

## Keynote Paper

### Participatory communication in rural development: What does it take for the established order?

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**Abstract.** Participatory approaches have undergone several waves of interest within the agricultural research and development community since the 1970s. There has been a trend from technology-oriented towards farmer-oriented outcomes to better support the requirements of sustainable change. The practice of participatory research and extension under a variety of models, all underpinned by the principles of participatory communication, has been accompanied by debates on what is “genuine participation” and how different “types” of participation suit different development objectives. Addressing stakeholder participation has slowly become the norm in project proposal development for most major funding organisations as it is perceived to increase impact. However, very little is required in terms of demonstrating, firstly, that project partners have a common understanding and are in agreement of what type of participation suits the proposed design and context of the research and development process and secondly, that the capacity and political will exist among the partner organisations to allow for and facilitate participation. It is not uncommon that participation is reduced to superficial consultation or even lip service, whilst decision making power remains in the hands of specific stakeholder groups, often those who already had their own agenda for the change process to take place. This paper will discuss the factors and conditions that enable and impede effective collaborative partnerships of stakeholder groups in the context of rural development, particularly in cross-national initiatives. Factors at the level of the individual include mentality, communication skills and facilitation capacity. At the organisational level, institutional mandates and objectives, leadership and political climate will be reviewed. The paper will particularly build on experiences in Australian government funded research for development projects in Southeast Asia but intends to provide some general input to further discussions into the debate about good participatory practice to support sustainable rural development.

#### Participation – so what’s new?

Participation has become an essential part of the vocabulary used in project proposals over the past two decades, since it was recognised that people - rather than technology-oriented approaches are required to find the right balance in achieving economic, social and environmental sustainability (Van de Fliert 2007). The underlying goal of participation is, in theory, to empower communities, groups or individuals to determine their own direction, objectives and options for change, make well informed decisions, take (collective) action to achieve their goals and monitor and evaluate if they are getting where they want to be. In practice, however, many ‘non-participatory’ interventions can be observed (Bessette 2004) and genuinely participatory processes are hard to come across in development initiatives. In fact, good participation is not as easy to achieve as it sounds due to a range of factors, which will be explored here.

The high requirements on human and financial resources are often mentioned as an immediate impediment to applying participatory processes, as well as a reason for not applying them. This may indicate that the benefits are not necessarily perceived worth the investment. It seems impossible, however, to assess what difference participation actually makes to the return on investment as it cannot be compared with a non-participatory approach in the same context. Many projects that do invest in participation attribute positive project outcomes to the application of the participatory approach but rarely are the indicators for successful participation clearly articulated. How do we judge whether participation was “genuine” and what do we expect in the process from each of the “participants”, including ourselves?

More often than not, we see that participatory approaches are employed as a “means” rather than an “end”, as a potentially better pathway to achieving project objectives compared to top-down methods, but not necessarily for empowerment. As a means, participation is defined as a method to increase the effectiveness of an externally introduced program via the involvement of local people (Cleaver, 1999). As an end, it is seen as a goal in itself, which is to empower people by equipping them with capabilities and providing them opportunities to their take control and give direction to the change process to improve their livelihoods (Huesca, 2003). All too often in development projects, we can observe that participatory processes have been designed to serve as an end, but are merely implemented as a means. This is typically evident in situations where participatory approaches are applied in a context driven by the traditional

development paradigm of modernisation that emphasises economic growth rather than the multiple dimensions of human wellbeing. This paradigm is still very much embedded in contemporary mainstream development thinking, expecting those who supposedly “know” to take control over decisions on the direction of change for those who supposedly “don’t know”. Coupled with a predominantly reductionist view on research and development that tends to exist among professionals who had their training in a specific disciplinary field, many projects that attempt to apply a participatory approach grapple with the complexities that emerge when we allow all stakeholder groups to express their needs, instigating fear to lose control. In addition, academic training generally does not cater for “participatory research and development methodology” whilst facilitation of such processes is an art in itself.

The literature has captured the dilemmas in the application of participatory approaches by categorising different forms of participation. White (1994), for instance, makes a distinction between pseudo- versus genuine participation. Pseudo-participation is described as “people’s participation in development in which the control of project and decision-making power rests with planners, administrators and the community’s elite” (White et al. 1994, p. 17). Genuine participation is defined by Servaes (1999, p. 198) as a process that “touches the very core of power relationships in society”. Pretty (1995, p. 1252) describes seven types of participation:

1. **Passive Participation:** Be told and follow; information belongs only to external professionals.
2. **Participation in Information Giving:** Participate by answering questions; no opportunity to influence conclusions and decisions beyond the professionals.
3. **Participation by Consultation:** Participate by being consulted; conclusions may be modified in the light of people’s responses but professionals are under no obligation to do so.
4. **Participation for Material Incentive:** Participate by providing resources, for example labour, in return for food, cash, or other material incentives.
5. **Functional Participation:** Participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives. Instructions can be dependent on external initiators/facilitators or become self-dependent.
6. **Interactive Participation:** Participate in joint analysis, leading to action plans and formation of local institutions. Groups take control over local decisions.
7. **Self-Mobilization:** Participate by taking initiative independent of external institution to change systems.

