

Participative Strategies, External Advisory and Community Development in Mexico

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Abstract

During the 80s and the 90s there was a boost in participatory strategies created in order to solve a serious deficiency in community development programmes and projects. The existence of these methodologies, *per se*, does not guarantee conscious and voluntary participation of rural inhabitants. Social energy mobilisation of rural communities poses a demand on those who monitor or implement participative strategies for the consideration of, among others, rescuing the information that exists about the community; the historical and subjective construction of the communities; the respect of the existing structure and organisational forms; the consideration of the specificity of proposed objectives and its close relationship with specific operative strategies, and respect of the time and pace of the communities, as well as the time, pace and wanders of organisational processes of social actors within these communities.

Participative strategies and community rural development

Institutional strategies for rural development in the past were characterised for their top-down grand design, in which remarks over how to influence from outside into the rural world were becoming vague and imprecise as the guidances provided were reaching the implementation scenario, until they finally became non-existent at community level. Therefore, the grand design, the good intentions, were implemented by field level personnel throughout several strategies that were sometimes embedded into the present political ideology, at times conditioned by the political and social control mechanisms of the regime in turn, at times shapes by the common sense, and the ample room for manoeuvring of the field level personnel in charge of implementing them. This situation motivated Michael Cernea in 1982 to state that there was a serious vacuum on what he called the "software" for rural development, that there were no implementation strategies to work at micro social level¹.

Times have certainly change. In nearly 25 years diverse strategies have been developed in order to work at community level. The same Michael Cernea, considering his experience in Integrated Rural Development Programs (IRD) at World Bank, became involved in the design of implementation strategies for rural development that were successful in dealing with the human side of development within rural communities. This search gave as an outcome the book published in 1992 titled: "The Building Blocks of Participation: Testing Bottom up Planning"², where this author states the need for putting upside down the order of the structuring levels for work, as weel as designing, deciding and implementing programs and projects of development starting from the individual, then the domestic unit,

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then the informal groups, then the community and to keep on knitting right from these field levels upwards and not viceversa.

Robert Chambers is another academic that has influenced in community work participatory strategies out of his own disenchantment after working on the Integrated Rural Development Program of Kenya in the 60's³. He started to look for down to earth methodologies that allowed to influence adequately in rural communities. This academic developed the Rapid Rural Appraisal and more recently the Workshops for Participative Rural Evaluation⁴.

The work of GTZ (German Society for Technical Co-operation) over participatory methods for community development strategies has derived into a diverse ways of doing field work applied in Less Economically Developed Countries⁵. These variants in general follow the principles and ideas stated over RRA and TERP, diversifying the type of support according to the particular characteristics of each community. Among these works, due to its closeness to Latin American reality, it is worth mentioning the one carried out by Herman Tillmann and María Angélica Salas titled: "Nuestro Congreso: manual de diagnóstico rural participativo (Our Congress: Manual of rural participatory diagnostic)"⁶.

In Mexico, the work of the Instituto Mexicano de Desarrollo Comunitario (IMDEC) i, based on "Educación Popular" and the work of Paolo Freire has had particular relevance⁷, emphasising, as a pedagogic defiance, the need to "educate in order to transform", motivating a critical way of thinking among the population in order to oppose it to the false appearance of the dominant thought over which any oppressive system it is ideologically reproduced. The TERP have been promoted by the NGO *Grupo Ecológico Ambiental* (GEA) ⁸, and even the same government have been applying similar participatory techniques like in the National System of Integral Rural Training and Extension (Sinder) ⁹. and the Regional Funds of the Indigenous National Institute (INI) in order to promote and manage these programs under a participatory facade.

These strategies put together a cluster of dynamics at community and intracommunity level by means of which advisors, named monitors in this case, help the local population to rescue, order and systematise information and points of view already existent, disperse and hidden among community members, in order to mobilise the social energy required for solving different kind of problems: productive activities, agrarian conflicts, preservation of natural resources, health problems, cultural development, local government, power relations, and so on.

Participatory paradox and participative strategies

It is certain that the participative strategies mentioned above have come to fill a vacuum in community development. Today any development agent of public institutions, non governmental organisations and the same rural organisations and communities count with an ample reservoir of participatory strategies as well as countless evaluations, reports, books and papers that rescue concrete experiences that can be taken as an example of how to advice, how to accompany processes of change in a more efficient, capable and reflexive manner. Despite of that, the mere existence of these strategies as well as a great number of

participatory tools and techniques, are no guaranty of their proper and ethical use: there is no antidote against the bias implementation of these strategies, participative in appearance, they can be also use in order to manipulate people, making them fell they are the ones who decide about goals previously established by alien institutions and their field level personnel.

