Chapter 3
Participation

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The past ten years have seen a sea change in philosophy regarding international development projects in general, and education and communication projects in particular.

The new approach, inspired in part by recent behavioral research, prominently features the word "participatory." Whether called "participatory development," "participatory learning approach," "participatory monitoring and evaluation," or "participatory rural appraisal," the new methods proceed from the premise that people have a right to be part of decisions that affect their lives. The methods are guided by the observation that local stakeholders know better than anyone else what their problems are and what solutions might work. Behavioral research also shows that when people commit to a course of action that is their idea, the results are more likely to succeed and continue than when ideas are imposed from the outside, or delivered within a top-down structure.

A participatory project aims to involve as many local stakeholders as possible in the process of formulating, designing, implementing and evaluating programs in the hope of making development self-directing, fair, and self-sustaining. In addition, participation aims to erase the feelings of inferiority that stakeholders from developing countries have often experienced in relation to their counterparts in developed countries.

In the process, the development worker sheds his or her status of "expert" and becomes instead a listener and facilitator dedicated to helping stakeholders solve their own problems. "Who's participating in whose project?" the participatory facilitator may ask. And she answers: "The outsider is actually participating in the clients' project." Simple as the wording may seem, it represents a radical change of perspective.

Participatory development assumes that a diverse group of stakeholders brings sufficient wisdom—technical, social, and political—to produce a sound project. Further, it assumes that a given solution, if not technically superior to an expert's solution—will benefit from the commitment of the community and will actually be enacted.

The process of participation can benefit projects in health and infrastructure as well as environmental education. GreenCOM's experiences are each unique, but the lessons learned could be applied by communication and development professionals operating anywhere.

WHAT IS PARTICIPATION IN AN EE&C PROJECT?

Examples from the GreenCOM experience demonstrate the variety of participation in environmental education and communication projects. Each project brings together key actors and representatives of key publics to research, design, implement, and/or evaluate an intervention. Each uncovers important facts, assumptions, and trends through working with diverse groups of people in an atmosphere of respect and discovery—and comes up with solutions that no outside "expert" would likely have found.

- In Jordan, a participatory GreenCOM workshop brought together representatives of stakeholders in a school system to develop an environmental education curriculum for school clubs. Teachers, students, administrators, NGO environmental education staff, scientists,

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donor representatives, curriculum development professionals, gender specialists and communication professionals all met for two weeks to design a water awareness curriculum. GreenCOM helped NGO staff with the preliminary formative research and later trained them to analyze it, but the NGO performed the actual research and analysis (see Chapter 15).

- GreenCOM/Egypt addressed the problem that villagers were having with decreased waterflow in irrigation canals. The project used video cameras to help people tell their story to government decision-makers. These functionaries are often so far removed from the field and so buffered from local reality by the reports of their own (often biased) field staff that they are unaware of the real problems and issues affecting the final client, the farmer. The video camera allowed the farmer, and most importantly, the women of the community, to speak "directly" to the Minister and his staff. The video was used to effect institutional change in the irrigation Ministry and make it more client-centered.
- GreenCOM/Nepal sponsored a participatory video workshop in which members of community forest user groups (CFUGs) prepared a community video letter to present their concerns on forest issues to top-level government officials. After the viewing, the government officials provided feedback to the community members, addressing some of their concerns. The gender-balanced group represented castes and ethnic groups who rarely speak together. Using some of the tools outlined below—plus story telling and informal walks in the forest to significant places—the group developed enough trust and openness to come up with their own messages. After some video training, they articulated these with clarity and forcefulness (see Chapter 12).
- In Fez, Morocco, GreenCOM worked with the municipality of Zouagha to re-engineer the system for collecting solid waste. GreenCOM brought to the same room all possible stakeholders, including such disparate players as the mayor, neighborhood residents, the local member of Parliament, municipal staff including truck drivers, sanitation engineers, health professionals, representatives of community groups, solid waste experts, the directors of the solid waste program, the person responsible for hiring personnel for the municipality, staff of the maintenance depot of the trucks, and GreenCOM technical personnel.

During the two-week activity, the group researched the solid waste system as well as the social structure of the community, analyzed that knowledge and came up with solutions that, while perhaps not technically ideal, represented the greatest consensus possible. Because of the evident transparency of the activity, everyone concerned felt that a milestone in cooperation and understanding had been achieved.

These four examples of GreenCOM activities have much in common. They exemplify the philosophy of participatory development clearly—a philosophy in keeping with the democratic spirit of the age. The activities also build local capacity so that agencies as well as individuals are better able to take charge of their future.

