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Strengthening Participation of Field Practitioners in the Communication and Development Process

By

Mohd Fadzilah Kamsah
STRENGTHENING PARTICIPATION OF FIELD PRACTITIONERS IN THE COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

By

Mohd. Fadzilah Kamsah, Ph.D.

Introduction

Communication serves as a vital ingredient in determining the success and effectiveness of development programs, especially in the context of the development of the rural sector. Communication by itself is unable to bring about necessary changes in rural areas. However, in concert with other inputs, communication facilitates the realization of rural development goals. One can argue that no development endeavor is complete (or even practical) unless communication strategies and activities are incorporated into the diagnosis of needs and problems of the intended beneficiaries, and into the design, implementation, evaluation and feedback mechanisms of identified development programs. Communication serves as the lifeline which connect and interrelate the various subsystems that are involved in the achievement of the stated development goals.

The earlier models of development often failed because their approach neglected the necessity to involve the intended beneficiaries, field practitioners and planners in
the development process. Projects were designed for, not with, the rural people and field practitioners; thus much of the expertise, experience, energy, interest and commitment of the main "actors" of development were lost.

Field Practitioners: The Unsung Heroes

Before we can proceed with the discussion on participation, we need to address the role of the field practitioners. In the rural development context, the field practitioners constitute those that are involved directly in the implementation of development projects. These include extension workers, technicians and all those that work at the frontline. The field practitioners (FPs) serve as the vital link between the beneficiaries of development and the development agencies, and the agencies to the knowledge and research centers.

By and large, the FPs are regarded merely as "implementers" rather than as "partners" in developing the rural sector. In other words, they are relegated to the status of doers and, more often than not, are not involved in such development activities as need assessment, program planning, and monitoring and evaluation.
The FP's, by right, have a broader role to play and can offer their contribution at every stage of the development process. The pertinent questions to ask at this juncture include: Why aren't the FPs given the opportunity to participate more in the communication and development process? What are the barriers to a more wholistic and meaningful participation of the FPs? What are some of the means of boosting the participation of FPs in the communication and development process? Must the FPs remain as the unsung heroes of development?

Dimensions of Participation

The term "participation" can be conceived and defined in different ways, depending on the context of the issue being discussed. One can speak about participation in benefits, in implementation, in planning and decision-making, and in monitoring and evaluation.

The subject of participation is a complex one and we should take into account several dimensions. The term "participation" can be broken down into specific components along three dimensions -- what kinds of participation are occurring, who is participating, and how? The first two can be represented quantitatively in terms of frequency -- how
many of what kinds of persons are involved in what activities or aspects of participation? The third dimension is more qualitative in nature.

The fourth dimension of participation that need to be included is evaluation. Evaluation is a crucial element in participation but is often underemphasized and not given its due weight.

Each dimension in itself is comprised of different kinds of participation. For instance, there can be participation in initial decisions, participation in ongoing decisions, and participation in operational decisions.

Not everyone should or can participate in all aspects of a development project. Also, each project usually aim at involving and benefitting some groups more than others. Hence, it is important to specify who should participate in relation to the kinds of participation.

Any effort to strengthen participation needs also to consider the "how" dimension.
This includes such questions as:

a) How voluntary or compulsory is the participation
b) How self-initiated or imposed is it?
c) How continuous or intermittent is it?
d) How routine or ad hoc is the participation?
e) How much or how little participation is expected?
f) How direct or indirect is it?

Despite its importance, systematic evaluation is seldom carried out, and even then usually in very technical, non-participatory ways. Future development projects should consider this dimension of participation more earnestly.

Issues on Strengthening Participation

The implicit rationale of participatory approaches in the communication and development process is that everyone involved has a specific role to play and each role can be expanded to achieve a greater overlap and interrelationship among the various roles. The task is to find ways to systematize and synchronize the available knowledge, experiences, initiative, critical appraisal, talent, organization, effort, and commitment of the development actors.
Increased participation, either of the FPs or other role positions, will only be realized through deliberate, systematic and concerted efforts on the part of those responsible for project formulation, design and operation. To increase FPs' participation, they must be sensitized to the benefits (materially or psychologically) that accrue from such participation. It is not uncommon to find instances whereby participation of FPs is in the form of "delegation" from the project planners. Meaningful and equitable participation should take into account the interests and goals of all participants and the development project's aims.

Some of the benefits of greater participation of FPs include:

a) Sharing of project accountability
b) Improved technical design
c) Resource (both tangible and intangible) mobilization
d) Greater sense of belonging
e) Greater motivation and commitment via role enrichment

There are threats and constraints at the local level, within the bureaucracy, as well as in the environment, which inhibit greater participation of FPs. For example, there may be lack of understanding of technical possibilities
relating to the communication or development project, lack of trust among the incumbents of the different role positions, sheer ignorance on the mechanisms of participation, low self-concept, or the inherent nature of the project itself which may restrict the possibility of participation. Nevertheless, with appropriate planning and design efforts, such threats and constraints can be ameliorated.

Concluding Remark

The importance of participation of FPs in the communication and development process need not be overemphasized. But an inquisitive mind may still be asking: Is participation of FPs really practical in areas requiring a high degree of professional and technical competence? There is a dearth of research addressing the issue, but the available examples indicate that FPs' participation is not only practical but indeed indispensable for the efficient implementation of communication and development programs (see for example, Mohd Yassin & Md. Sail, 1984; Mohd. Yassin et al., 1985; Mohd. Yassin & Kamsah, 1983). However, one must be cognizant of the fact that appropriate and feasible kinds of participation are contingent on the circumstances and objectives. There is