Whither participation?

Experience from

francophone West Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence in the Sahel of the so-called "participatory" approach, at the end of the 1970s, stemmed from an awareness of the limitations of the local development strategies adopted in the Francophone countries of West Africa during the first two decades following independence. These strategies were based on the idea that it was the role of the State, to lay down guidelines and decide on the most appropriate measures and how they should be implemented. A centralised, vertical approach of this kind left no room for local people to participate in the decision-making process. On the contrary, the State acted as if it were alone capable of defining the needs of local communities and determining the measures required to satisfy them. This outlook naturally tended to shape the mentality and attitudes of both local communities and technicians responsible for implementing development policies. On the one hand, the technicians acted in accordance with a conventional technology-transfer model, whereby they presented themselves as providers of know-how to local people (Scoones in Guèye; 1999). On the other, local people, constantly seeing their own frame of reference, knowledge and know-how disregarded, came to suffer from a lack of self-esteem, and adopted in some places what might be referred to as a "welfare mentality". In other words, they tended to turn more and more to outside agencies for solutions to local problems.

The results of these strategies were not long in making themselves felt. It soon became apparent that the considerable resources invested in development programmes were not having a major impact. The technologies adopted were often not appropriate to the needs of local communities and were incompatible with local cultural norms. Some of the problems which interventions were intended to solve in fact got worse. In view of this situation, it became necessary to reconsider the way in which development programmes were designed, and to give greater weight to the aspirations and needs of local people. This concept led gradually to emergence of the participatory approach. The basic premise underlying the participatory approach is that "*greater involvement of local people in defining local problems, identifying solutions and implementing them ensures that the resulting programmes are more effective and sustainable*".

Participation should be seen as an active process in which the initiative is taken by local people, guided by their own ideas and using means and processes over which they have effective control. In consequence, development programmes

should be implemented in response to specific needs and requirements identified by the local people themselves, in collaboration with the technician or researcher (*adapted from* Tilakaratna, 1987). Through participation, communities make their own the forms, and indeed the meanings, of the integral process in which they are engaged (Bryant and White, 1980). Consequently, participation implies (a) taking part in making decisions about what needs to be done; (b) taking part in implementing programmes and decisions by contributing resources or managing certain activities or specific organisations; (c) sharing in the benefits of a programme; and (d) taking part in efforts to evaluate such programmes (Uphoff, in Slocum, 1998). The most important thing is to empower those who have no power, i.e. the most vulnerable groups in society, those generally targeted by development programmes. This kind of process assumes that individuals, as well as local groups and communities, will identify their problems and give shape to their life and the type of society in which they live. It implies that local populations are capable of organising and influencing change as a result of achieving access to knowledge, political processes and financial, social and natural resources. Community participation therefore involves a devolution of power to vulnerable groups. It means that local people, in partnership with those assisting them, identify their problems and needs and increasingly assume responsibility for the planning, management, control and assessment of the collective measures they see as necessary for their own development. Participation is therefore more a set of principles, an ethic rather than a model. To have lasting impact, participation must draw on a vision both personal and social. Participation requires that structures aiming to provide support should learn to respect and listen to the opinions, feelings and knowledge of those who for a long time have been passive recipients (Blackburn and Holland (eds),1998**).**

It should however be stressed that organisations apply the concept of participation in different ways. As Chambers notes (1997), there are three different ways in which the word participation is used:

1. It is used as a cosmetic label for anything which appears good. "Participation" becomes a catch-all phrase which some organisations use to lend legitimacy – particularly in dealings with donor organisations – to approaches which in fact leave no place for local community expression.

2. It describes a way of co-opting and mobilising local labour and thereby reducing costs. In a situation of this kind, "participation" is a pretext for getting local people to contribute to development programmes which have

been planned and decided on without their being consulted. The support organisation effectively decides when, how and on what terms the local people should participate.

3. It is used to describe a process whereby local people are given the capacity and power to make their own analysis, direct the process, grow in confidence and take their own decisions.