In face of the apparent panacea offered by participative strategies for community development, it is quite common for difficulties in decoding the real problems of communities to be present. Monitors require more than effort in order to grasp vital information and knowledge out of narrations, stories, observations, there is also the need to uncover the subjacent signs implicit under the superficiality of felt needs, there is also the capability in order to feel when is appropriate to intervene in a situation and when is better to remain aside and even to leave the scenario. The problem of implementation becomes even more complicated when monitors already have, as bias dice, the intention to convince about a preconceived idea, action, strategy, despite the ideas, expectations, or felt needs of the supposed beneficiaries of their actions: changes in use of soil, a new policy on population control, new requirements for collective associations imposed by a trade or a financial institutional program, "using participatory strategies".

These problems, neglections, inefficiencies, manipulations, uncovered guidance in the implementation of participatory strategies for community development can generate discouragement and even upset the local population up to the extent of withdrawing from participative workshops, they might even feel nostalgia and yearn for the return of the old fashion extensionist, who with less time, effort, turns, and manipulation offer openly, direct and in an impositive manner the apparent solution to community problems.

In order to avoid these type of situations, the participatory strategies already mentioned, require being implemented in a cautious, serene and capable manner, by mature and experienced monitors with a clear idea of their role in the accompanion process, avoiding the imposition of their own views as well as those of their institutions, and trying to keep a low profile in all their actions. In order to promote the participation of the rural population, monitors have to consider fundamental aspects related to community development strategies: (i) to do a lot of research and to gather relevant information about the community in government offices: the National Agrarian Archives (RAN), the Indigenous National Institute (INI), the Ministry of Agriculture (Sagarpa), The National Rural Bank; to interview field level advisors and monitors who have previously worked in the community, to interview regional rural leaders who might know relevant details of the community's history; (ii) to construct and reflect upon the historical construction and the constituent subjectivity of the community and all the functional groups within it, (iii) to understand and respect of the uses and costumes of the community as well as the organised forms existent in the community; (iv) to reflect upon the specificity of the proposed objectives in relation to the specificity of the implementation strategies proposed, (v) to respect the rhythm and time of the proposed beneficiaries of the accompanishment as well as those of the community as a whole.

The relevance of previous information

The good will of those who decide, with the best intention, to influence in other people's reality, generally convey the disdain of previous information, the local history, and the antecedents over previous experiences of the community with external or internal actions related to government or non government institutions, and even to peasant or indigenous organisations. In this way, it is quite common for field servants to arrive at a community in a similar way as Cristobal Colon when he thought he had reached "*Las Indias*". The newcomers always discover new territories just to realise with time that plenty of the basic information they discover on day to day basis could have been gathered before arriving into the community just by reading government files on the community or chatting with advisers who had previously worked in the community and that might know relevant information of the complex interwoven social fabric of the community.

Why to rescue community's history, as well as the subjective constitution of individuals and social actors of the community

Community development invites to imagine and idyllic and harmonious scenario. This romantic conception gets enlighten when the communities in question are involved in libertarian social movements. Passion, the need for faith in something, or just field work inexperience in rural scenarios make some advisors or monitors to believe in the existence of homogeneous communities, without antagonistic and conflictive relations among individuals or groups. Unfortunately, reality tends to be rather different and the norm could be stated in a completely different view by considering most named communities as mere localities, small towns, as a social scenario where consensus decisions and solidarity mechanisms among the inhabitants can take place side by side with authoritarian forms of exerting power by the local elite who might even impose slave type forms of exploiting the local population.

In the communities, the elite know when to look for social support by consensus decisions among the local citizens and when to impose their ideas even with the use of violence. The oppressed, the bottom of the local social structure, learn how to press and express their demands and views implicitly or explicitly, either in a passive resistant fashion or in open confrontation when rejecting the local elite. These strategies of hidden trails (Scott, *) or the open confrontation are also applied when facing governmental and non-governmental institutions, transnational corporations, religious sects, and other regional and external actors.

