

Participatory Development as New Paradigm: The Transition of Development Professionalism

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“People centered” principles have influenced the course of western culture over the last thirty years, often changing the bearings of education, business, public policy and international relief and development programs. These principles, larger humanist movements in the natural and social sciences and the emergence of post-modernism and chaos theory required organizations who were serious about adopting a “people first” orientation to change more than their tactics. It necessitated a paradigm shift. This newer paradigm maintained that big was not always better, centralized hierarchies were suspect, big outcomes may be born of small inputs and that a “more heads are better than one” philosophy would more readily sustain productive, durable change. Still, most of the changes inaugurated by a “people first” paradigm over the years were simple alterations to the style and fabric of old conventions. Resistance to the structural reform essential to sustain these changes was powerful. Few advances withstood erosion by the still intact traditional systems they were intended to transform. In international relief and development organizations, however, “people centered” practice became “participatory development” and great deal of persistent and determined effort went into fending off old dragons to ensure “participation” occurred in the design, implementation and evaluation of many programs.¹

Defining Participation

The meaning of “participation” is often a rendition of the organizational culture defining it. Participation has been variously described as a means and an end, as essential within agencies as it is in the field and as an educational and empowering process necessary to correct power imbalances between rich and poor. It has been broadly conceived to embrace the idea that all “stakeholders” should take part in decision making and it has been more narrowly described as the extraction of local knowledge to design programs off site.

The result is an extraordinary mélange of context-specific, formal methodologies, matrices, pedagogies and ad hoc approaches to enhancing participation in humanitarian aid and development. They include: conscientization and praxis; rapid and participatory rural appraisal (RRA & PRA); appreciation–influence–control analysis (AIC); “open space” approaches; objectives-oriented project planning (ZOPP); vulnerability/capacity analysis and future search workshops.²

Differences in definitions and methods aside, there is some common agreement concerning what constitutes authentic “participation”. Participation refers to involvement by local populations in the creation, content and conduct of a program or policy designed to change their lives. Participation requires

Participation is involvement by a local population and, at times, additional stakeholders in the creation, content and conduct of a program or policy designed to change their lives. Built on a belief that citizens can be trusted to shape their own future, participatory development uses local decision making and capacities to steer and define the nature of an intervention.

recognition and use of local capacities and avoids the imposition of priorities from the outside. It increases the odds that a program will be on target and its results will more likely be sustainable. Ultimately, participatory development is driven by a belief in the importance of entrusting citizens with the responsibility to shape their own future.

There is less than general agreement over whether participation is appropriate in all relief and development interventions and disagreement exists over whether such methods are relevant in all phases of programs, from conception to exit evaluation. Similarly, some organizations hedge over whether participation is a value that requires strong institutional commitment, if not outright reorganization. These are disagreements over whether surgical participation or more fundamental retooling of assistance organizations is needed to faithfully engage in participatory development. But there is consensus that it is not “participation” if contact with the local population is used to confirm the integrity of a preconceived idea. Likewise, it is not participation if the purpose is to engage an indigenous population to convince them of the wisdom of a program they took no part in informing.

Relief and Development Assistance as Political Enterprise

Participation programming is not politically neutral. Participatory development promotes equity and accepts that the exercise of decision making power at the local level is as legitimate as it is at

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the national level. Like an important political technology of our time called democracy, it champions the sovereignty of people over the sovereignty of a state. It is not just about meeting a people’s needs. It is about helping to create an environment where people can more effectively identify and address their own needs. It explicitly recognizes the significance of political and social context in an effort to determine the roots of an enduring problem and to

avoid harming those who should benefit. To believe in and promote participatory development is to believe in the intrinsic importance of self-determination.³

Some organizations tasked with *political* development, such as the United States Agency for International Development’s Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID/OTI), openly advocate participatory methods precisely because they promote self-determination and predispose a people toward more democratic behavior. As Rick Barton, OTI’s first director puts it, “if you are ever going to get to a system of the people, by the people, and for the people then you’d better engage the people as early as you can.” In Haiti and Kosovo, OTI implemented programs with that in mind, making the means and ends of the program to develop a participatory ethic within populations unused to being asked what they thought. And while concrete assistance was delivered to meet the real priorities these local citizens identified and implemented, OTI emphasized the “how” of the process as the schools, water systems and electrical upgrades it funded were completed. Admittedly, this is unusual. Most organizations remain extremely wary of what they fear is “political” aid. To an astonishing degree, most traditional professionals believe their programs are “politically-neutral”.