Some key elements in the process of participatory development
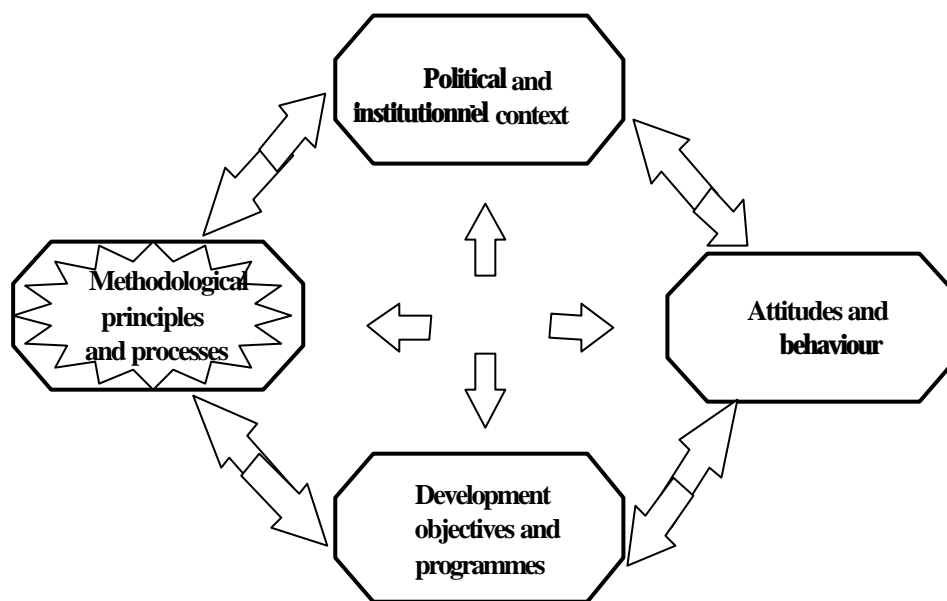
The approach which underlies the participatory option aims therefore to transfer control of resources and institutions to the most disadvantaged groups, which have long been excluded. It requires a favourable environment, and a certain transparency in the decision-making processes (Slocum; *op. cit.*). We therefore cannot talk about participation without considering the issue of control. To control implies the capacity to bring about desired effects, or conversely to prevent undesirable outcomes. So the participatory process differs from non-participatory approaches in the way in which control is exercised and distributed (Strauss et al. (ed), 1974). When participation is transparent, it creates in people a sense of vitality and self-direction. Local people begin to feel that they face real choices, exercise a degree of control and can exert influence over events. They become human beings, whose key attributes are their ideas, opinions and knowledge. If the potential of participatory practices is to be realised, three

conditions must be met. *Firstly*, there needs to be a cultural context which genuinely recognises the opportunities for participation and existence of personal incentives to take advantage of these opportunities. *Next*, the structure of the organisation must be such as to facilitate participation through the circulation of information, planning, the encouragement of inter-personal contact, etc. *Finally*, it is essential that the organisations responsible for promoting participation be motivated by a commitment to the adoption of procedures and attitudes which make for a real decentralisation of power in the interests of the local people (Hall, 1980).

From this it is apparent that the participatory process is complex and requires fundamental changes in the way in which various participants (including local communities) perceive their roles and relationships. Moreover, this process is far removed from the still rather mechanistic approach to participation which views this as the mechanical application of techniques and tools.

PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

Participatory approaches began to be introduced into Francophone West Africa in the mid-1980s through two different doorways. The *institutional doorway* was opened by natural resources management programmes, particularly those set up in the context of forestry projects. After some years of state management, people began to wonder if this was the most effective way of doing things. Consequently, forestry projects were among the first to develop a participatory approach on a systematic basis. The *methodological doorway* was opened up by the adoption of the village land management (Gestion des Terroirs) approach as a practical response to the recommendations of the 1984 CILSS[1] conference in Nouakchott. This conference was a rare occasion during which governments pronounced in favour of adopting a participatory approach. Although, subsequent to the conference, few countries[2] took the political measures necessary to support Village land management as their approach to the participatory management of natural resources, this gap has been filled to some extent by ad-hoc project practice.

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[1] Comité Inter-Etats de Lutte contre la Sécheresse au Sahel (Iner-State Committee to Combat Drought in the Sahel).
[2] Burkina Faso has set up a National Village Land Management Programme to affirm its choice of this approach to natural resource management.

This clear affirmation of a participatory approach was particularly favourable to the emergence and development, in the late 1980s, of what are generally referred to as participatory research and planning methods, in particular the Active Research and Participatory Planning Method (Méthode Active de Recherche et de Planification Participative, or MARP)[3].

Box 1: Village land management

The village land management approach implies a transfer of control, management and use of natural resources from state structures to local communities (Toulmin, 1994). The aim of village land management is to create the conditions for the establishment of forms of use that are sustainable, environment-friendly, socially just and economically appropriate. A decentralised approach is the most likely to fulfil these conditions. The key principles of village land management are tailoring of interventions to the local context, flexibility, transparency, participation, a differentiated approach to male and female target groups, and inter-discipliniarity in the choice of tools (Simbroek et al). A "village" in this sense may be defined as a physical area of land, normally or customarily occupied by the inhabitants of a village (or in some circumstances by a group of villages) who are bound together by a certain level of solidarity, common interests and joint management of agricultural, forest, pastoral, wild game and fish resources. Four factors characterise this approach: it is participatory, multi-sector, long-term in nature, and concerned with land management and development (Bonfils; 1989). The concept of village land management contains several elements: the techniques used for raising the productivity of natural resources, the organisation and participation of local communities and the role of state development agencies and state services, economic and socio-cultural circumstances, land tenure rights, and legislation governing the use of resources (Bokland 1989). The VLM option requires flexibility, as each entity (district, group) has its own characteristics and dynamic, and staff well-versed in the use of leadership/training tools and able to augment the technical and management capacities of the local community.

The Sahel has a number of specific characteristics which have moulded the development of the participatory approach in this region.

