Public Participation in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management Projects in South and Southeast Asia: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Facilitators of participatory approaches to community development in agricultural and natural resource management settings frequently encounter dilemmas due to embedded social and power structures that potentially interfere with achieving desired outcomes. These dilemmas underscore the need for better facilitation structures and techniques to mediate the complexity of disagreements. This paper reviews the literature on selecting and applying participatory facilitation methods in Asia, focused on South and Southeast Asia. The analysis acknowledges critics of participation and identifies elements for involving marginalized communities when using participatory approaches to increase the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Keywords: early engagement, facilitation, facilitator training, marginalized communities, power dynamics

INTRODUCTION

There is broad acceptance of the idea that the public should be given a greater role in development planning, which focuses on alleviation of poverty and support of social advancement. Increased public participation has been an important focus in community development and agriculture and natural resource management, particularly after Chambers (1983; 1994) popularized the application of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) in natural resource management, agriculture, poverty and social programs, and health and food security in the 1980s. Approaches to public participation worldwide range from the Gal Oya Irrigation and Resettlement Project (Uphoff 1992) in Sri Lanka to the Analytic Hierarchy Process in forestry in Australia (Ananda 2007) and conduct of public hearings as regards the environmental impact assessment of oil production in Ghana (Bawole 2013). Facilitators of participatory approaches frequently encounter dilemmas, which may be due to the structures obtaining in the community as well as possibly their choice of participatory methods, which may lead to unexpected or unwanted outcomes. For instance, Leeuwis (2004) describes how ranking technique, a well-regarded participatory method, raised tensions in a decision-making process in a meeting that addressed the priority of general and agricultural community problems involving San Bosco community in Costa Rica. Leeuwis concluded that problems were caused not only by normal levels of conflicts among the different needs and priorities of participants, but also by the ways in which sub-communities (sub-groups) focused on defending their interests in the meetings in an entrenched manner, without a willingness to negotiate for mutual benefit. Moreover, in many communities, even the overlay of basic democratic procedures, as seemingly simple as "majority vote," can result in discrimination or prejudice against those who disagree, despite use of a secret ballot. There is also a need to avoid the cosmetic use of participatory jargon (Apthorpe 1997); for instance the term "participatory" may be used for the purpose of attracting donors (to meet the requirements of a request for proposal) or of appealing to a community, instead of designing a program that provides real benefit to the public (Leeuwis 2000; Mosse 2003).

Reed (2008) questioned broad claims associated with participatory benefits when he argues comprehensively that participation does not occur in a "power vacuum." In some communities, embedded social and power structures potentially interfere with the inclusion of marginalized people, who are at a greater risk generally, but especially when change is proposed through development. He argues that there is a need for highly-skilled facilitators to maintain healthy group dynamics and improve equality. Potential threats to the efficacy of participatory approaches underscore the importance of better facilitation techniques and their improved application to address challenging situations, such as the use of facilitation designs to mediate the complexity of unstated (nonpublic) disagreements.

DESIGN AND FACILITATION

Using the metaphor of a ladder to describe participation in the U.S. community development literature, Arnstein (1969, 217) posits that the highest achievement in development planning is meaningful citizen control, in which "citizens obtain the majority of decision-making seats, or full managerial power." Other scholars have discussed variations of the participation levels (such as Biggs 1989; Pretty and Chambers 1993; Wilcox 1994). To some extent, these notions as regards participation point to a common principle: the

influence and sharing of goals for initiatives, decisions regarding approaches, and resources (Leeuwis 2004). For decades, the constructs of participation theories have shaped agriculture and rural development programs in different countries worldwide. Major international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations have adopted the principles of participatory approaches, making these as requirements for funding development projects around the globe (Heck 2003; Jennings 2000). In the 30 years since Chambers (1983; 1994) put forward a series of guides on development participation, participatory practices have gained a strong endorsement as a way to stimulate more equal power among stakeholders in development planning.