The truth is that humanitarian and development interventions, regardless of whether participatory methods are employed or not, are highly political. Local power relationships and the psychology of expectations are revised each time organizations determine their interlocutors and distribution

systems and as resources from salaries to food parcels and reconstruction materiel are delivered. With no awareness of social or political context it is never certain if an intervention is warranted at all. And when there is blind engagement, ignorance of context makes each choice a round of roulette, potentially explosive and liable to overrun the self-development potential of the target population while undermining the effectiveness of assistance delivery in the first place.⁴ At worst, we aid and abet the violence and become accomplices to adversity. Participatory methodologies, as part of political development programs or not, increase awareness of the social and political context and better the odds this will be avoided.

Other Benefits

Improved common sense about the political footprint of an intervention aside, there are other advantages to employing participatory methodologies. Separate appraisals by The World Bank, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), USAID and the International Relief/Development Project (IRDP) have examined participatory approaches and numerous case studies. Their findings are compelling and remarkably consistent. Each review independently concluded that while participatory methodologies may require greater up front investment in staff training and operations expenditures (up to 15%, on average, according to the World Bank study), throughout the life of programs overall costs average lower than in programs that do not rely on local capacities. Not surprisingly, each study concluded that participatory development programs are invariably more relevant and effective at addressing local needs. Moreover, the gains made during an intervention are more often sustained using participatory methods and chances are higher that the engagement of local women and youth in the intervention process will improve their status as well. In the end, the ability of local participation programs to leverage other national or foreign resources extends the overall reach of general assistance in most cases.⁵

Four separate studies of participatory programming have found that such methods often cost less in the long run and are consistently more effective at getting assistance where it needs to go. Such methods were also found to be unmatched in fostering sustainability, strengthening local self-help capacities and in improving the status of women and youth. Finally, by establishing platforms where organizations may access and involve citizens in their programs, participatory development methods often extended the reach of traditional development approaches by leveraging local resources with national and foreign assets.

Cautions and Recommendations: The Disclaimer

With such inherent advantages, why isn't participation the sine qua non of development practice? Dominant biases in conventional humanitarianism and development affairs still favor immediate results and rarely question whether an intervention should be avoided on ethical grounds. The index of care for a people in crisis is measured in how many millions they receive in aid. Efficiency and effectiveness are still commonly defined in the abstract, as a comparison of what was delivered to how much it cost to get it there. How assistance is rendered, whether it reaches legitimate beneficiaries, what is its political and social impact and whether assistance contributes to stability or further misery are variables dropped from most assessment formulas and planning documents. Ironically, small, targeted participatory interventions that account for such measures are often criticized as being inefficient and irrelevant because large quantities of aid are not transferred. Some of the best efforts to calibrate levels of assistance to local absorptive capacities and to collaborate with disaster victims and local communities rebuilding their lives in a sustainable

fashion have been undermined by these larger, well meaning imperatives of conventional development. Which statement keeps your seat at the table in a high profile intervention? “Congressman, we’ve spent \$3 million to augment local communities’ own coping mechanisms which are quite effective and ultimately sustainable...” or “In the past six months we’ve air dropped emergency food assistance and delivered hygiene and emergency shelter packages valued at \$33 million.” All too often it’s the latter even if that approach contributes to the violation of human rights, an overall decline in the quality of life for victims and the decay of stability in a region.

Advocacy and bearing witness are also responsibilities of participatory professionals that are suspect in conventional development. Designing programs around the cares, concerns and coping mechanisms indigenous to the location of a cataclysm often entails raising the decibel level of local voices. This sometimes upsets the political equilibrium of a country or otherwise contributes to the discomfort of diplomats. This is hardly embraced by mainstream humanitarianism and development institutions. Nonetheless, to advocate, bear witness and give voice to local partners is the bone marrow of humanitarianism – or it used to be – and it is integral to encouraging and working on the behalf of residents who are bringing themselves back to life.