Another typology of participatory research approaches distinguishes between five types of power relationships (adapted from Lilja and Ashby 1999, p. 3-4):

1. **Conventional:** Outsiders take decisions on their own based on limited communication with local people. They may or may not consider information related to local conditions and relatives.
2. **Consultative:** Outsiders take decisions on their own although there is organized communication with local people. Outsiders inform themselves about local people opinions, preferences and priorities through organized one-way communication methods. They may or may not let this information effect their decision. The decision is not made with local people nor is it delegated to them.
3. **Collaborative:** The decision is shared between local people and outsiders and involves organized communication between these two groups. Outsiders and local people know about each other’s opinions, preferences and priorities through organized two-way communication. The decisions are made jointly after a consideration of all opinions and suggestions. No party has the exclusive right to revoke a shared decision.
4. **Collegial:** Local people make the decisions collectively in organized communication with outsiders. Local people know about outsider’s opinion, preferences, proposals and priorities through organized two-way communication. Local people may or may not let this information affect their final decision.
5. **Local decision making:** Local people make the decisions individually or in a group without organized communication with outsiders. They may consult and consider the opinions or suggestions from outsiders, but the decision making process is not influenced or facilitated from the outside.

Types 1 and 5 can barely be called participatory as decision-making power is predominantly owned by one party. Type 2 is the typical example of pseudo-participation, which can be a stepping stone to higher levels of participation and empowerment but also lead to manipulative participation (Strauss 1998). Types 3 and 4 describe the range in which genuine participation can take place with an increasing level of empowerment.

Although these typologies were described a decade or more ago, they still seem very relevant in that only limited numbers of development initiatives manage to go beyond consultative participation and instigate shared ownership over processes. Mostly, these are initiatives by NGOs who establish long-lasting collaborative relationships with communities. It is becoming increasingly obvious that it is no longer the lack of acceptance that inhibits participatory approaches to achieve their full potential, but rather a lack in understanding, skills and effort of what it takes to design and facilitate multi-stakeholder engagement. Training in participatory methods of mainstream professionals is still scant and mostly inadequate to master the art. It tends to focus on tools and methods that are often presented as “blueprints”, rather than on principles, skills and requirements for flexible, adaptive application. No single toolbox can cater for all the different types of participation, each serving a different goal and requiring different processes and roles of the various actors. Training should, therefore, focus on underlying principles of development and empowerment and on basic communication and facilitation skills.

### **From participation to participatory communication**

Facilitating participation does not imply “making others participate”, but engaging stakeholder groups in a dialogue, or better a “*multilogue*”. It requires open sharing of information and opinions in all directions, identifying areas of conflicting interests and collective assessment and testing of options that can fulfil needs while capitalising on opportunities and compromising on conflicts. This places participatory communication (rather than just participation with its various meanings and interpretations) at the core of sustainable development. Facilitation of participatory communication processes inherently implies “giving voice”, hence power, to all parties involved. These processes should be based on a thorough stakeholder analysis. This analysis helps to understand who has what stake in the process and what functional and power relations exist amongst and within the different stakeholder groups. Understanding people’s positions, interests and relations is required to design and employ the most suitable communication and engagement methods to raise interest in and initiate the dialogue. Rather than applying a standard set of recipes from a toolbox, situation specific processes need to be designed with a clear and mutually agreed objective. The process design should be based on considerations such as existing inter- and intra-group dynamics, language choice (both from an ethnic as a vocabulary perspective), access to and suitability of media or channels to be used, external noise that may occur and anticipated effects of both the internal processes and the external noise.

### **What does it take for the individual?**

Participatory communication processes involve “participants” and “facilitators”. The prerequisites and desirables for each of these two main roles in participatory communication processes are discussed separately below.