POWER ASYMMETRIES

In areas of rising development in Asia, some elements of community participation may be characterized as social accountability initiatives, particularly across South and Southeast Asia (Sirker and Cosic 2007). Under natural resource management's allocation policies, inequalities persist across gender, geography, class, caste, ethnicity, and age (Beck and Fajber 2006; Vernooy 2006). The situation highlights an important facet of facilitation, which is recommended in development settings where social dimensions play a crucial role: early and intensive engagement with marginalized communities and use of facilitation approaches that support low-power members of the communities in decision-making processes. Resources would need to be allocated, including facilitator employment and training. This paper provides specific examples from literature (such as Barnaud and van Paassen 2013; Butler and Adamowski 2015; Dahal et al. 2014; McDougall et al. 2013) that emphasize key steps in involving marginalized

communities in each of the major stages in design and facilitation of participatory models. The section intends to contribute to better public participation practice and to prevent common pitfalls.

It is well-known that the essence of participatory approaches is a reduction in the dominance of unequal power by empowering the poorest (Mosse 2001). Nevertheless, the implementation of participation faces a wall of complexity of local politics in rural areas. Barnaud et al. (2010) argue that different legitimate perspectives held by stakeholders can turn into dynamics that could lead to a complex and ambiguous socio-ecosystem. Local power is inevitable in rural politics – perhaps not more so than urban politics, but certainly not less than. As Mosse (2001) posits, it can be strongly shaped by local relations of power, authority, and gender roles and experiences. In the context of natural resource management, rural poverty has been associated with less access of people to the ability to manage resources (Barnaud and van Paassen 2013; Tyler 2006; Vernooy 2006), where access has always been linked to power relations. Dahal, Nepal, and Schuett (2014) demonstrated that marginalized communities are often related to poor people although they are the major users of natural resources. Their study regarding community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) of the Annapurna Conservation Area in Nepal showed that poorer households from the lower caste of Dalit relied heavily on wood from the forest. The worst risk is when a participatory approach benefits solely the local elites while the marginalized endure the cost. Kothari (2001), in a critique of participatory approaches, cautions development practitioners against underestimating the key power relation, as the dynamic may threaten the inclusion of particular individuals or groups as social control, as well as the whole body of knowledge available to them.

This situation regarding participation's risks and benefits underscores the importance of the focus of this paper, particularly in understanding inequality in social structures and power relations in natural resource management and the conjunction of facilitation strategies in dealing with power asymmetries. Insights into these issues would help community development practitioners not only in improving facilitation methods as part of intervention strategies that favor marginalized communities, but also in genuinely understanding meaningful inclusive and equitable development.

CHALLENGES IN MARGINALIZED COMMUNITY FACILITATION

Facilitation strategies that favor marginalized communities dependent on agriculture and natural resources are often challenged by power imbalance at the local level. This paper identifies several core issues derived from two recent case studies. Problems often arise during interaction among community members, such as during meetings and discussions. Marginalization was found to be usually linked to unequal access to authority in decision-making processes in the form of domination and oppression, underrepresentation and underestimation of opinion, and limited access to information (Barnaud and van Paassen 2013; Butler and Adamowski 2015; Dahal et al. 2014).

The Case of Nan Province, Thailand

Barnaud and van Paassen (2013) studied the issue of non-timber forest products (NTFP) management in Nan province. They provided evidence that the village leaders who were responsible for representing the marginal groups showed little concern for key issues of the public. These leaders, who were charged with representing the communities

in negotiation with national park officers, appeared to have no interest in sounding out the communities' issues because they stated that they believed that nobody was collecting forest products anymore. They assumed that people had abandoned this traditional practice, preferring instead to purchase food. Barnaud and van Paassen (2013) showed that contrary to the leaders' presumptions, more than one-third of the people in the community were still highly dependent on collected NTFP for their family's sustenance. The understanding of the context by the leadership did not reflect the reality of the people, particularly the marginalized members of the community. The leadership retained representation of these key groups yet consistently overlooked important data and behaviors. Bernaud and van Paussen use the case to illustrate large gaps of knowledge related to food insecurity that can occur when participation of marginalized people is not encouraged and sustained.