Overall, the two paradigms coexist, often uneasily, with participatory approaches playing the role of the impoverished little brother to conventional traditions. Participatory programs often cost more up front. Their results may seem too small and scattered and they may appear too miserly with their resources as intervention programs shore up existing capacities. They may even advocate a hasty exit, against national interests, if it is determined that assistance is not really needed or that aid can not be delivered without worsening the crisis. By conventional measures, this relegates participatory methodologies to the shelf where the cod liver oil sits. It may work but even a small dose tastes bad.

Consequently, under pressure from dominant conventional development institutions the use of participatory methods is not widespread. Much of what has been done in the name of participation has been tactical, tentative and often ancillary to the bread and butter work of most organizations. Many participatory forays take the shape of halfway measures that ride the fence between traditional imperatives and “experimental” approaches.⁶ It makes for a netherworld of misfit programs.

Case studies provide some rules of thumb for programs straddling the fence and for those more fully committing to the participatory paradigm.⁷

- For those straddling the fence, don’t. Engaging victims and communities in emergency response and development activities is to begin a process of awakening and healing. It sets in motion the expectation that quality of life improvements will be dependent on local initiative, advice and arrangements. Follow-through, continuous collaboration and consistent delivery with a coherent exit strategy are essential. To stall, mix command and participatory methods, unexpectedly disengage or interject “outside expert” decisions midstream may create profound distrust among local partners, frustration and confusion in already traumatized residents and quite possibly do more damage than if local involvement never featured in the program. Commit to participation, then follow through.

- In many case studies, participatory development is most successful when implemented by agencies that made developing sustainable patterns of participation and self-help one of the primary goals of their field programs – at least as important as the delivery of aid itself. Likewise, the most successful programs were implemented by agencies which embraced participation internally, maintaining a climate approving of intellectual honesty and critical reporting. Agencies and programs that made participation an elementary value internally and in the field succeeded more often.
- There is a steady temptation to interfere and distrust. Half measures and ersatz participation are often the result. Practitioners who have learned lessons the hard way warn against doing anything for people they can manage for themselves. Beginning a process of soliciting local input and building local capacity is likely to carry programs to the edges of the map, where the serpents are drawn. Best judgement should be used and scrupulously followed. Western educational culture emphasizes an intellectual, step by step, paint by numbers orientation foreign to this process and intuition-based cultures in general. Observe, partake, facilitate.
- Organizations willing to front higher start-up costs to support a large field presence deployed more quickly and more often met program goals. These are not programs best run out of capitols or headquarters. They are decentralized and field driven. The greater costs associated with implementing participatory projects usually averaged out over the life of programs and participation-centric programs counted such operations expenses as project costs in the first place, given their process oriented goals. It is important to compare what is leveraged against operations expenses as well.
- Throughout the case studies, small is beautiful. Successful participatory programs paid keen attention to absorptive capacity and in many cases resisted providing more resources even when donors made them available. The same went for monitoring political impact. Local relationships proved essential to understanding the complexities of political expression, the layers of formal and informal authority and the consequences of participatory programs and other assistance efforts in local communities and the region. In many instances, this made advocacy essential, putting participation facilitators and program managers at odds with their development colleagues' programs which sometimes exacerbated the suffering of local residents. This role of advocate sometimes caused heated exchanges with local and national authorities as well as with embassies, but often it strengthened the facilitator's bonds with local partners whose legitimate complaints were otherwise ignored.
- One of the most compelling conclusions from over sixty case studies of humanitarian interventions is that there is little cause to avoid the use of participatory methods when *there is no time*. A persistent theme in humanitarianism is that participatory methods are not appropriate in rapid response disaster mitigation. This remains one of the most potent myths constraining the wider use of participatory methodologies. Correspondingly, from day one of non-participatory interventions, local capacities are overlooked, dependencies are often created and the potential for self-help atrophies. It is in such early, best-intentioned interventions that destructive patterns are established that too often worsen the enduring problems that confound residents and later development professionals. In many disaster response cases, the primary motivation is to save lives regardless of context or collateral impact and to be accountable only

to the people providing the resources – donors and governments. Case studies support that, in the first place, there is rarely a need to be on the scene within hours of a disaster. And even fewer reasons exist for any such intervention to overlook local leadership and response efforts. In most cases, the most effective humanitarian interventions capitalized on existing resources, wisdom and methods already put to use by residents. In the rare instances where immediate response seemed warranted, a far better approach was to direct resources to indigenous organizations to better enable them to persevere. It is never too early to help people help themselves.