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

Generally participation begins with courtesy calls to local leaders and discussions leading to a consensus that there are problems of concern to the community, and that examining their causes could be beneficial to all.

The next step depends on the degree to which one is committed to participation. Pioneers of the participatory approach insist that the development professional step into the shoes of the villager or whoever is experiencing the problem. If this means that a day or a week is spent fetching wood, carrying water, building a local house, repairing a local road—then that is precisely what the development professional must do. This exercise shows the villager that the

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"expert" is imperfect, and that the villager, too, has expertise that he can teach to the technical specialist. This helps the two meet as equals.

Living the village life also shows the technical specialist just how difficult that life is, and that suggestions for improvement need to be tempered with humility. GreenCOM has used exercises in workshops that simulate this activity and show all the concerned parties that each person's knowledge and opinion is valuable.

LEVELING THE FIELD

Participatory exercises are relatively simple but require patience and skilled facilitation. In the Fez case, GreenCOM used team-building exercises and ice-breakers to raise the comfort level of participants, ensure everyone's participation, and guide participants to recognize the validity of the points of view of others in the room, despite differences in role and social status. For instance, while the room was originally set up with the government officials seated on a raised dais, the facilitators brought everyone down to one level, literally, and reinforced cross-role communication by dividing people into discussion groups randomly.

To prohibit prominent participants from dominating the discussion, ground rules included not allowing anyone to speak a second time until everyone had spoken once.

While the men at the meeting forbade the presence of neighborhood women, workshop organizers saw to it that women's voices were included. Women interviewers solicited women's views, and when they were presented, it was clear to all that women's knowledge filled in many gaps in the record. The information from women was thus used as an object lesson showing the improved performance that results from inclusion.

Many participatory techniques emphasize visual methods for drawing people out and promoting discussion. Rather than individual sources of information, such as surveys, they focus on group activities that generate shared visual representations such as maps of forest boundaries; charts ranking social and economic status within a community; maps of irrigation, time-lines of land-use, and so forth. The tools do not depend on literacy. Each tool looks at information in a different way. Use of multiple tools provides a way to cross check data.

PARTICIPATORY ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH METHODS

In addition to facilitated discussions, many tools exist to help groups obtain information, analyze it, and make decisions. The following examples will pertain to a sub-objective of improving or building irrigation canals to increase agricultural output.

Mapping

By walking through the territory and performing a group map-making exercise, participants can contribute and gather a great deal of information about possibilities, trade-offs, and concerns. Maps show the relationships between various systems, natural and man-made and illustrate potential problems and alternative solutions. Mapping is often the first participatory exercise in a project. In this non-confrontational and collective experience, women and other marginalized members of society may feel freer to express preferences and ideas.

A map for discussion of irrigation might include:

- Natural resources (rivers, forests, streams, meadows, mountains)
- Existing infrastructure (roads, railways, electrical lines, sewage, water pipes, garbage sites)
- Existing system of canals noting which require repair, upgrading or maintenance
- Water sources from which irrigation canals would be filled
- Location of new canals
- Locations of human habitations (houses, towns or villages)
- Location of solid waste disposal sites (traditional or formal)
- Location of fallow land and land not currently under agriculture that might be used for expansion

- ♦ Traditional (ancient) water catchment basins and canals
- ♦ Where aquifers flow below ground and where water is surface water
- ♦ Cattle/sheep pasture land
- ♦ Where women obtain domestic water.

The following comments on mapping come from the final report of the Nepal video letter project:

The production of the map was definitely a collective endeavor: boundaries and river markers were discussed, erased and drawn again; each member brought an object to mark his/her house; groups went off to collect red mud for drawing. When the map was complete, the specialized representation triggered in nearly every participants mind a different issue as they could situate their own homes and daily concerns within a larger… context. Many commented that they were amazed by how many issues they were able to pin down all at once by making and then consulting…the map. They also found this exercise to be more fun than simply talking or walking, and their interactions with one another become more direct.[*]

Transect Maps

The transect shows the topography of the land in relation to land usage. It shows where ecological sub-zones might require greater care and attention, where soil loss may be greatest and where gravity flow irrigation will and will not work. A transect map for irrigation could indicate:

- ♦ Hills and mountain areas
- ♦ Streams and drainage
- ♦ Gradient and timber line (if appropriate)
- ♦ Crop production in the various zones
- ♦ Other land uses (e.g. dwellings or human habitation, dams).

*Nepal: Environmental Education and Communication—Environment and Forest Enterprise Activity (EFEA), GreenCOM Final Report, November 1998.