The Case of Annapurna Conservation Area, Nepal

Dahal, Nepal, and Schuett (2014) studied issues of equality in Nepal with regard to community-based natural resource management. They showed that qualified members of the Committee which managed the effort—members were mostly lower income individuals—rejected holding leadership positions because they did not want to sacrifice personal work by becoming involved in committee work. They struggled to fulfill their basic livelihood needs, thus felt that they must decline additional involvement in committee work. The study documented that poor people may show lack of interest in a project because they failed to foresee practical benefits they would gain from their participation. They may have very little motivation to participate because they do not perceive how the project may help fulfill their basic needs related to food and shelter.

FACILITATION: INTELLECTUAL AND PRACTICAL TRADITIONS

Participatory facilitation design and practices are embedded in several intellectual traditions, mainly Western in origin. Participatory practices in the 1970s–1990s drew from social psychology based in Europe (typified by Tavistock Institute) and in the U.S. (typified by Lewin 1947; see also Cummings, Bridgman, and Brown 2016). Inspection of facilitation guides such as "Participatory Learning and Action: A Trainer's Guide" (Pretty et al. 1995) shows a social psychology orientation in the key elements: (a) development of the individual as an adult learner; (b) understanding the individual in the context of the group dynamic; and (c) use of a facilitator to manage the group interactions, but not the outcome of the group, which is the province of the members of the group. Also, the guide's section on adult learning focuses on motivation and the need for some self-direction, both common elements of an adult education approach. Somewhat more developed are sections on group behavior, such as the "four stages of group development" (Handy in Pretty et al., 40) and "nine types of team members" (Belbin in Pretty et al., 46). Moreover, the guide emphasizes games as an underutilized means for group development, including the role of games in bringing "issues of conflict and dominance out into the open in a non-threatening way" (51). This step in the process of participatory facilitation, if neglected or underestimated, could potentially contribute to the failure of outcomes of participatory structures (such as failed voting) discussed earlier. The guide suggests ongoing assessment of trainees to reduce the return to "bad habits" or to catch and reward "innovations" (109). Finally, it provides a list of 10 situations (i.e., structural conditions) that would frustrate attempts to invite greater participation, even with a strong facilitator employing a valid facilitation approach. Among these, "status divisions may be rigidly followed" and "institutional focus is on product" stand out (Ison and Thompson in Pretty et al., 113).

Participatory facilitation within the social psychology tradition, however, has been subjected to criticism. The focus on the individual (member of a group) as the locus of change—even when that change is directed toward becoming more networked or in solidarity with others—is rejected by many from the critical theory point of view who argue that structures are more highly influential and that structural change is more enduring. Arnstein's (1969) model might term participatory endeavors "therapy," which is low on the ladder of participation.

It is possible that this rejection is a source of embarrassment or doubt as it enters the picture for change agents who are asked to use games or create community-based matrices in their work with marginalized people. Moreover, over the years, theorists such as Lewin (1947) have been interpreted to be simplistic and superficial (Cummings, Bridgman, and Brown 2016) with respect to important concepts such as "unfreezing" one's prior conceptual orientations, which games and participatory facilitation aim to accomplish. There is also confusion in practice. Guidebooks like Pretty et al. (1995) separate light-touch "ice breakers" from activities that are used strategically and more directly challenge power inequities and prejudices. However, in practice among less-trained facilitators, ice breakers often become solely a means for developing comfort and friendliness.

A second approach to participatory facilitation is founded in critical theory, and has played a role in more confrontational union and environmental politics around the globe. This type of facilitator is typically called an "organizer," and may play a crucial role in mediating between marginalized

people and more powerful members of the community and relevant institutions. The starker the difference in size and power, the more likely the organizer may come to play a role. Fornari (2007) reviewed the relevance of Jürgen Habermas and Amartya Sen to selected contexts in Asia and highlighted critical theory applications, particularly where organizers confronted entanglements of human rights with development. In summary, in situations where there is less difference geographically and socio-economically and where outcomes related to agriculture and natural resource management appear to be achievable and feasible, participatory facilitation appears to be more effective and less risky than approaches based on critical theory.

