all parties involved, and starting to experiment. However, under pressure

Facilitating process means thinking and reacting on one's feet

Cartoon: Thierry Aubert

from a group which expects answers, often falling back into old habits of giving advice and being the expert.
- Starting to understand the need to guide the process, to balance participation, and to keep the group on track.
- Experimenting with being content neutral, but still not always able to resist outside pressure to give advice.
- Being able to resist outside pressure by staying content neutral but not being able to guide either the group process or the meeting process. This often translates into being completely passive and leaving the group to manage entirely on its own.
- Finally, only a few manage to actually experiment with being a process guide during the time span of the training event.

It is probably obvious that none of the above happens by itself. Boxes 4 and 5 outline some strategies and skills that support participants in their new role as facilitator.

At the end of the training, the participants are faced with a series of challenging statements. The debate sparked by these statements often reveals substantial changes in beliefs and attitudes about their roles as facilitators. Nothing is more rewarding for us trainers than when participants themselves realise that they discovered another level to participation, and therefore facilitation.

Lessons learned and remaining challenges
Developing learning processes and materials in building facilitation skills has been an iterative process. As there was very little to build on, we learned by doing. Some of the most important lessons learned are:
- **Strategic introduction of concepts**.
In previous training we had left what we perceived to be the most difficult concepts until the last stages of the training and built up the training design from simple to complex. In

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Box 4: Skills needed for effective facilitation

Content neutral
- Active listening
- Asking questions
- Probing
- Paraphrasing

Process advocate
- Observing and monitoring group behaviour, group roles, and group processes
- Balancing group dynamics
- Practising feedback to individuals and groups
- Effective agenda planning by formulating achievable desired outcomes and designing effective meeting processes

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Box 5: Strategies for supporting participants

- Stressing their responsibility for their own learning by motivating them to venture into new territory in the way they think and behave.
- Building in *practice*, preferably in the field; otherwise through well-planned and guided simulations.
- Guiding *reflection* sessions during which participants analyse their own actions and feelings, and those of others.
- Stimulating constructive *peer feedback*.
- *Filming and reviewing* pivotal moments to reconstruct an 'objective' image of what actually happened during a simulation, which draws out very powerful learning points.
- *Challenging* fixed beliefs and behaviours.

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many ways this back-fired as some of the most important concepts of facilitation are what participants resist the most and if introduced at the end of the training, it is often too late to deal with this resistance. We feel it is important to introduce the concept of content neutrality early on in the training. This gives time to deal with different individuals' resistance, which often happens at different times in the process depending on their own personal internalisation process.

• **Personal responsibility and development in learning**.
Becoming an effective facilitator often involves a considerable amount of personal reflection and feedback from others. The training programme that has been designed places considerable emphasis on personal development and therefore personal responsibility for learning. This, combined with a focus on experiential learning methods, often involves a big 'shake up' of participants' learning styles, and for some the adjustment is clearly difficult. Skill based training can only be effective by practising and experiencing the use of different skills; many participants find this difficult and are familiar with systems where responsibility for learning is not focused at such a personal level. Enough time needs to be allocated to ensure that trainers can support those participants who struggle with this, often at different stages in the training.

• **Building group dynamics**
Although this is an important aspect of any training, facilitating the learners to work as a group in this training is especially important. Many aspects of the learning depend on peer feedback and exchange, and peers in the group help learners build confidence as much as trainers. Carefully managing introductions, the size of the group, and how the groups are structured in simulations are all important. At the end of a training it is great if the group feels that fellow learners have been as critical to their learning as the trainers, and recognise this themselves. This adds to their own understanding of the importance of group dynamics in facil-

itation and group processes.

Despite certain lessons learned and a feeling of breakthrough and revelation in terms of training development, challenges still remain.

