

Bridging Power Asymmetries in Facilitating Public Participation

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ABSTRACT: Participatory approaches to community development and environmental management frequently cause facilitators to encounter dilemmas related to the structure and choice of methods. Because participation does not occur in power vacuum but rather as embedded social and power structures which potentially interfere, these dilemmas underscore the importance of better facilitation structures and techniques to mediate the complexity of disagreements. This paper will review the literature on selecting and applying facilitation methods in Asia, focused on South and Southeast Asia. The analysis includes critical elements for involving marginalized communities in participatory approaches.

KEYWORDS: facilitation, marginalized communities, power asymmetries, public participation

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a broad acceptance of the idea that the public should be given a greater role in development planning, which focuses on alleviation of poverty and support of social advancement. Increased public participation has been an important focus in natural resource management particularly after Chambers (1994) popularized the application of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) in natural resources management, agriculture, poverty and social programs, and health and food security in the 1980s. Ambitious approaches to public participation range from the Analytic Hierarchy Process in forestry in Australia (Ananda, 2007); use of the public hearing in determining environmental impact assessment of oil production in Ghana (Bawole, 2013); to internet-based participation, focused on stakeholders in Colorado (Brown, Montag, & Lyon, 2010). Brewer (2013), working with fisheries in Maine, argued that despite the concerns regarding participation such as the assumption that more time and energy must be invested (which is not always substantiated), participatory approaches in environmental management have resulted in improved public trust, understanding of a diversity of views, and integration of scientific and experiential knowledge. Nevertheless, participatory approaches frequently cause facilitators to encounter dilemmas in their practice that are related to the structure and choice of participatory methods. Leeuwis and Ban (2004) described how ranking technique, a well-regarded participatory method, raised tensions in a decision-making process. The authors concluded that problems were caused by conflicts among the different needs and priorities of participants, whereby sub-communities focus on defending their interests in the meetings rather than negotiating to gain real mutual benefits. Moreover, in many communities, even the overlay of basic, newly-enacted democratic procedures, as seemingly simple as

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“majority vote,” can result in discrimination or prejudice against those who disagreed even when there was an attempt at secret ballot.

Reed (2008) questioned broad claims associated with participatory benefits when he argued that participation does not occur in power vacuum. In some communities, embedded social and power structures potentially interfere with the inclusion of marginalized people. He argued that there is a need for highly skilled facilitators to maintain healthy group dynamics while at the same time, improving equality.

Potential threats to the efficiency of participatory approaches underscore the importance of better facilitation techniques, and their improved application; such as the use of facilitation designs to mediate the complexity of unstated (non-public) disagreements. This issue is paramount to avoid a cosmetic use of participatory jargon (Apthorpe, 1997) in the sense that, using the term “participatory” is intended to attract donors (for example, if it is in the request for proposal announcement) instead of giving real benefit to the public (Leeuwis, 2000; Mosse, 2003).

In Asia in areas of rising development there are elements of community participation that may be characterized as social accountability initiatives, particularly across South and Southeast Asia (Sirker & Cosic, 2007). Under natural resources management allocation policies, inequalities persist across gender, geography, class, caste, ethnicity and age (Beck & Fajber, 2006; Vernooy, 2006). The situation highlights the importance of early and intensive engagement with marginalized communities, and use of facilitation design to support low-power members of communities in decision-making processes. Specific examples will be drawn in this paper from recent studies (such as Barnaud & van Paassen, 2013; Butler & Adamowski, 2015; Dahal, Nepal, & Schuett, 2014; and McDougall, Leeuwis, Bhattarai, Maharjan, & Jiggins, 2013), which emphasize key steps regarding the involvement of marginalized communities in each of the major stages in participatory models. This paper will complement the published literature by discussing and summarizing examples related to facilitation structure and power asymmetries in public participation in natural resources projects. We hope that this paper will eventually contribute to a better public participation and prevent possible downfalls.

2. POWER ASYMMETRIES IN PUBLIC PARTICIPATORY IMPLEMENTATION

In the ladder of participation from the U.S. community development literature, Arnstein (1969) claimed that the highest achievement in development planning was meaningful citizen control, in which “Citizens obtain the majority of decision-making seats, or full managerial power” (p. 217). Variations of participation levels were discussed by other scholars (such as Biggs, 1989; Pretty & Chambers 1994; Wilcox 1994). To some extent, those notions regarding participation are directed to a common principle; the influence and sharing of initiatives, decisions, and resources (Leeuwis, 2004). For decades, constructs of participation theories have been influencing the shape of rural development in many countries. Major international organizations such as the World Bank and the United Nations have been adopting the principles of participatory approaches into their funded development projects throughout the globe (Heck, 2003; Jennings, 2000). Participatory practices have gained a strong endorsement as a way to stimulate equal power in development planning.