The efficacy of participatory facilitation is not yet established, however. For example, studies on the efficacy of participatory development approaches have not been conducted using valid designs such as comparative studies in a certain area, due to the complexity of the nature of development and the sensitivity of the nature of studying people in real settings. Lacking also are long-term comparative historical studies such as those by Putman, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1994), which established the durability of democratic social trends over centuries (in Italy) and their effects on social functioning. Therefore, measuring the effects of participatory approach is complicated. Nonetheless, this paper recounts examples that point to a pattern of meaningful development.

An example of facilitation's contribution to a better decision-making process in agricultural and rural development is its habit of improving the understanding of problems at the grassroots level and its ability to create meaningful discussion on alternative solutions (Ananda 2007; Brown, Montag, and Lyon 2012). One of its longer term benefit is having improved social structures that allow multidimensions of critical aspects to be brought into decision-making (Antunes, Santos, and Videira 2006) and

provide possible future situations for improved inclusion of marginalized stakeholders (Barnaud and van Paassen 2013; Butler and Adamowski 2015; Dahal, Nepal, and Schuett 2014).

MORE ON FACILITATORS

Nandago (2007, 37) considers facilitators as "the most important persons in development, spread and evolution of high quality participatory methodologies." Facilitation is a complex process involving multidimensional aspects occurring continuously such as planning, taking action, reflecting, learning, and change (Chambers 2002). Thus, there is no "special formula" that can be a single solution to all problems. A range of literature discusses effective facilitation methods, strategies, and techniques to improve participatory approaches. Some of the more popular ones include "Participatory Workshops" (Chambers 2002) and "A Trainer's Guide" (Pretty et al. 1995). Resources on facilitation emphasize helping beneficiaries to identify their needs and articulate their ideas. In many cases though, marginalized people not only lack access to basic education and facilities, but also are powerless to convey their ideas due to existing power structures.

The key element of facilitating marginalized people is to capture both what is being said and what is not. The focus should be reinforcing marginalized communities at both the individual and group levels. Benefits should flow to both. We selected approaches based on the particular findings in the case studies presented earlier, which emphasized the group function representing marginalized communities in decision-making through group meetings. The aim is to create a conducive atmosphere where marginalized people feel safe to express opinions freely and to trust that their voices are listened to and considered.

Key Facilitation Strategies

To avoid facilitation failure, we identify key strategies that a facilitator should adopt, which are given below. But before we discuss the strategies, it should be emphasized that one of the most essential elements in facilitation is early engagement. This stage may take months, even years. Reed (2008) highlights the importance of representing relevant stakeholders as an initial stage in stakeholder participation. He notes that development projects commonly engage stakeholders only in decision-making during project implementation–which is late in the game. He argues that besides increasing the stakeholders' participation level, early engagement also improves the facilitator's understanding of the variety of needs and priorities held by the different stakeholders. In addition, Butler and Adamowski (2015) say that early engagement is an appropriate way to identify (and thus reduce) barriers (such as the choice of day and time, venue, and methods of workshops) to involvement of members of marginalized communities. Detecting and reducing these barriers could increase the marginalized members' confidence and eventually support fuller engagement in later activities. Furthermore, early engagement is important in building trust - an essential element when working with marginalized people. In the case of NTFP management, for instance, many villagers were pessimistic about their sentiments being heard by the board of the national park due to their trauma from past threats of violence resulting from strong top-down policies that had been in place for decades (Barnaud and van Paassen 2013). Interactions during early engagement may minimize misleading information that could lead to biased interpretation of current issues.