1. Unlike in other regions, where universities and research institutes have played an important role in the development of participatory methods, in the Sahel they have been pioneered mainly by NGOs and natural resource management projects. This is due to some mistrust on the part of research and higher education institutions in Francophone Africa vis-à-vis methods seen to be of British or American origin, since the two research systems are

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[3] It should be remembered that, contrary to a widespread misconception, a participatory approach to forestry existed before the introduction of MARP (the Francophone equivalent of Participatory Rural Appraisal). The ground was therefore already well prepared for the introduction of MARP tools in the implementation of the participatory approach.

modelled on different intellectual traditions and academic cultures (Hussein; 1996). One criticism levelled by Francophone researchers is that the methods are excessively pragmatic, one of the primary considerations being "rapidity". This has meant that application of these methods in the field has not benefited from the methodological and theoretical reflection necessary for their adaptation and fine-tuning which could have been provided by research institutions.

2. Absence of tools suited to a participatory approach as required for village land management projects provided a good opportunity to develop participatory methods. As a result, natural resource management is still the field of application *par excellence* of these methods in Francophone Africa (Guèye, 1999).

3. The late 1980s were characterised by much debate on how to implement the concept of participation in development. NGOs, which were among the main "pioneers" of support to community development, were also the greatest enthusiasts for participatory methods.

4. Unlike in other regions, there are still very few institutions specialising in research into participatory development. Institutions such as the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), based in London with an office in Senegal covering the Sahel, and the Fondation Rurale de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (FRAO), also based in Senegal, have both established programmes offering methodological support for the development of participatory methods, but initiatives of this kind are still few and far between[4].

5. The language divide has made it very difficult for institutions in the region to benefit from methodological progress carried out elsewhere. Documentation available in French was very limited when these methods were introduced into Francophone Africa.

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[4] Other institutions, such as the Centre d'Etudes Sociales de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CESAO), l'Institut Panafricain de Développement (IPD) based in Ouagadougou and Douala, l'INADES Formation, ENDA Tiers Monde, etc. are also devoting more time and attention to the development of these methods.

> **Box 2: Developing local community capacity for self-analysis**
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> In 1993, the International Institute for Environment and Development set up a programme to support the development of capacities in the field of research and participatory planning in four Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Senegal). The aim was to develop in partnership with other organisations, the human resources capable of facilitating a process of local reflection, self-analysis and planning at community level. For example, IIED's Sahel programme, in conjunction with the Rodale Institute (an NGO based in Senegal) is working with a women's group to develop their capacities in the field of Participatory Monitoring and evaluation. By an adaptation of MARP visualisation tools and techniques, the women have managed to set up a simple but effective monitoring system, the criteria and indicators for which have been entirely designed by the group Implementation of this system has led to a number of measures to improve the organisation of various activities pursued by the group.

PROGRESS AND PROBLEMS IN THE APPLICATION OF THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

Progress in the application of the participatory process

Areas of progress in participatory development in Francophone Africa include:

- greater stress on developing human capacities than on developing infrastructure;

- greater focus on the needs of local people when drawing up development programmes;

- an increasingly emphasis on sustainable development;

- an inter-disciplinary, multi-sectorial approach to development bringing together a range of organisations;

- the adoption of a longer-term programme, rather than a project-by-project approach;

- greater awareness of the importance of institutional development as part of the participatory process;

- emergence of local institutions which have acquired participatory planning skills and play an increasingly active part in taking responsibility for local development;

- some funding agencies are becoming more aware of the need for a participatory process in planning development programmes in West Africa. As a result, the time-scale of some projects has been extended from 4–5 years, to 15–20 years or more. In addition, a training and planning stage lasting up to three years is being built into some programmes.

Participation and social analysis

The mis-use of so-called rapid and participatory methods derives from the widespread misconception that 'participation' can be reduced to a mechanical application of techniques and, consequently, that anyone can do it. However, participatory development takes place in a social and cultural context governed by norms and power relationships, and by different interests. Engaging in and attempting to facilitate a process of this kind therefore requires a deep awareness on the part of actors from outside the community, and above all the ability to take into account the following factors as part of the process of reflection and analysis:

1. Community members often have contradictory or divergent interests. Consequently, local views and perceptions will not be uniform.

2. Solutions to problems are usually the result of negotiation between the different groups involved. Consequently, the participatory process should not always be geared to trying to find consensual solutions to local problems, but should emphasise the diversity of perceptions and interests in relation to the problems identified. The soundness of a particular solution depends on this diversity being taken into account.

3. Technicians from outside the community can only play an effective role as facilitators when all those involved see development as a process in which participants negotiate decisions in a given context of power relationships and interests.

4. The process should emphasise inter-action between participants rather than focusing on methods (Scoones et al, 1996).

Participatory research methods aim to provide local communities with the capacity to define their own objectives, pursue their own priorities, and play a central role in decision-making (Guijt et al. 1995). Participatory development must therefore be seen as a continuous process of empowering local communities, while taking into account organisational and behavioural aspects, long-term-objectives, etc.

Box 3: Problems associated with participatory development

1. Making a "fetish" of tools and techniques, which manifests itself in:

  • c*onfused objectives* (Guijt and Cornwall, 1995). Among NGO practitioners, who are the most important advocates of the process, it is still common to reduce participatory development to use of a set of tools.

  • *belief in a panacea.* There is a tendency to ascribe to participatory methods an efficacy in solving problems which goes far beyond their true potential.

  • *lack of analysis.* The role of visual tools as a means to an end, is not always understood. The process is therefore sometimes reduced to drawing diagrams.

  • *rapidity at the expense of care.* The choice of these methods is often motivated by a concern to cut down the time required for planning and monitoring and evaluation, rather than a belief in the underlying principles.