#### ***Participants***

Depending on the issue at hand and the type of activity involved, participants in a change process can be fairly homogeneous representing a specific stakeholder group or highly heterogeneous consisting of many and diverse stakeholder and anything in between. In order to achieve meaningful participation (i.e., voluntary contribution to the dialogue), people will have to have a sufficient level of awareness that there is an “issue” or in the least a need or opportunity for change. This can range from an immediate problem that occurred or a general need to keep up with a changing world around us. Awareness and attitudes towards the desire or need for change will have to be assessed and if needed enhanced before participation can be expected. Participation requires people’s time, so participants will need to be able to afford that time and be convinced that involvement is worth the investment. Involvement should contain an incentive, which may be in the form of a rewarding experience or gained knowledge but could be material, for instance a shared meal. Most importantly, methods applied to facilitate participation will need to match the capacities that exist. This relates to, for instance, language ability, literacy levels and background knowledge on the issue of concern, communication skills, and levels of empowerment. These capacities need to be assessed in order to adapt methods and activities accordingly to allow maximum contribution to the dialogue for each group with specific capacities.

There may be limited awareness and participation capacity of local people in certain situations, especially amongst marginalised groups who are not (or cannot afford to be) immediately interested in self-reliance, empowerment or the efficiency and sustainability of a project, but rather in the tangible benefits they can obtain from participating in the project at that very moment. This can bring about a dilemma and requires strong facilitation skills of development practitioners to mediate the conflicting interests and perceptions.

### **Facilitators**

Some people are naturally talented facilitators, while others can go through any amount of preparation or training and will never feel comfortable in that role. The majority of people, however, can greatly improve communication and facilitation capacities through concerted effort, which can be by means of formal training, on-the-job learning, systematic self-reflection or a combination of the above. Most importantly, anyone acting in a facilitator's role should have a favourable attitude towards this role and respect and process the contribution of all participants. The facilitator requires good communication skills, the ability to design and conduct suitable methods and organise a range of activities for multiple stakeholders. Support to do so is vital and deals with institutional backing, availability of adequate resources and clearly defined terms of reference.

### **What does it take for the organisation?**

Individuals can only fulfil a specific function effectively if the institution they belong to fully supports them. It often happens that as long as there is a project and funding, individuals are supported by their organisation to do things in a different way. However, as soon as the project is over and the funding stops, people tend to fall back, or are told to get back, to their old ways of going about business as there are mostly no structures or incentives in place to continue. More often than not professionals who are committed to participatory approaches rather feel disadvantaged by doing so when it comes to ticking off the boxes of the traditional performance evaluation system. To secure and be promoted in their jobs, researchers are more valued for scientific publications in peer-reviewed journals and amount of funding they bring in for projects rather than sustainable impacts of these projects in farmers' fields. Organisations will therefore have to change the performance evaluation criteria if real impact is what is desired.

The application of participatory approaches in traditional organisational settings founded on the principles of the modernisation paradigm of development has shown many limitations and little hope for institutionalisation and sustainability. For organisations to change to a people-centred paradigm of development, major institutional changes would need to be instigated at the levels of mission formulation, mandates and basic operations. This requires strong leadership to allow change, particularly when change implies empowerment, which can be a threat to those who have the power. Additionally, it needs to be supported by a favourable political climate that allows different funding and staffing mechanisms. The minimum ingredients for instigating such change towards institutionalisation of participatory approaches at the organisational level are: (1) collective positive experiences, (2) substantial evidence of documented impacts, (3) open-minded, creative leadership and (4) funding mechanisms that allow for flexibility and longer term engagement.

### **Conclusions**

While participation has become the norm rather than the exception in development vocabulary, the application of participatory communication principles and practices still leaves much to be desired to effectively contribute to sustainable and equitable impacts. Some areas that require further attention of individuals, organisations and funding agencies to maximise the potential of stakeholder participation and engagement are the following:

- There needs to be more coherence in the overall goals and operations of development programs and organisations in order to enable empowerment and people-centred outcomes. The application of participatory approaches in isolated projects can set examples and create momentum but impacts are not likely to sustain if no paradigm shift takes place in the larger context in which these projects take place.
- Participatory communication is not served by the application of standard recipes for activities, as situation specific processes need to be designed to suit conditions, capacities and contexts.
- Therefore, investment in communication and facilitation skill development among researchers and development practitioners is required. Training cannot be cut short and has to contain a strong experiential component to unlearn old habits and perceptions.
- Effective application of participatory approaches requires a supportive institutional context in terms of staffing and funding mechanisms, incentive structures and mechanisms for transdisciplinary collaboration.
- Funding mechanism should allow for participatory diagnostic activities for collective agenda setting and planning, allow flexibility in processes and be longer term.
- Impact assessment should not look at immediate economic gains only, but identify human and social impact factors and assess how these contribute to sustained economic and environmental impacts.

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