• **The rocks and sponges phenomena**
In any training, there will always be participants who are open to new ideas and keen to practice and soak up the training like a sponge. At the other end of the spectrum are the 'rocks': despite efforts to challenge, peer pressure, and one-to-one feedback, these participants flatly refuse to see the value of participation. Although they may not necessarily openly state their beliefs, they are unable to cover them up in training of this kind and they usually emerge when they are in front of a group. Sometimes these individuals can be disruptive in the learning process, but more often than not they are more of a disruption in the minds of us as trainers! A remark from an East Timorese government official at the end of a two-week international course run by RECOFTC in October 2001 illustrates this attitude:
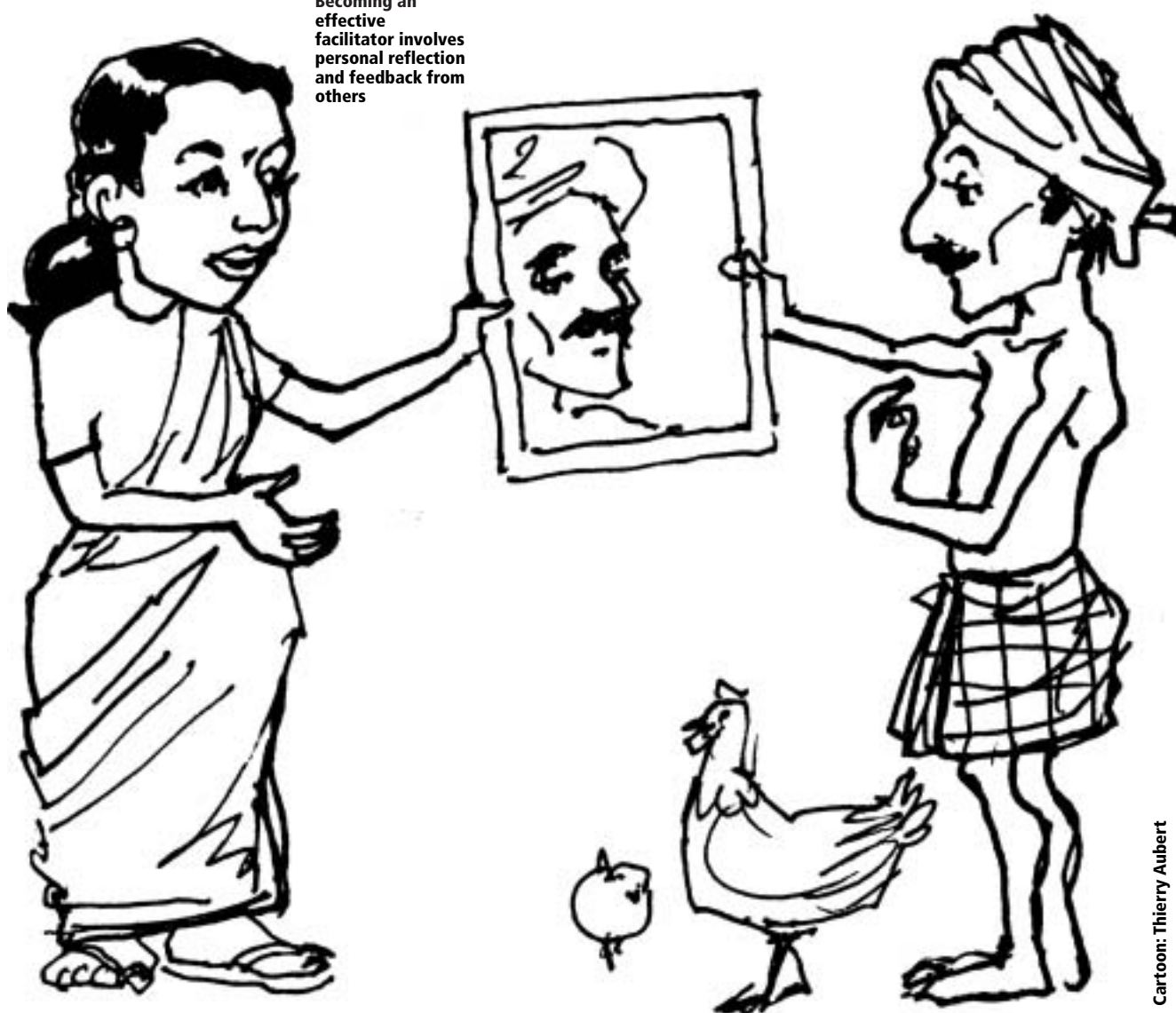
I will mainly carry out my activities as I used to do. I might start working more closely with NGO people.

• **Lack of enabling environment**
For many participants, the more in-depth their understanding of facilitation becomes, the more they start to realise that what is being promoted as participation in their organisations is not true participation. The challenge, therefore, is to equip participants with enough self-confidence to practise in environments over which they have some control, e.g. small meetings and workshops which they run themselves, and at the same time help them to anticipate types of resistance they may meet on return. This aspect of training is of particular relevance to participants who believe that what they are learning all sounds very nice but is so far removed from what they are used to that learning any more about it will be

Becoming an effective facilitator involves personal reflection and feedback from others

Cartoon: Thierry Aubert

useless. This challenges points to the fact that training cannot happen in isolation and that a combination of strategies is required.

• **Lack of good role models**
One aspect we have noticed is the importance of participants having good role models they can relate to; otherwise they struggle to improve their own skills and approach, but with very little idea of the type of facilitator they would like to become. We have tried to address this by producing a train-

ing video which provides examples of good facilitation, but it remains to be seen to what extent this can substitute for the real thing.

Some of these challenges can be addressed in the training context. However, most of them relate to the wider environment that any learner of facilitation concepts and skills will eventually have to operate in, and therefore will need strategies other than training to enable the participants to practice their new facilitation skills.

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