In this local scenario, the treads of the social skein are usually quite interwoven up to a degree of making impossible to pull just one of them without upsetting the others. Therefore, who influences in rural or urban local realities has to consider these localities as too complicated scenarios in which actors change playing roles continuously modifying their social nets and alliances which in turn tend to be explained by the history and the constituent subjectivity of identitarian nets.

In this complex local social dynamics, there are times when the members of the community fight as a whole against a common enemy or threat, and there are other times when they fight against each other, sometimes for reasons understood by insiders and outsiders like electoral fraud, water access, or the murder of a relevant leader of the community, and

some other times, due to factors related to beliefs, myth and rite, and the rebirth of the well forgotten identity or a historical social conflict that despite cotidianity still pervades.

That is why there is a need to search in the past, to reconstruct the local history in order to understand the present which is only a small part of social timing.

The imposition of organised forms and antidevelopment

One of the worst distortions of the "development engineering" is the lack of respect for associative forms of local social actors within a community, and even worse, the tendency to impose forms of organisation to potential beneficiaries of a process of change. This sin or deviation in rural development is commonly due to the bureaucratic and administrative need, blindness or stubbornness of institution decision makers, in search for associative forms in tune with their institution's administrative functionality and/or ideological fashion. In the best of the possibilities, when no bias dice is present, imposed associative forms tend to be the product of the common sense and guidance of mislead advisors.

It might be adequate, for the pursuing of the objectives of the action related to the natural resources of the community, to work with the whole social structure of the community, however, when dealing with productive projects, this same strategy can become utterly wrong. It is quite common that the best elements of a community remain aside of a productive adventure when they realise the participation of lazy, conflictive, corrupt or too powerful elements of the community. In order to allow the conformation of harmonic social groups for a productive project, the social strategy has to allow space for self-selection and even purging among their members, and community assemblies tend to be the worst scenario for these processes to take place.

Administrative limitations in order to provide attention to rural dwellers at individual level can also give ground to artificial groupings in order to reduce the number of field contacts with the population. In this way, there are institutions that only work with groups of 10 individuals, pressing the population to form clusters of this number according to the rules set by the institution in order to receive goods and services.

Opposite case are the institutions against collective ways that only work with individuals, others work with very small groups 4 or 5 individuals and others with domestic units and families. Most of these strategies reduce their coverage to a needle in a hay hip from which a regional strategy could never arise. It is also worth to mention that homely groupings although are natural in human society, need close accompaigment from advisors or monitors in order to avoid the patriarchal figure to run the activity as his own, leaving in doubt the level of democracy, human development and real participation in the group.

There is no doubt that there are community's uses and costumes, institutional intentions and actions, that can influence local development more adequately when they allow in their strategy for individual support instead of collective one, but viceversa it is also true, the problem is not whether to work with individuals, groups or community level collectives but to allow grand designs with homogeneous strategies to be applied to any individual or community despite their differences.

To think that rural dwellers need to be organised it is perhaps one of the main black rice grains in the pot, in this same direction one can think of trying to impose associative figures cut and shaped to fit the political and administrative needs of the development institutions, and even worst, conceived in tune with the politico-ideological dogmas of the time. It is worth at this point, as a counterpart, to reflect upon the level of organisation existent in rural communities and its specificities, and the idoneity of these micro-organizations built and decanted along time for the community development.

Even if migration might have decimated the internal community organisation, its members tend to form part of different groups: domestic units, families, informal vertical groups (Galjart, 1981), *cofradías* (humanhoods), political parties, sport teams, and the kind; in all of them there are social forms of reciprocity, solidarity such as lending, help in return, community duties. It is worth thinking until which extent community development, specially when it is promoted from outsiders, should be based on this complex community's organizative net.

The relevance of objective's specificity and its close relation with implementation strategies

The particular characteristics of programs and projects of community development like the type of action to be carried out: productive or social, and more specifically: beef production, preservation of natural resources, health care, potable water, represent a main determinant for the adequate forms of participation and the types of organisations inside communities. Meanwhile there are actions that require the participation of all the population like the management plan of natural resources of the community or the introduction of potable water net, there are others that are usually implemented by means of communitarian promoters such as social health care and others that require the participation of the population in small groups and others that tend to operate more adequately when they work at domestic unit or at individual basis.

