# **Community Participation and Capacity Building**

***Introduction***

*Community Participation is a continuous process in which a community organizes itself and takes responsibility for managing its problems. Taking responsibility includes identifying the problems, developing actions, putting them into place, and following through.*

**The objectives of community participation include:**

1. Identifying problems, needs and other important values
2. Providing critical information related to the problem
3. Generating ideas to solve the existing problems
4. Evaluating alternatives and pick the best option
5. Resolving conflict by consensus
6. Providing feedback and facilitating continuous action

**Factors that facilitate Community participation**

1. Conducting consultations where the people are;
2. Working with traditional leaders, and the full range of community groups and organizations;
3. Ensuring that the scope of consultation is appropriate to the decision being made;
4. Limiting the number of management and consultative bodies to which communities have to relate;
5. Giving communities and other interested parties adequate, intelligible information and enough time to consider it, contribute to proposals themselves and respond to invitations to consult;
6. Ensuring that consultations are in a culturally acceptable form. For example, indigenous people with a tradition of decision-making by communal discussion should not be expected to respond with a written submission from one representative. The indigenous consultation mechanisms that may exist should be used.
7. Ensuring that the timing of consultations is right. This means that consultation should not take place so early that no useful information is available, or so late that, all people can do, is react or oppose detailed proposals.

**Prerequisites for Optimum Participation**

To facilitate community members optimum participation in projects, there are some conditions that must be focused on. Such include autonomous organizations and homogenous membership.

**Autonomous organization**

1. **Membership:** This should include the community members at the grassroots. Such organizations counterbalance the larger uncontrollable power concentration at the higher levels and also strengthens the small community members’ collective capacity for self-defense. These organizations need support from development agencies but caution must be taken to ensure that the community does not over rely on such agencies. The agencies should ideally empower the community to collectively bargain for their position and to have their collective voice heard.
2. **Leadership:** Such organizations are managed by the community members themselves. The leaders must be properly oriented to ensure their motivation and commitment.
3. **Organizational structure:** The members should be allowed to participate in decision-making in the group operations as opposed to rigid and bureautic structures.
4. **Homogenous membership.**
5. **Importance of homogeneity:** For authentic representation of common interest and avoidance of conflicts in interests, homogeneity must be considered. In many cases people with similar problems naturally get into some kind of grouping either for consolation or to seek a way out. Homogeneity prevents domination by some members and facilitates effective participation.
6. **Social differentiation and economic stratification:** It is not easy to get a completely homogenous community. This means that there is need for narrowing down the criterion for homogeneity. This could be based on either vertical social differentiation or horizontal stratification.
7. **Vertical differentiation**

This includes cultural, ethnic or gender status. These factors cut across the layers. There may be concerns that affect a group that has such ties and members would work towards common solutions.

1. **Horizontal stratification**

This includes economic classes. Though the criteria may vary from one community to another, these classes can be established through wealth ranking exercises.

# **Capacity Building**

Capacity building refers to a endless process of strengthening stakeholders’ ability and capability to determine their individual priorities and values and to consolidate themselves to take suitable action based on the priorities. Capacity building aims to create skills and experience, rise opportunities and boost involvement in decisions that affect community members. It seeks to optimize utilization of resources and opportunities.

This process involves identifying existing capacity resources and assessing the gaps that exist to implement community mobilization. The gaps identified should be supplemented by capacity building of the community groups and other relevant stakeholders involved in community mobilization. Community capacity building, as both a concept and a strategy, has relevance to all communities and to society as a whole. It is, however, most commonly applied to disadvantaged communities.

The ideas behind community capacity building are not new and many of the aspirations, processes and strategies of community development are entrenched in the current manifestations of community capacity building.

**Some Underlying Values**

The capacity building approach is based on the understanding that certain groups and communities have been, or are in danger of being 'left behind' in the society and that they need to 'catch up'. In this view capacity building clearly endorses the value of equal opportunity and social equity.

In its emphasis on participation and a more collaborative approach between different sectors, capacity building reinforces the value of participatory democracy and also expands the meaning of democratic governance at all levels. The concept of capacity building is also based on the conviction that all communities – regardless of their status have strengths or resources. This apparently simple and self-evident understanding contradicts the 'deficit' prism through which disadvantaged people and communities are usually viewed.

While the main purpose of capacity building in a community is often to achieve a specific outcome, it is argued that capacity building is also a desirable end in itself because it contributes to the creation and maintenance of communities’ active involvement. Community capacity building can be viewed as both a process and an outcome or as both a method of working and a value in itself. Considering the complexities of the concept, capacity building contains some internal tensions and ambiguities. These include:

* There are not always local solutions to local problems, regardless of the strength of a community's 'capacity'. Some problems require national level changes in policies, political approaches or resource allocations.
* The 'community' is not a homogenous entity. Within any community there are different viewpoints and interests. These may prompt some occasional conflicts.
* There can be significant inconsistencies between the goals and desired outcomes set by government and those preferred by local community organizations. In this view it is not clear who best reflects 'the community's wishes' (government bodies or local organizations), and should there always be shared decision-making and a search for consensus between the community
* The community leaders are not necessarily the representatives of the community or democratically appointed and thus may have other interests. It should be understood that, only motivated and willing individuals move things forward and make change happen.