  • *routine, formalism and standardisation.* There is a tendency to repeat the same process in a mechanical way, without taking into account the specific problems, objectives and social context of each situation.

2. Organisational change is slow, as shown by the difficulty of making the transfer of power a reality.

3. The implementation of participatory development comes up against conservative attitudes amongst some participants, such as those with power.

Adapted from Guèye ; 1999

CHALLENGES CURRENTLY FACING PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

The challenge of institutionalisation

Participatory development in Francophone Africa is beset by a number of problems. Analysis of experience with participatory development shows that its impact, though not to be underestimated, has been disappointing, given the considerable effort made and expectation entertained by the different actors. Real changes will occur only when the participatory process stops being seen as a mechanical and routine application of techniques, tools and other methodological packages and becomes a process involving institutional change. This means transforming the principles, methods and procedures of existing organisational structures and adapting them to the requirements of the participatory approach (Guijt, 1996). The idea of institutionalisation implies a common understanding of and commitment to participatory development and, more fundamentally, leads to changes in attitude and behaviour appropriate to this outlook (Meyer et al, in Pfeifer; 1984).

In practice, however, and despite all the rhetoric about participation, those organisations supporting participatory development have made little effort to change. This is because most organisations work according to standardised, bureaucratic procedures which inhibit new, flexible practices (Gaventa in Blackburn, 1998). Over time, organisations become embodiments of a certain way of seeing things. But such a paradigm rarely evolves and once established, it tends to transform the organisation into a closed system.

A paradigm is more than just a way of seeing the world; it implies procedures and mechanisms for investigating the world, and categories into which information is pigeon-holed. The real purpose of participatory development is to exchange the existing paradigm for another. But the self-protecting nature of paradigms, and trauma associated with changing them, makes any kind of change difficult (Kuhn in Pfeifer, 1982). In practice, to avoid being instruments of this sort of trauma, most support organisations prefer to set up new organisations which are easier to mould to their outlook, rather than try to work with existing local institutions and help them to change. In the field of village land management, for example, this is evident in the widespread practice of setting up new structures (men's groups, women's groups), all created on the initiative of projects or NGOs to implement their activities. In the field,

however, this strategy can lead to very variable results, depending on local circumstances:

- the new organisation may quickly be absorbed by existing local institutions. This tends to happen when the functions the new organisation are already being carried out effectively by a local institution. This phenomenon is often observed in village land management programmes where local communities have already established effective mechanisms for managing natural resources. Furthermore, the process of absorption tends to be even more rapid when, as is often the case, the two organisations are managed by the same people.

- But, the opposite can also occur such as when the new organisation manages to supplant existing structures and achieve a degree of legitimacy. This situation tends to arise when the new organisation stems from an existing one; for example, traditional women's organisations, to which projects have entrusted new responsibilities related to project activities, under the banner of a new name.

- Finally, there are situations in which the new organisation comes to share responsibilities with existing structures. In the field of natural resource management, for example, local institutions may retain all the powers relating to control of and access to resources, while leaving the new organisation to perform specific functions (credit, reforestation, etc).

It is important to understand and take these organisational aspects into account as in many cases there is a danger that the structures set up by a project or an NGO will disappear when the project ends or when the NGO withdraws. An approach which seeks to involve and work with local institutions has more chance of producing lasting effects.

Box 4: Institutionalising participatory processes: Participatory Forum on Village Land Management

In 1997 IIED's Sahel Programme, in conjunction with its partners in the Sahel, conducted an evaluation of the impact brought about by the adoption of participatory methods. It emerged that, despite the development of these methods, their application was still patchy and instrumental, and took little account of the wider need for change in organisational culture and individual attitudes and behaviour. This realisation led to the setting up of a pilot programme for institutionalising participation.

Currently being implemented in Senegal and Burkina Faso, this programme combines research and activity in the field, and seeks to incorporate participatory principles and processes into the daily practice of the organisations taking part.

The programme objectives are:

- to understand how different policies and legal systems influence the planning and implementation of participatory approach to village land management;

- to analyse the structure, composition and mode of operation of support organisations and local institutions, to evaluate their capacity for promoting a participatory approach;

- to evaluate the perceptions, understandings and roles of the actors involved in the planning and implementation of participatory approaches as applied to village land management;

- to analyse the processes used by different institutions, and the methodological, technical and institutional implications of large-scale application of participatory processes;

- to set up an institutional mechanism able to learn from and improve the approaches already adopted.

This has led to the setting up of a Forum Participatif sur la Gestion des Terroirs (FOREP-GT = Participatory Forum on Village Land Management) in the Thies Region of Senegal and a similar structure in Burkina Faso. The Forum consists of technical structures (NGOs, Projects, technical services) and community organisations involved in village land management. The learning process is based on the experiments and practices initiated by members of the Forum. IIED gives methodological support to this process. A system for monitoring the Participatory Process is being designed using indicators developed by Forum members. The application of this monitoring system should provide the Forum with continuous feed-back on the way practices are developing, while an information system regarding participatory practices is also being established, and mechanisms to bring policy and practice more into line.