Even if community development on principle should be inclusive and consider all the members of a community, the mobilisation of the social energy has to take into account the particularities of distinct actions to be implemented, together with the local forms of organisation. The actions to be develop require strategic precision and the definition of specific "steps" that are usually not transferable from one purpose to another. In this way, to develop a program for social health at regional level or to support the agricultural or animal production will require precision over how much should local authorities be involved, what decisions to carry out to the general assembly of the community, in which steps will the participation of the members of the community be required, when this participation will have to be expressed in general assembly and when in participatory workshops, what steps will have to be taken through the natural leaders of the organised groups inside the community, what others will have to consider all the members of an organised group.

These especificities, that somehow are imprinted by the main objective of change, will have to be shapes by local diversity. As an example, community work in order to achieve a better

handling of natural resources quite well can be initiated with a workshop of participative Rural Assessment (TERP) in which at the first stages all the member of the community should participate. On the other hand, to influence in the complex community's social cobweb by means of productive projects might require to work with the informal vertical groups within the community, this is valid also for projects that are to be handled individually and those to be handled collectively. Therefore, to sustain the work over productive projects, taking as an organizative basis the informal vertical groups of the community will require to carry out the same TERP, although this one will have to be carried out at each group instead of community level. To open the participation to all members of the community, in most cases, can degenerate into an explosive mixture of antagonistic elements.

It is worth mentioning that the members of a community usually participate when they are interested in the objective of change, being it the introduction of the service of potable water or the rational exploitation of the communal forest. In this way, people tend to gather together, become partners in a productive adventure when they coincide in interests with other members of the community.

For the purposes of community development, it is worth mentioning that the plasticity already mentioned is fundamentally reactive if endogenous and propositive if directed towards the structural context, and that in the social movement those who follow share identities, ideas, interpretations, projects, myths, utopias that are never stable and keep on changing with time. This situation, nevertheless, should not bear any hopes for a collective plasticity in relation to changing: objectives, projects and utopias generated for the dynamics of the social interaction and sometimes induced from outside. Therefore, a successful social group sprang from the felt need of the introduction of potable water for the urban area of the locality might tried * to be used in order to introduce honey production in the community, just to find disinterest, lack of participation and the dismemberment of the original organisation, meanwhile other individuals and groups that did not participate during the introduction of potable water now are really interested in participating in honey production.

Times, rhythms and uncertainties in organizative processes of social actors inside communities

All process of change requires assuming each step of it. Participants have to evaluate risks, to keep fear under control, assume uncertainties, build up assertiveness, and all these requires ageing with time. In this sense, community development, as a process of change, can not be achieved at a faster rhythm than the one established by the social group immersed in the process.

No matter the social compromise, and the appropriation by those who influences from the outside in a process of change inside a community, the truth is that this process is lived in a different way by each participant and specially by those who are members of the community and those who are not. From outside the process of change is seen as an easy one. From inside, to assume each step of it could imply encountered sentiments, conflict of interests, power negotiations and reallocations, changes in the appropriation of productive

resources and patterns of economic exploitation among dwellers. Each individual, each member of a group within a community, will live the process differently, and he or she will have to assume changes at his/her own pace: the individual and social compromise, the identity of a collective project, the risk and uncertainty implied; all these will inevitably entail moments of rebelliousness, anxiety and conflict. As time passes by the organisation of a group should be consolidated, generating at the same time capabilities of response as well as those needed in the mobilisation of resources.

The problem for advisors, monitors, or companions of the process of change relates to respecting, understanding, and assuming the different times and rhythms of the social actors involved in this process; all these without trying to impose his/her own perception of what should be considered as the right timing, "clockwise", or the proper rhythm, in order to avoid aborting the social actor's development.

The role of the agent, companions, monitor, advisor in community development

The previous section questions the role of the development agent. Certainly, it is not easy to influence in an adequate fashion into somebody else's process of change, Therefore, it is quite common for these agents to be tempted to assume borrowed identities that do not belong to them, to become protagonic and to inflate their ego through the community's recognition, to take in their hands roles and actions that should be carried out by those "obscure objects of their wish to develop them". In reality, most agents, due to their pragmatic and ageing need or due to a mislead psychological contract, assume a role of "*hacedores*" (makers) instead of "*asesores*" (advisors), generating a pathological dependency in their "objects", building up at the same time great vulnerability to the process of change that becomes regulated and conditioned to his/her guidance, hanging from the thread of his presence in the community. Therefore, a job promotion, a grant to continue studying, or the simple and human need of adventure of the agent can seriously put to treat the local project in face of the abrupt orphanage due to the absence of the personage that used to decide and do all the relevant aspects of the enterprise.