Stakeholder identification

Stakeholder identification and analysis are used to recognize power imbalances and to categorize members of marginal communities in the project. They may use tools such as a stakeholder analysis grid or campfire analogy. Facilitators need to observe, identify, assess, and position relevant stakeholders in relation to the power dynamics in the project prior to selecting the appropriate strategies to empower marginalized people. Butler and Adamowski (2015) point out the importance of facilitators successfully identifying the correct marginalized communities in the beginning, because it would then be easier for them to recognize and link with other marginalized groups across the area. This process requires conscientiousness because more powerful stakeholders might use their influence to exclude other members of the community in the project site (Barnaud and van Paassen 2013). Additionally, carelessness in stakeholder identification (e.g., using demographic representation in a place where different demographics have wide gaps of power and social status) can lead to inequitable representation because people who have more wealth would strive to win the top position (Butler and Adamowski 2015; Chambers 1994).

Neutral or not?

Barnaud and van Paassen (2013) underscore the importance of defining the posture that should be constructed by facilitators during early engagement. They suggest that in a situation where power asymmetries occur, taking a non-neutral posture (i.e., the project decides that only some stakeholders will be offered the opportunity to be empowered) may be an appropriate way to prevent the increase of social inequity discussed by Kothari (2001). The less powerful stakeholders would not have the ability to defend their interests in front of more powerful stakeholders should they be divided

and be unprepared in the decision-making process. It is thus useful to have preliminary discussions, caucuses, workshops, and the like for marginalized villagers to collectively reach a mutual perspective to strengthen their position before they go into a discussion with the more powerful stakeholders. In their study regarding forest management issues in Thailand, Barnaud and van Paassen (2013) used the Companion Modeling (ComMod) method to mediate conflict between the Royal Forestry Department (RFD) and two communities within the Mien ethnic group. A series of workshops were held to enhance the villagers' awareness of the importance of mutual understanding through collective reflection on the issues they faced and to increase their preparedness for the discussion with the board of the national park. A critical role of the facilitator in this phase is to explicitly expose the posture to allow all local stakeholders to either accept or reject the idea that only part of them will be empowered. The objective of this strategy is to be transparent and to gain legitimacy regarding the non-neutral posture.

Encouraging representative leadership

Marginalized people often need representatives so their voices could be heard. Leaders are needed not only to sound the people's interests in the decision-making processes, but also to defend and to argue while decisions are being made. In a meeting, gaps of social status within participants often become communication barriers in development programs. Barnaud and van Paassen (2013) showed an example of two poor women who initially said that NTFP for food was more important than commercially-bought food, but indicated the opposite during a subsequent meeting because the village leader influenced them to change their minds.

Representative leaders who are able to speak their minds freely and articulate ideas clearly in front of powerful people must maintain fairness in opinion sharing during discussion in order to increase the likelihood that the views of marginalized people will be considered in the discussion. Failure to properly put forward these views will lead to biased understanding of the sentiments of marginalized people. Facilitators need to recognize and mentor people who are capable of becoming the representative leaders. Interaction during early engagement (such as preliminary discussions, pre-workshops, etc.) may serve as a space for social learning among marginalized people to discuss issues at stake and to draw common perspectives toward solution(s), as well as to recognize and develop personal leadership capabilities that come from internal group collaboration. Further activities such as leadership training might be an option to foster representative leadership.

The above strategies are paramount to increasing participation of marginalized communities by reinforcing their position toward encountering power asymmetries with respect to issues in decision-making processes. Other strategies exist in the literature and in practice. Some strategies focus on selection of methods, such as by enhancing powerful stakeholder's awareness concerning diverse interests of marginalized group through card-ranking technique to visualize and discuss prioritized problems (Barnaud and van Paassen 2013) or by giving more power to marginalized group during decision-making processes through voting modification where a larger weight is given to the marginalized group (Butler and Adamowski 2015). Others emphasize negotiation by convincing the powerful stakeholders that fulfilling the interests of the marginalized group is in their interest (win-win solution).