The adoption of a genuine participatory approach may in time make projects more efficient, organisations more receptive and sensitive to the needs of local people, and policies more in tune with realities on the ground. However, the advocates of participation need to be good social critics, able to take into account the philosophical and political dimensions of their methods. Institutionalising participation is not just a matter of adopting new procedures and tools, but also means recognising that those who were the "targets" of our development initiatives (our priorities, categories, time constraints, etc.) must now become the masters of their own development (Blackburn ; 1998).

Box 5: Stages in the institutionalisation process

Institutionalising the participatory approach involves five inter-related stages, each of which may last several years (Korton in Guijt 1996).

1. Identifying and evaluating the aspect of the programme and its practices which are not meeting their objectives or the needs of the local people and therefore need improving;

2. Conceptualising a new, more dynamic participatory approach and testing it at a manageable level, under different ecological and socio-economic conditions;

3. Drawing conclusions as to the suitability of the approach on a wider scale after a period of presentation, evaluation and adjustment;

4. Analysing and integrating these conclusions to arrive at forms and procedures that can be applied at all levels of the organisation;

5. Developing organisational capacities and institutionalising appropriate changes so that they are incorporated into the regular activities of the organisation.

This process of institutionalisation should result in:

- the support organisations bringing their procedures into line with the requirements of a participatory approach; in other words, the organisations must become more flexible, transparent and willing to be accountable to the communities on whose behalf they are meant to be working;

- a greater willingness on the part of support organisations to accept and facilitate the communities' right to monitor and control the way in which development programmes are conducted;

- a genuine decentralisation of decision-making (including decisions relating to the management of financial resources), which should not be restricted to occasional consultations when programmes are being planned or evaluated;

- greater fairness in allowing the most vulnerable groups access to powers of decision-making and the benefits of participation;

- the existence of mechanisms to facilitate a change in attitudes, this being one of the key indicators of participatory development;

- a need for donor organisations and sponsors, which have a great deal of influence, to reconsider the criteria whereby their programmes are evaluated. The performance of many development programmes is still assessed more in terms of their physical achievements than of the real impact produced by the adoption of a participatory approach. When criteria relating to participation are taken into account, they generally focus on the nature of the participation rather than its real impact. This point is confirmed by the fact that many development programmes do not include criteria and methodological processes for evaluating the impact of participation.

Box 6: Extract from the Brighton Declaration (IDS; May 1994)

Donors supporting participatory development should:

- consider the participatory approach as a process leading to change, rather than a product in itself. This implies commitment to and support for a long-term process of development and monitoring;

- provide flexible funding geared towards greater openness;

- promote participatory control and self-evaluation procedures favouring mutual responsibility (local communities↔organisations↔donors);

- encourage and support organisations which can take on training and participatory learning functions with a view to helping other organisations to improve the quality of the work they do;

- support pilot learning processes for which clearly identified stages have been set and which take into account local conditions and characteristics;

encourage policies and programmes which offer a varied range of development options based on community-defined criteria, needs and priorities.

> **Box 7: Key questions relating to the institutionalisation process**
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> - Is the culture of an organisation in line with its promotion of community participation?
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> - Are the relationships between a support organisation and the local community – and those between different groups within the community – appropriate to efforts to institutionalise participation? If not, how can the necessary changes be brought about?
>
> - How should institutionalisation be effected?
>
> - What skills are needed to carry through an institutionalisation process?
>
> - What internal and external factors are likely to accelerate or slow down the process of organisational change?
>
> - How can one help to change attitudes and behaviour patterns – within support organisations and within local communities – so as to facilitate the institutionalisation process?

The challenge of large-scale application

Another challenge facing participatory development and its institutionalisation is that of applying it on a wider scale. Until quite recently, the application of participatory methods was limited to the village or inter-village level. Behind this lay the idea that the participatory process, which depends on in-depth self-analysis and continuous interaction between the individuals and institutions involved, could only work effectively when practised on a physically and socially manageable scale, i.e. restricted to one or a few local communities.

Nowadays, most major natural resource management projects have opted for participatory approaches on a wider scale. But, how can participatory methods be applied in this way? The truth is that many agencies are venturing into *terra incognita*, combining multiple objectives with as yet untried organisational approaches. Unless careful thought is given to this process, it is possible that in a few years time the reputation of participation generally, as well as its application on a large scale, will have suffered serious damage (adapted from Roades, 1997). All necessary methodological precautions should be taken, so that the requirements of genuine participation are taken into account before such a wider application is undertaken.

This concern is all the more real in that wide-scale applications of the process often create greater dependence, in which participation is inhibited by a number of factors, including:

- poor understanding of the philosophy of participation, pressure or too much haste to apply the process on a wide scale;
- a plethora of ad hoc training programmes covering a wide geographical area;
- poor quality training based on standardised rules-of-thumb;
- a concern to draw up programmes or projects as quickly as possible;
- a concern to obtain rapid access to sources of funding;
- underestimating the importance of local knowledge and know-how;
- not recognising the need to link the process with the development of local institutions and capacities;
- an absence of administrative continuity;
- the obligation to achieve results assessed in terms of outputs rather than processes;
- a lack of flexibility in the way programmes are run; etc. (Gaventa ; 1998 in Blackburn et al.).