# **Participatory Approaches**

Participatory approach is a practice where community members are invited to cooperate with the agents of change, researchers and developers, during the several stages in the course of a project or programme innovation. The members participate during the initial exploration and problem definition and pool their ideas together in search for a solution. During implementation, they help evaluate proposed solutions.

The participatory approach in community development becomes effective when it utilizes principles of self-help, felt needs and participation. When members of a community display high levels of felt needs, they are very likely to think of problems as relevant and a priority for instituting change. The notion of cross-cultural variability calls for extensive investigations to develop a body of knowledge concerning the problems facing a particular community prior to the implementation of programme/project for some intended change.

Community Developers are supposed to exploit participatory methods so as to gain insight into local community’s strengths and weaknesses. This is because knowledge of problems is connected with actions required and that solutions are produced by community stakeholders who are beneficiaries of change.

# **Types and Levels of Participation**

There are many different types of participatory approaches that can be utilized to help a community to define their needs. These include: -

# **5.5 Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)**

This is refers to the methods employed by Non- Governmental Organizations and other agencies involved in international development.  PRA developed in late eighties in South – India, Nepal and Kenya. PRA sought to bring extra people-centered approach to the development practice by laying emphasis on community members’ active role in pursuing their own agenda and having more power in decision making process since they are bound to understand their situations better than anyone else. The PRA approach seeks to incorporate the knowledge and opinions of rural people in the planning and management of development projects and programmes.

This approach was in contrast to the prevalent practice of the donors and aid workers who had the main power in deciding about how communities should be assisted. Within several years from its inception, PRA became widely used by NGOs, academics, governments and communities. One of the reasons of such popularity has been its methods which, include **and empower people in matters that affect their lives.**

# **Self-esteem, Associative strength, Resourcefulness, Action planning, Responsibility (SARAR)**

This is an education/training methodology for working with stakeholders at different levels to engage their creative capacities in planning, problem solving and evaluation. The five attributes and capacities in this approach are considered the minimum essentials for participation approach to be a dynamic and self-sustaining process. The attributes are described as follows: -

1. **Self-esteem:** a sense of self-worth as a person as well as a valuable resource for development. Community members only feel free to participate when they know that they are appreciated for who they are.
2. **Associative strength:** the capacity to define and work toward a common vision through mutual respect, trust, and collaborative effort.
3. **Resourcefulness:** the capacity to visualize new solutions to problems even against the odds, and the willingness to be challenged and take risks.
4. **Action planning:** combining critical thinking and creativity to come up with new, effective and reality-based plans in which each participant has a useful and fulfilling role.
5. **Responsibility:** Ability to follow-through until the commitments made are fully discharged and the hoped-for benefits achieved.

SARAR is based on the principle of fostering attributes among the stakeholders involved in the evaluation. Such a process enhances the quality of participation among all the stakeholders.

# **Beneficiary Assessment (BA)**

Beneficiary Assessment is refers to qualitative method of collecting information on beneficiary perceptions toward an activity. The method is described as involving participant observation and intensive qualitative interviewing in the project communities by professionals trained to develop information attuned to the needs of local project management. By using focus groups, semi-structured interview and observations, information can be collected, measured and tabulated to show how stakeholders will value improvement.

Community groups having more power are likely to be engaged and previously have had their voice and perspective heard. Because of economic and cultural differences some communities have less power. This shows that a number of participatory methods should be purposefully be employed in a community to come up with solutions that embrace all stakeholders.

In any participatory approach, it is important to consider matters appertaining to accountability. Accountability plays an important role in making sure that there is maintenance of steady relationships amongst the different stakeholders. It is important to make the leaders of the project accountable to community members, who are the beneficiaries. This makes the community members have courage to get involved and be committed to the success of the project and project’s sustainability.

For the project’s success it is important to assist community members cultivate a sense of its ownership. If community members get involved in the process of decision making, they cultivate a sense of project ownership. Generally, project sustainability depends on the level of community ownership members feel they have in the project. Without the participation of the local community, projects often fail. Ideally, there should be interdependence between the local community and the external agents of change.

The first step in the evaluation of participatory approaches is to look at social and cultural customs of the society. It is largely believed that the finest way of promoting community participation is by inspiring community to own and to take part in projects meant for their community development. The need for self-reliance must also be considered since without it participants may continually rely on the project without concern for development.

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