Mapping Participatory Development

In a related paper, the variety of methods used in different types of interventions will be outlined for use in emergency, transition and development contexts. Such approaches may be categorized into participatory emergency methodologies (PEM), participatory transition methodologies (PTM) and participatory development methodologies (PDM). Once charted into contexts where the various approaches have been found most useful, methods could then be detailed along with successful organizational support arrangements and case studies, taking care to avoid duplicating similar efforts already completed. This task is beyond the scope of the current paper but will be described in a follow-on piece.

Conclusion

Paradigms sometimes peacefully transfer their preeminence to newer ones. Occasionally they defeat upstarts for a renaissance before they fade. Usually, when transition happens, it is anything but congenial. There is bickering in academic journals, textbooks fall out of favor, grant monies are redirected and the lecture circuit personalities change. A general camping up of adherents and “heretics” takes place. Obstinate practitioners are culled. Careers end. Professional identities are renegotiated. There is training, more training. In the end one view or the other must prevail, consolidate its gains and redefine the enterprise. It can take years. Copernican, Freudian, structural functionalist, impressionist and industrial revolutions required decades to both gain, then lose favor. Perhaps, if participatory professionalism does not become a footnote to conventional development, the transition from the dominant conventional paradigm toward a participatory ethic will be smooth, fast and more generous. The history of paradigm collisions suggests otherwise.

The good news is that the most creative and innovative work within a discipline occurs precisely at these times of transition and collision. But it is also a time that wild claims about the force and utility of a new way of doing business are made. Participatory methodologies are no panacea. They are not the linear descendants of industrial age production-oriented development understandings nor part of a larger accumulation of wisdom in the field. They, like all paradigms, are spontaneous reflections of their historical moment and will pass. However, competing paradigms, when they prevail, do so because they manage everything the old paradigm did and then some. And they do it better. Participatory development methodologies have this potential. Slowly, with the successful implementation and greater use of these methods, the participatory development approach will gain ground.

Conventionalism will be turned on its head when participation is no longer a curious addition to the development tool kit but a precondition for activities ranging from emergency relief and debt restructuring to technical assistance. Participation will then inform, contextualize and define the

ultimate goal of these and other necessary institution-building activities and encourage accountability to the publics in intervention environments - not donors and governments. Therein is the fight and the challenge. If participatory development stands a chance of prevailing in this slow motion collision, we must implement programs that disempower ourselves.

Organizations implementing participatory programs must more fully commit in thought and action to decentralizing and giving their power to local partners. Current development institutions that host the conventional paradigm must restructure or dismantle themselves. New arrangements must assemble around participation as a core value in their organizational customs and behavior. The gains such creations as the OTI and the World Bank's Participation Fund have made will need to be consolidated, they will need to recommit to internalizing participation and hold the line on their mandates as the collision creates more pressure for each to choose sides.

The most challenging frontier will be in rapid onset emergency interventions. This is where there is danger, from the first hours, for patterns of aid dependency to originate and it is where the relevance of participatory approaches is most questioned. In this area, as in the areas where participatory methods are more regularly put to use, practitioners will need to continue the creativity and innovation that has thus far defined the paradigm. In doing so, the merit of the approach will become evident and among the serpents and dragons on the edges of the parchment sea, the new continent will be drawn.

