

Participation is like a journey

Position paper by Charles Dhewa

My experience in working with farmers' organizations, Community – Based Organisations, NGOs and government departments in Southern Africa has shown that participation can be seen as a journey that people travel together, with an end in mind. It is a journey that takes people to uncharted territory, the unfamiliar, to new challenges and opportunities, to new benefits and costs.

The journey can be broken up into several parts:

- Get ready for the journey (*purpose and commitment to participation*)
- Where are you now? (*assessment, appraisal*)
- Where do you want to be? (*Visioning*)
- What is the best way to get there? (*action planning, decision-making, options*)
- What barriers are you likely to face? (*implementation-barriers to participation, problems*)
- How will you know how far you have traveled? (*monitoring and evaluation, success*)
- Arrival and preparing for a new journey (*embedding participation*).

Some important steps in the development journey

Given that most development processes fail to notice the link between one stage of the process and another, it is useful to look at the stages that one may go through in establishing participatory processes in community situations. These are as follows:

Formulate the desired situation: This is a description of what the individual or the community would like to achieve in a given period. The desired situation often covers many aspects of life and denotes success. Communities cover their values, and the social, economic and ecological improvements in formulating the desired situation.

Identify the community and area strengths: These are the resources the community possesses in order to achieve the aspired kind of life.

Problem and opportunity identification: Participants identify the major obstacles and opportunities that may lie in their path to achieving the desired life.

Problem and opportunity clarification: The people go over the problems and opportunities so that they can appreciate their context, content and relevance. This facilitates engagement, negotiation and deepening of discussions.

Causes and effects identification: Participants draw up a problem tree and/or causal diagram to identify real causes and consequences. There are many unsuccessful attempts to do development work because the solutions addressed symptoms only.

Prioritise: Participants identify the problems to tackle according to their importance and significance. There are some problems that if solved, lead to solutions for others.

Participatory planning: Participants then define the objectives derived from the desired situation, the problems identified and agreed upon, followed by specific objectives and

activities under each objective. They also decide on monitoring and evaluation tools and mechanisms.

Implementation and monitoring: Participants then implement the plan and constantly review it, learn from both the successes and failures, develop their own “theories” about the project and feed lessons into future planning.

Participatory evaluation and re-planning: After setting its own indicators and basis for evaluation, the community takes an active part in the process. It may decide to have someone from outside (external evaluator) in which case it should lead the definition of the terms of reference. At the end of the evaluation, major re-planning is often necessary.

Some lessons

Quite often, when a new technology is introduced into a community there is so much excitement from the local people. This fools whoever is introducing the technology to believe it is relevant. The truth usually comes out after a while and when the introducer pulls out. Participatory introduction of technology will prevent the disappointment that occurs when the community abandons the new technology once the donor pulls out.

The introduction of peanut butter processing machines (plate grinders) in Zimbabwe by the Development Technology Centre of the University of Zimbabwe (DTC), has produced crucial technical lessons. Women groups using manual or motorized grinders have provided valuable feedback leading to the production of user-friendly equipment. They provided important information on machine performance and the quality of the peanut butter produced. For instance, they revealed that the original machines were too heavy to operate and they also indicated that they wanted plate grinders to produce very fine peanut butter at once rather than was the case where a fine product would only be produced after the peanut passes through the plate grinders a number of times.

Some of the issues raised by the groups are that there is a serious shortage of spanners in rural areas. As a result of this observation, machine designers had to modify the machine so that few tools are used to operate it. For instance, instead of using spanners to adjust burrs, wing nuts were installed to simply adjustment. The earlier machines were difficult to dismantle and re-assemble for cleaning purposes. This observation came from the machine users causing the DTC to simplify the design for easier management. The development of manuals and trouble-shooting charts for the machine by the DTC was also a response to feedback from the groups. Courses were also introduced to help the groups manage the machines. A key lesson from this is that technology should be user-friendly for easier management and there is no substitute for participation by users in the development and assessment of technology.

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