Seasonal Calendars

When it comes to irrigation, seasonality is particularly important. A group exercise might yield, for example:

- ♦ Data on cropping patterns by season
- ♦ Times of maximum use and availability of water
- ♦ Times of minimum use and availability of water
- ♦ Tasks of men, tasks of women
- ♦ Data on planting and harvesting.

Time-Line/Historical Profiles

Historical profiles in irrigation can help a community better understand its own use of water. The time periods can be vast, as in a comparison of Roman irrigation and agricultural methods with contemporary methods. Or a time line could cover a generation, marking important episodes recalled by the community. A time line might note, for example,

- ♦ Major migration patterns in and out of the village
- ♦ Years of flood, drought, epidemics
- ♦ Deaths of leading figures
- ♦ Harvest celebrations or other celebrations and festivals; religious holidays
- ♦ Completion of construction of major monuments such as the village mosque or community center
- ♦ War or other conflicts.

Trend Lines

It is important that the community understand trends that affect their resources. Such trends range from changes in rainfall to shifts in market opportunities. Economic and social differences can be highlighted, for instance if rich farmers feel that productivity has been constant, but poor farmers do not. Trends are represented as graphs or visual charts after plotting the amounts over several years. Research on irrigation might spotlight trends over time in such areas as:

Ranking is a simple way of asking a community to limit its choices to those things that are the most important to all of them.

- Crop production
- Soil loss and fertility
- Rainfall
- Land cover
- Forest loss or reforestation
- Population
- Employment, for men and for women.

Matrices

Matrices can be used to explore any subject. For example a *historical* matrix for irrigation might be a chart indicating the following items at three points in time: before, during, and after a war:

- Land under irrigation
- Size of land holdings and ownership
- Kind of crops under cultivation
- Amount of cultivated land
- Amount of fallow land.

A *classification* matrix might show natural resource use by category of individual over the past year. The vertical axis could indicate land use (food or cash crop production, sheep or cattle ranching, natural forest, wood lots), while the horizontal axis represents categories of individuals (women, men, youth, adults, poor, rich) who use that land.

A *conflict* matrix looks at the various users of the resource and tries to indicate where conflict may have arisen in the past year or two years. In irrigation, possible causes of dispute might be where water is used by the person at the head of the canal leaving little for those at the tail. It could be about landowners who do not maintain the portion of the canal that crosses their land, thus limiting the flow of water to others below them. It can be caused by one village maintaining ownership of the water and limiting its use by other villages in time of drought. Again each box records the actual frequency of such conflicts so that they can be prioritized.

Pie Charts

Pie charts are a simple way of visualizing information and can show, for example, the proportion of a farm family's time spent in planting, or time spent irrigating. A pie chart could dramatically show the proportions of women's and men's labor involved in irrigation or obtaining household water.

Ranking

Ranking is a way of classifying information and prioritizing sensitive information and is often used to initiate an activity prior to using another participatory tool. For example, when studying the proportion of land ownership by rich people and poor people, it may be necessary to do an exercise with a pie chart to determine who is rich and who is poor in a village. The criteria for determining wealth should be determined by the community itself and is often an occasion for dynamic debate. Sometimes ownership of material things (a bicycle, a car, a tractor, sheep, cattle, etc.) is counted to measure wealth. Sometimes ownership of land is counted. Whatever the criteria, it should be decided by the community. Ranking is a simple way of asking a community to limit its choices to those things that are the most important to all of them.

CONTINUING THE PROCESS

Creating maps, time-lines, trend-lines, and seasonal charts—these help a community collect and sort relevant information, and prioritize it. Once sufficient information is generated, it is orally and publicly analyzed, and solutions are proposed. For implementation, participation implies self-directed development and communities are expected to exhaust their own resources in terms of manpower, money and materials, before asking for external assistance.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Western-trained experts look at development through a particular mental model and ask the questions dictated by that model. Other people's mental models are shaped by their own training and experience, which is why it is important that

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the research questions that lead to the design of a project or program be framed by the local community and not by the development expert. No matter how skilled the experts, they cannot presume to stand in the shoes of the client.

To the extent that s/he asks for particular information, the technical specialist still controls the development agenda. This control may satisfy donor concerns for accountability, but it continues to skew the process of development.

Another pitfall is that, in reality, participation is extremely difficult to get—and will never approach 100 percent. Development specialists will do well, though, to try to include at least representatives of the most concerned groups.

Finally, participation may not always be the most useful route to take. Legislation and regulation can be more direct and efficient. Communication activities can then focus on compliance.

In sum, useful participation is less a matter of applying techniques, methods and approaches, than of an attitude that values the views of all who are directly affected by a project.