¹ Karl Popper's critique of Thomas Kuhn's theory of knowledge aside, Kuhn's use of "paradigms" and "paradigm shifts" provides a useful, easy framework to understand the struggle in international relief and development between an institution-centered, conventional worldview and a more recent "people centered" one. David C. Korten and Robert Chambers also use "paradigms" to describe this tension. Korten juxtaposes the "people-centered" paradigm to what Robert Chambers characterized as "conventional professionalism" and, to Chambers, conventional development professionals are inclined toward providing assistance to state institutions, prefer working within centers of power, favor modern over traditional technologies, quantitative analysis over subjective experience, market approaches over subsistence production and industry over agriculture. To the conventional practitioner, to "go local" is unprofessional. Both Chambers and Korten note that conventional professionalism has dominated development activity for the last forty years and is largely responsible for a depressing record of failure to relieve chronic poverty. When paradigms are referred to in this paper, traditional professionalism will be called the "conventional paradigm" or "conventional professionalism" while "people-centered" approaches will be referred to as the "participatory development" or "participatory methodologies" paradigm. See Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, reprinted by University of Chicago Press, 1996; David Korten, ed., *Community Management: Asian Experience and Perspectives*, Kumarian Press 1986; Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*, Longman Group 1984; and Chamber's "Us and Them: Finding a New Paradigm for Professionalism in Sustainable Development" in Diane Warburton, ed., *Community and Sustainable Development: Participation in the Future*.

²For a comparative review of these approaches see *The World Bank Participation Sourcebook*, World Bank Publications, 1996. Also find at <http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/sourcebook/sbhome.htm>

³Thanks to John Fawcett for his incendiary reminders of the very real consequences of ignoring political and social context. He and Victor Tanner provide a disturbing analysis of the effects of this incognizance in Bosnia-Herzegovina in a recent case study of humanitarian assistance in the former Yugoslavia. Fawcett and Tanner have persuasively argued that donor agencies would do well to require a "political impact statement" of their implementers before a decision to engage is made. In Fawcett, John and Tanner, Victor, *Review of Programs in the Former Yugoslavia*, USAID: OFDA, April 2000.

⁴Sometimes this means choosing to not intervene at all. As Rony Brauman describes it, humanitarian and development organizations often deliberately sideline political variables and are gripped by "the insouciance that permits agencies, in

their guise of selfless saviors, to remind governments and other authorities of their responsibilities without pondering their own". See Rony Brauman's *Refugee Camps, Population Transfers, and NGOs* in Moore, Jonathan, ed., Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention, New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 1998.

⁵ See Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), *Mainstreaming Participatory Development: Experiences and Lessons of the Interagency Group on Participation*, CIDA, June 1997. Also *Empowering People: A Guide to Participation*, United Nations Development Program Civil Society Organizations & Participation Programs series (UNDP CSOPP), 1999; The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), *Participation at USAID: Stories, Lessons and Challenges*. USAID Participation Forum Summaries, 1999; and Anderson, Mary and Woodrow, Peter, Rising from the Ashes: Development Strategies in Times of Disaster, Boulder: Lynn Rienner Publishers, 1998.

⁶ What is interesting is that the labels "experimental" and "pioneering" and their ilk are terms that are most often used by observers from within the traditional paradigm in describing competing non-traditional approaches.

⁷ In addition to sources for case studies cited in endnote five, add Korten David, ed., Community Management: Asian Experience and Perspectives, West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1986 and Burkey, Stan, People First, London: Zed Books, 1993.

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The *Eldis Development Information Gateway*. Contains links to databases, library catalogues and participation case studies. Found at <http://www.ids.ac.uk/eldis/eldis.html>

The *Food and Agriculture Organization Website*, located at the Sustainable Development Department of FAO, Rome, Italy.

The *World Bank Participation Workbook Website*, located at the World Bank, Washington, DC.
Found at <http://www.worldbank.org/html/edi/sourcebook/sbhome.html>

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The *International Development Research Centre*, a public corporation created by the Canadian parliament. Found at <http://www.idrc.ca/corp/idrc.html>

Devline, located at the International Development Studies Department of the University of Sussex, UK. Found at <http://www.ids.ac.uk/index.html>. For a web site specifically dedicated to PRA see <http://www.ids.ac.uk/pramain.html>

The *USAID Participation Page*, located at USAID, Washington DC. Found at http://www.usaid.gov/about/part_devel/index.html.

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