When should an agent take something in his/her own hands, when to live it to the "beneficiaries". How internal or external the agent should be. There is likely to be dissent of opinion around this aspects since these questions can only be answered according to the diverse local and regional realities, the uses and costumes of the community, the personalities of the intended beneficiaries, the particularities of the objective of change in question and the personality of the same agent. It is certainly difficult to know when to talk and when to remain silent, when to do things and take action, when our right shoulder is in need, and when is vital to let people do their own effort. Anyway, and assuming there is a diversity of situations, all those who influence in a process of change on principle has to allow the social actors to take the process of change in their own hands, so that it is them who, according to their logic and way of seeing life, incide in their present, building up realities that approach them to their utopias.

The above gets complicated due to the fact that development agents appear in the scenario representing an institution: supra governmental, governmental, non governmental, religious, producers, indigenious or peasant organizations. The script written by the

institution will somehow condition his/her role in the community and in the region. From this starting point, agents tend to rewrite their role according to a self perceived duty or bested interests, and as time passes by and they get to understand their room for manoeuvring defined by the accountability of the institution and the attitudes of the dwellers of the community. These last ones, the individual and social actors of the community, in turn, tend to rewrite the role of the agent according to their expectancies, their projects, their utopias all of which can have little to do with the institutional script or that of the agent.

The solution to this development riddle is not an easy one, above all if one considers that in the majority of the cases the development agent arrives into the community as a mere nosy person, to influence in the lives of people who did not ask him /her presence. This ethical problem usually finds an adequate rationalisation based on the assumed fact that any interference is grounded in a proposal for change considered as positive from those who promote it. The conflict among distinct scripts, on the other hand, can find place when the room for manoeuvring of the agent is ample enough even to put aside substantial parts of the institutional script in order to be able to adapt his/her one to the local reality. The most common scenario though, is that the conflict among different scripts tend to become worst up to the extent that the agent is pushed to take a stand between the institutional pressures generally in favour of imposing a strategy of change and to help subordinating community members into a story already written for them, or either, to try to find common ground for his/her role as developer agent and the process of change as seen by local actors. This last riddle has created an out number of non-governmental organisations integrated by individuals involved in community development in search for a more adequate spaces from which to carry out their professional life.

Final remarks

The problems of implementation of community development have motivated the search for down to earth strategies, for stiles of work of development agents in the process of change of rural communities. The participatory strategies generated from the 80's have been a fundamental tool in order to mobilise the social energy and to accompany process of change. These strategies, however, when offered as participatory panacea, in its goodness seem to carry the nonparticipatory "serpent egg". Its apparent participatory guaranty and the imprecision in the fine adjustment, together with implementation carelessness, can produce rejection among rural community dwellers that in some way feel pressed to participate in processes and projects somehow alien to their real worries.

Even if on principle the goodness of the participatory strategies is accepted: such as the Participatory Rural Assessment, or the Workshops of Participatory Rural Evaluation (TERP), however, it is wise to be cautious in their use and to consider distinct instrumental particularities, as well as the diversity existent among communities and inside of them.

This work has made emphasis in various elements usually left aside in the implementation of development actions that tend to condition the outcome of external and internal intervention upon community development. Among the relevant aspects mentioned are: the need for taking into account second hand information on the community, as well as the

knowledge that previous agents have about that community; the rescue of the local history and the constituent subjectivity of functional groups and the community as a whole; the consideration of the social structure and the organised groups existent in the community; the understanding of the power relations and the social alliances and nets built inside and outside the community. From these premises agents might be able to define proper implementation strategies, according to the proposed objective's specificity, in tune with the times and rhythm of social actors, allowing the local population to find answers to some of their main problems. This type of strategic pressures condition and eventually determine the type and degree of local participation.

Somehow, the agents of change, the advisors, the monitors, the accompaniants have to bear in their minds the role they have to play in the process of change. To influence in other people's realities require to act with social commitment, it also conveys to act with capability and with the idea of the consequences of their actions. Distinct communities, different agents and diverse objectives of change give ground to a great diversity of scenarios, this implies in turn different roles to play by those who influence in other people's reality. It is worth though to emphasise the relevance of allowing the social actors of the communities and not the development agents and their institutions who have to take in their own hands the process of change, that somehow they have to drive their own development according to their timing and rhythm, founded in their historicity, subjectivity, logic and vision of the future. Remains on the advisors to accompany and support the social actors of communities in this process, avoiding subverting it.

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