Box 8: Examples of projects applying the participatory approach on a wider scale.
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- In Burkina Faso, the Programme National de Gestion des Terroirs (National Village Land Management Programme – PNGT) is responsible for planning and implementing the village land management approach and for supporting other projects active in this field. The programme leans strongly towards the use of participatory methods applied to natural resource management. It is currently involved in 8 provinces but is soon likely to extend its work to 28 of Burkina Faso's 45 provinces. Although the PNGT is one of the leaders in applying the participatory approach to village land management , a rapid transition to applying the approach on a wider scale raises serious methodological and practical questions, which the Programme will have to resolve.

- In Senegal, the Programme Communautaire de Gestion des Ressources Naturelles (Community Natural Resource Management Programme) has set up a support programme to strengthen the capacities of rural communities in participatory planning of the use of natural resources. Fifty "rural communities" (i.e. Communautés Rurales – administrative entities with legal status and financial autonomy covering between 15 and 35 villages) have been targeted by the programme, one of whose tasks is to support them in drawing up local development plans. The planning process is based on the use of participatory research methods but the emphasis on rapid results is likely to limit the reality of this "participation".

A concern to meet short-term deadlines often gets in the way of a slower learning process enabling local people to make the process their own. There is

an urgent need for reflection on the implications of applying participatory methods on a wider scale, for various reasons:

1. The process is likely to gain further impetus in the years ahead as most Natural Resource Management programmes, see such an emphasis on community participation as lending greater legitimacy to the programmes they set up.

2. Because of their size and importance (generally they are in receipt of bilateral or multilateral funding), the programmes behind the large-scale application of such an approach can have great influence in ensuring the quality of the participatory process. Programmes of this kind are bound to have a snowball effect, for better or for worse. It is therefore a matter of urgency to consider the best way of making a success of large-scale application.

Box 9: Questions relating to the large-scale application of the participatory approach

- What are the main characteristics of the organisations which apply participatory methods on a wider scale (size, structure, ways of taking decisions, short or long-term commitment)?

- What are the real motives behind the decision to apply participatory methods on a wider scale? Is it simply a concern for speed and efficiency, or is the initiating organisation really committing itself to a process of lasting change?

- What processes are being borrowed to implement this large-scale application?

- What mechanisms have been put in place to ensure that standards of quality are assured?

- To what extent has the need for real participation on the part of the most vulnerable groups been taken into account?

- What are the methodological, and technological constraints conditioning an initiative to apply participatory methods on a wider scale?

- How does policy relate to practice when applying the approach on a wider scale?

- What is the most appropriate social and geographical scale for effective wider application of the participatory process?

What comparative advantages are inherent in different forms of organisation (government agency, bilateral or multinational project, NGO, etc.) when it comes to ensuring that the participatory process is applied effectively on a wider scale?

The challenge of achieving the right balance between decentralisation, local governance and participatory development

The issue currently dominating discussion about participatory development in Francophone West Africa is that of decentralisation and local governance. A policy of decentralisation, if well implemented, would undoubtedly help speed up and strengthen the participation of local communities in planning and implementing policies. In actual fact, however, the emergence of decentralisation policies has led to the co-existence of two types of participation. On the one hand, there is the participation of local communities in the planning and implementation of community development programmes supported by NGOs, development projects and state technical services, or initiated by the communities themselves. This form of participation, which is technical or methodological in character, develops as a result of negotiation and partnership in development programmes. On the other hand, there is the participation of local government structures (*collectivités locales décentralisées*, i.e. entities enjoying a legal status of their own). This second form of participation derives from mechanisms which are political, legal and technical, as defined and controlled by the State. Nevertheless, these decentralised government structures are an important part of the participatory development picture, for a number of reasons:

- The strengthening of their powers in the field of planning and implementation of sectoral policies means they have a vital role to play at provincial and lower levels. In some countries, for instance Senegal, decentralisation has involved a transfer of powers formerly held by the technical services of national industries to regional structures, such as those relating to the environment and natural resources.

- The formal legal and moral status of local government structures, as opposed to most local community organisations, gives the former an opportunity to exert greater influence over the formulation of policy. If local government structures were to take into account the innovative and participatory practices being adopted by rural communities, it might result in such initiatives having a greater impact.

- Local government structures currently lack skills in the field of participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation. They could learn from the methodological principles arising from the participatory practices promoted

and upheld by some support organisations (NGOs, natural resource management projects) working in this field.

Nevertheless, decisions taken by local government structures are often highly politicised, which often results in their failure to meet the real needs of local communities.   The challenge today is to see how these structures can be equipped with the methodological and technical abilities they need to promote real participation on the part of local people.

Box 10: Key questions relating to the challenge of decentralisation

- What new social demands are local communities making on local government structures?

- What is the relationship between the powers of local government structures and the practices being implemented by local communities?

- What mechanisms are there to ensure the co-existence of traditional powers of decision-making and the powers arising from decentralisation? For example, do local decisions regarding the management of natural resources derive their legitimacy from customary law or from new legislation establishing local government structures?

- What strategies are being implemented by local government structures to promote participatory development?

- What methodological and organisational support do local government structures need to enable them to take over the planning and implementation of local participatory development?

- To what extent can local government structures facilitate a better match between local practices and national policies?