CONCLUSION: LOOKING TOWARDS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF FACILITATORS

In the development discourse worldwide, studies consider urban areas to be the focus of innovation and regional growth, whereas rural areas are considered to be passive, separate, and isolated entities (Ward and Brown 2009). In Asia, agriculture, natural resource development, fisheries, and rural development have come to be considered a crucial part of development. The agriculture sector is the largest employer in many Asian countries (Briones and Felipe 2013). Agriculture and rural development is a premier context for participatory facilitation in Asia because it sets the stage for the economic and social engine of the region. The importance of this sector has led to many studies, which, among others, have led to the understanding that agricultural and rural areas are defined by local boundaries and are decentralized (Moseley 2003), as indicated by decision-making at a lower level. Development in agricultural and rural areas involves multidimensional aspects that are bound by different local environments. In this regard, participatory facilitation is well suited to crossing boundaries and becoming fitted to unique environments by using approaches that build on local decision-making. With the help of facilitators, groups can plan for tangible outcomes that respect the resources that a group brings to the situation. The process should not violate core values nor oppress members of the community; it should deliver highly ranked products and services, and build toward independence in the production of outcomes. A key tenet of the facilitation process is the inclusion of marginalized people in agricultural and rural development. Facilitation's most critical aspect for success appears to be early and consistent engagement.

We would like to turn the discussion to the implications for professional development of facilitators, and retention of high-quality practitioners with respect to power issues in settings with marginalized communities. As a field worker in a community development project, the facilitator is a vital instrument for success, a professional who translates concepts into practices. The effectiveness of program implementation depends to a large extent on the facilitator's skills and capacities to select and use appropriate methods and strategies on the field.

Processes in early engagement involve continuous and dynamic interactions among the facilitators and the institutions or nongovernment organizations that employ them, the marginalized groups, and the powerful stakeholders. These responsibilities require prior training and not just training concurrent with employment or conducted during a brief orientation (which may not be facilitation training). To be successful, the facilitator must know how to build trust so that marginalized people will believe that the process being offered will allow them to be involved (not merely as a form of tokenism) and that the output of the process will benefit them economically and socially.

Challenges also arise when marginalized people have experienced trauma due to past conflicts with other stakeholders or institutions, or from being excluded in prior development planning that used top-down approaches. The case of NTFP in Thailand reflects how past conflicts between villagers and the national park officers increased suspicion and bigotry (Barnaud and van Paassen 2013), which likely hindered the building of consensus or agreements. Facilitators should tackle or at least acknowledge this issue in the beginning of the engagement process. They should also be able to recognize when they cannot force a fast resolution.

Furthermore, legitimizing a non-neutral posture to practice a meaningful early

engagement requires compliance from powerful stakeholders as well. Facilitators should test whether the range of stakeholders will accept this approach to reduce prejudice against the posture, so that the powerful stakeholder will not view it as an intervention to be rejected.

Capacity building of facilitators should take into account the above discussion and many other theories and skills. Alongside technical skills, empathy is a broad ability that should be honed during professional development of facilitators (supported by social psychology's theoretical base for many participatory approaches). Sensitivity and responsiveness are also necessary skills: facilitators should be able to notice behaviors that reflect disagreement and inferiority. The facilitation training design should also encompass continuous learning processes that transform facilitators' empathy toward marginalized people and, at the same time, build confidence (respectful assertiveness) in working with more powerful stakeholders.

The training should develop among facilitators the capacity to understand and employ tools and techniques that suit particular situations, to individually assess diverse responses vis-a-vis the tools used, and to assist in selecting the most appropriate tool that would change circumstances to the advantage of the marginalized group. Skills in using tools and strategies favoring marginalized communities in early engagement process should be developed and disseminated. Moreover, facilitators should have appropriate mentoring and the support of their institutions. They should be given space to share experiences with peers to integrate meaningful learning processes among them.

Addressing power asymmetries in public participation is a complex process that requires facilitation strategies that favor marginalized communities through early engagement and follow-though. Awareness of non-neutral postures and its legitimation, capacities for identifying stakeholders, understanding the fit of

methods and techniques, and attaining abilities to use them in situations as appropriate are some of the important elements needed by facilitators to encourage less powerful stakeholders to achieve meaningful participation. Examples in the paper show that tailed responses may lead to successful outcomes, while dismissive or rushed approaches may result in empty gains or worsening social conditions. Further research is needed on improved strategies to empower marginalized communities to address power imbalance especially during decision-making processes in agriculture and natural resource management.

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