The challenge of training and developing skills

Over the last decade, the heavy demand for support in developing participatory methods has led to a corresponding supply of *training*. Generally speaking, training courses are offered on an ad hoc basis to meet an immediate need for diagnosis, planning or monitoring and evaluation. Training has rarely been part of an overall, planned process of institutional change. An instrumental approach to training has long been predominant, with a focus on the technical ability to "manipulate" tools and techniques. Although such training has contributed to the widespread adoption of participatory methods, the present state of participatory development demands a reorientation of the priorities, strategies

and content of training. In this respect, priority should no longer be given to training people capable of conducting participatory exercises, but to training agents of change aware of what is at stake and able to carry through the process of institutionalisation. Where training content is concerned, this should mean the inclusion of such topics as organisational analysis and evaluation, change of attitudes and behaviour patterns, strengthening the capacities and powers of control of local communities, the planning and implementation of programmes to combat poverty, gender awareness, etc.

Tools and techniques cannot bring about lasting change unless they are applied in an institutional context favourable to participation. Moreover, participation is a process both slow and on-going. The enthusiasm aroused by participatory methods resulted largely from unrealistic expectations of their capacity to provide rapid answers to immediate problems. The need to rethink training in participatory methods is justified by the three following reasons:

1. *Participation is not an end in itself.* Participatory development programmes have for too long focused on promoting the concept of participation without really seeking to link this to development objectives and strategies. But the impact of a participatory process should be judged by the changes it brings about at institutional level, as well as in the living conditions of local people. Many support organisations are becoming increasingly aware of the need to establish planning and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms which put greater stress on the impact of the participatory process. Fortunately, the issue of participation is now increasingly being analysed from the point of view of combating poverty in the rural setting, decentralisation, etc. With the development of Evaluation Participative de la Pauvreté (Participatory Evaluation of Poverty – EPP), for instance, a closer connection is being established between participation and the struggle against poverty. The basic argument in favour of EPP is that it involves actors belonging to the most vulnerable groups in a process which can influence policies and practices. Involving different actors in poverty evaluation activities not only improves the quality of information but also enhances understanding and increases the chances that poverty alleviation is brought to the centre of national policy making (Booth et al. 1998).

A paradox of participatory development where the struggle against poverty is concerned is that the poorest groups, who should logically have the greatest say in choice of activities, are at the same time those with the least power. They are often consulted little or not at all and, even when their views are sought,

their opinions are generally subject to the "seal of approval" of groups holding real power. The emergence of participatory evaluation methods in respect of poverty, while not giving such groups immediate access to power, at least has the merit of making the most vulnerable members of the community the main target group. Training programmes should henceforward make this one of their priority concerns, resulting in a better understanding of the concept of poverty, and of the criteria and indicators with which to analyse and act against poverty, and identify appropriate methods. Possessing these methodological tools is important for several reasons:

- on the one hand, it would give greater legitimacy and impact to programmes set up to combat poverty, being based on methodological approaches which help give the most vulnerable groups a central place in analysing the problems, and planning and implementing the programmes which result;

- on the other, a methodological approach which makes it possible to analyse poverty from the point of view of the people most affected should help to make participatory development programmes more effective.

2. *The need not to overestimate the place and role of tools and techniques in the participatory process.* To avoid the participatory process becoming too mechanical, it is necessary to reconsider the importance accorded to tools and techniques. This is essential because the present focus on tools tends to obscure far more important factors such as attitudes and behaviour patterns, institutional change, interpersonal relations, social and economic dynamics, etc. This is clear from the often poor quality of the reports produced as a result of participatory planning or monitoring and evaluation exercises. The writers are often more concerned with visual outputs (diagrams, maps, etc.) than with achieving a better understanding of the social and economic dynamics which underlie the development efforts of the community. These problems, which result largely from deficiencies in training and lack of experience, tend to be exacerbated by an absence of quality control mechanisms.

3. *The need for stricter self-examination on the part of support institutions.* Many support structures build their approach to participatory development on the mistaken idea that it is only the local communities involved which need to undergo change. Their training programmes and approach to the work are constructed in accordance with this outlook. The practices of support organisations have rarely been challenged, and the programmes they have set up

have paid little attention to analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the organisations themselves and their capacity to promote real participation. However, many of the problems arise from the preconceptions, culture and mode of operation of such support structures. It is therefore now urgent that just as much effort be invested in a self-examination exercise to enable support structures to criticise their own practices and cultures. But this requires new aptitudes, and developing them should be one of the priorities of future training programmes.

Box 11: Key questions relating to the challenge of training

- What new kinds of training are needed to foster the institutionalisation of participation?

- How can training programmes be devised and implemented so as to bring about lasting changes, not only in methodology but also of an institutional and behavioural kind?

- What mechanisms are required to monitor and evaluate the effects of training on participatory development?

- How can one identify participation-related criteria and indicators?

- To what extent can the participatory process help break down the barriers which prevent the most vulnerable groups from expressing themselves?

Participatory approaches and the issue of gender

It is now widely recognised that gender differences are an important factor in participatory processes. The use of tools, and the nature of the information these tools generate, reveal significant differences in the ways in which men and women perceive and react to certain realities. The phenomenon is particularly evident in the field of natural resource management. The rules of access to resources and the use to which they are put, perceptions of the functions attributed to different resources, development strategies, and so on, are all influenced by gender. Failure to take this fact into account and recognise the different needs of men and women can have a significant negative impact on development programmes.

It has to be admitted that the issue of gender is often not given sufficient weight in the participatory planning of many development programmes. There are a number of reasons for this:

- The aptitudes required to include a gender dimension in analyses and planning processes are unlikely to develop spontaneously but need to be acquired through a learning and training process. Proper analysis and inclusion of the gender issue in participatory processes requires more than simply applying participatory tools and techniques. Unfortunately, training in participatory approaches has not given due weight to the issue of gender.

- The structures working in the field of participatory development have tended to make gender analysis a matter for women only. When training is to be given in this area, it is generally the women who are targeted. They are usually chosen as resource persons when the gender issue is to be included in a planning or monitoring and evaluation process. This tendency needs to be reversed so that all workers in the field of participatory development acquire the skills required to take gender into account in their daily work.

- The exclusion of certain groups, particularly women, from the decision-making process sometimes makes it difficult for outsider institutions or support workers to consult them. In practice, these agencies generally prefer to take note of the power relationships between different groups rather than challenge them openly. This attitude is reinforced by the fact that they often spend only limited time in the field, and therefore are sometimes unable to grasp the various manifestations of the problem. It is not unusual for teams which have spent time in the field within planning participatory programmes to leave without having met some of the more vulnerable groups.

Box 12: Key questions relating to the struggle against poverty and the issue of gender

- How do local communities perceive the phenomenon of poverty, and by what indicators do they measure it?

- What is the real impact of greater participation by the most vulnerable groups on the effectiveness of programmes to combat poverty?

- Has participatory development produced effective solutions achieving greater social justice?

- What methodological approach is required to strengthen the role of the most vulnerable groups in analysing situations and planning and implementing activities to combat poverty?

- How can the capacities of development workers be fostered so that they are able to include the issues of gender and equity in the participatory development process?

The challenge of participatory development and private initiative

Today we see how local decisions are more and more strongly influenced by external forces – particularly market forces. The African countryside is no longer spared the pressures of globalisation and the free market. Rural enterprise is the current buzz word among many development support organisations. However, this phenomenon, which is related to diversification and subsistence strategies, is accompanied by an increasing individualisation of decision-making processes, which could in the long run deprive the community of its central role in regulating and directing the economic choices of its members. NGOs, as well as bilateral and multilateral aid organisations, are increasingly gearing their support activities to promoting entrepreneurial initiatives. The first implication of this is that greater stress is put on developing individual decision-making strategies rather than on establishing social sustainable institutions. It is important to anticipate the implications of this phenomenon when it comes to planning and implementing participatory approaches to development. Until now, such approaches have been based mainly on the concept of collective responsibility for local problems. An example of the current change in the level of decision-making can be seen from natural resource management programmes, which are increasingly looking for ways of refocusing their programmes so as to define an outlook and lay down guidelines at the community level while leaving individual farmers to translate the guidelines into action.

Box 13: Key questions relating to the challenge of private initiative

- How can we rethink participatory processes to take into account the gradual individualisation of decision-making at community level?

- Is there not a danger that forcing the pace of individual initiative will destroy what until now has been the essence of community participation: the spirit of solidarity?

- Where natural resource management is concerned, what kinds of support can be given to local initiatives so as to combine individual interests with sustainable management at a broader social level?

The challenge of participatory monitoring and evaluation and the impact of participation

One of the main challenges facing participatory development in Francophone Africa is the need to make the impact of participation more visible. It is now essential, after several years of applying the participatory process, to develop a systematic methodology for monitoring and evaluating the impact of participation. Establishing a system to monitor and evaluate the impact of participation would have several advantages:

- It would provide support structures and local communities with indicators for gauging the implementation of the concept of participation. This is especially important since misuse of the term participation has led to a gradual devaluation of the concept itself. Participation has come to mean all things to all men, with the result that it no longer means anything (Fisher in Roades, 1997).

- It would facilitate quality control and help improve the capacity of local people to monitor what is being done.

Box 14: Key questions relating to the impact of participation

- What criteria or indicators should be used to evaluate the quality and impact of participation in the context of a participatory development programme?

- Who is responsible for defining these criteria?

- What methodological process should be adopted for identifying and measuring these criteria or indicators?

- What institutional approach should be adopted to legitimise the criteria and indicators that have been identified?

- How can the various institutions working in the field of participatory development be encouraged to develop a widely accepted methodology for monitoring and evaluating the impact of participation?

CONCLUSION

Considerable progress has been made in encouraging local communities to participate more fully in the development process in the Sahelian region of West Africa. This has come about as a result of programmes which put greater stress on the development of both individual and institutional capacities. Nevertheless, much progress still has to be made, particularly in encouraging support organisations to adapt their internal culture more closely to the demands of participatory development. Better co-ordination between participatory practices and the formulation of policy needs to be achieved, since the sustainability of participatory approaches will depend on their being recognised and endorsed by national policy.

As the discussion above shows, there is much still to do to ensure that the rhetoric of 'participatory development' can be translated into tangible results for rural people.

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