It is well-known that the essence of participatory approaches is a reduction in the dominance of unequal power by empowering the poorest (Mosse, 2001). Nevertheless, participatory implementation faces a wall of complexity of local politics in rural areas. Barnaud

et al. (2010) argued that different legitimate perspectives among stakeholders can turn into dynamics which lead to a complex and ambiguous socio-ecosystem. Local power is inevitable in rural politics. It can be, as Mosse posited, strongly shaped by local relations of power, authority, and gender. In the context of natural resource management, rural poverty has been associated with less access of people to the ability to manage resources (Barnaud & van Paassen, 2013; Tyler, 2006; Vernooy, 2006), where this access has always been linked to power relations. Dahal et al. (2014) demonstrated that marginalized communities were often related to poor people although they are the major users of natural resources. Their study regarding community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) of the Annapurna Conservation Area in Nepal showed that poorer households from lower caste of Dalit relied heavily on woods from the forest. The worst risk is when a participatory approach benefits solely the local elites while the marginalized endure the cost. Kothari (2001), who provided a major critique of participatory approaches, warned that should development practitioners underestimate the obvious power relation, not only would it threaten the inclusion of particular individuals or groups as social control, but also the whole body of knowledge.

This situation underscores the importance of the focus of this paper, particularly in understanding inequality in social structures and power relations in natural resources management, and the conjunction of facilitation strategies for dealing with power asymmetries. Insights on these issues help us not only to improve facilitation methods as a part of intervention strategies that favor marginal communities, but also help us to genuinely understand meaningful inclusive and equitable development.

3. CHALLENGES IN MARGINALIZED COMMUNITY FACILITATION

Facilitation strategies that favor marginalized communities in natural resource management are often challenged by unbalanced power at the local level. Derived from recent case studies, we identified some problems that could be of interest. Problems often arise during the interaction between community members, such as during meetings and discussions. We found that marginalization is usually linked to unequal access to authority in the decision-making processes in the forms of domination and oppression, underrepresentation and underestimation of opinion, and limited access to information (Barnaud & van Paassen, 2013; Butler & Adamowski, 2015; Dahal et al., 2014).

3.1 The case of Nan province, Thailand

Inferiority within the power asymmetries was due to lack of representative leadership during negotiation towards decision making. Barnaud and van Paassen (2013), who studied the issue of non-timber forest products (NTFP) management in the province of Nan, Thailand, expressed evidence that the village leaders who were supposed to represent the marginal groups showed little concern for key issues. It seemed that the village leaders, who were supposed to represent the communities in negotiation with national park officers had no interest in sounding the issues because felt that there was nobody collecting forest products anymore. They assumed that people now preferred to buy food. In fact, contrary to the leaders' presumptions, researchers revealed that quite a large number in the community (more than one-third) were highly dependent on the NTFP.

3.2 *The case of Annapurna Conservation Area, Nepal*

Dahal et al. (2014) raised another leadership issue regarding lack of representative. Their study about CBNRM in Nepal showed that qualified members rejected the leadership position as they were not ready to sacrifice personal work by involving in the committee. Those who have less income were struggling to fulfil their basic livelihood needs, thus had no interest in getting involved in the committee. It is also notable that poor people may show lack of interest in a project when they do not foresee any practical benefit they would gain as a consequence of participating. Marginalized people may have very little motivation to participate because they do not perceive that the project would fulfil their basic needs related to food and shelter.

4. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF FACILITATION: INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS

Participatory facilitation design and practices are embedded in several intellectual traditions. Participatory practices within the development arena in the 1970s-1990s drew from a social psychology orientation based in Europe (typified by the Tavistock Institute, <http://www.tavistock.org/>) and in the U.S. (typified by Kurt Lewin, 1947; see also Cummings, Bridgman, & Brown, 2016). Inspection of guides such as the comprehensive “Participatory Learning and Action: A Trainer’s Guide” (Pretty, Guijt, Thompson, & Scoones, 1995) shows that key elements of a social psychology orientation are present: (a) development of the individual as an adult learner; (b) understanding the individual in the context of the group dynamic; and (c) use of a facilitator to manage the group, but not the outcome of the group, which is the province of the members of the group. For example, in a section on adult learning, the book focuses on motivation, and the need for some self-direction, both common elements of an adult education approach. Somewhat more developed are sections on groups, such as “the four stages of group development” (Handy in Pretty et al.) and “the nine types of team members” (Belbin in Pretty et al., p. 47). Games are emphasized as an underutilized means for group development, including the role of games in bringing “issues of conflict and dominance out into the open in a non-threatening way” (p. 51). This step in the process of participatory facilitation, if neglected or underestimated, would potentially contribute to the failure of outcomes of participatory structures (such as voting) discussed earlier. “The Trainer’s Guide” suggests ongoing assessment of trainees to reduce the return to “bad habits” or to catch and reward “innovations” (p. 109). Finally, the “Trainer’s Guide” provides a list of situations – what we would term “structural conditions” – which would frustrate attempts to invite greater participation, even with a strong facilitation approach. Among the ten items, “status divisions may be rigidly followed” and “institutional focus is on product” stand out as particularly relevant to the discussion (Ison & Thompson in Pretty et al., p. 113).

Participatory facilitation within the social psychology tradition, however, has been subjected to criticism from several directions. The focus on the individual as the locus of change – even when that change is directed toward becoming more networked or in solidarity with others – is rejected by many from the critical theory point of view who argue that it is structures (brought about through activism) that create the most enduring change. Arnstein’s (1969) model might term participatory endeavors “therapy,” which is low on the ladder. It is possible that this rejection is a source of embarrassment or doubt as it enters the picture for change agents who are asked to use games or create community-based matrices in their work with marginalized people. Moreover, theorists such as Lewin (1947) have been, over the years, interpreted in kind

to be simplistic and superficial (Cummings et al., 2016) with respect to important concepts such as “unfreezing” one’s prior conceptual orientations, which games and participatory facilitation aim to accomplish. There is also confusion in practice. Guidebooks like the one authored by Pretty et al. separate light-touch “ice breakers” from activities that more directly challenge power inequities and prejudices. However, in practice among less-well trained facilitators, icebreakers often become the point. Ice breakers are used the start of a meeting or conference and are not intended to spur change in anything but comfort and friendliness and, perhaps, the speed of networking.

A second approach to participatory facilitation is founded in critical theory, and has played a role in more confrontational union and environmental politics around the globe. The term for this type of facilitator is typically, “organizer,” and may play a crucial role in mediating between marginalized people and more powerful members of the community and relevant institutions. The more stark the difference in size and power, the more likely the organizer may come to play a role. In situations where there is less difference geographically and socio-economically, participatory facilitation appears to be more effective and less risky. This paper focuses on participatory facilitation.

5. APPROACHES TO FACILITATING MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Nandago (2007, p. 37) held, “Asked who are the most important persons in the development, spread and evolution of high quality participatory methodologies, without hesitating I will respond “the facilitator.” First and foremost, it is essential to understand that facilitation is a complex process. It involves multi-dimensional aspects such as taking action, reflecting, learning and change, occurring continuously (Chambers, 2002), thus there is no “special formula” that can be a single solution to all problems. A range of literature discusses effective facilitation methods, strategies and techniques to improve services participatory approaches. Some of the most popular ones discussed earlier such as are “Participatory Workshops” (Chambers, 2002), and Pretty et al.’s (1995) “A Trainer's Guide.” Resources on facilitation emphasize helping beneficiaries to identify their needs and articulate their ideas. In many cases, marginalized people lack access not only to basic education and facilities, but also are powerless to convey their ideas due to existing power structures.

The key element of facilitating marginalized people is to capture both what is being spoken and what is not. We set our focus on reinforcing marginalized communities at both the individual and group levels. Benefits should flow to both. Our selection is based on the particular finding in the cases in this paper that emphasized the group function representing marginalized communities on decision making through group meeting. We aim at creating conducive atmosphere where marginalized people feel safe and secure to express opinion freely, and trust that their voices are listened and considered. To deal with facilitation failure, we first identify several strategies that a facilitator should have.

One of the most essential elements in facilitation is early engagement. Reed (2008) highlighted the importance of representing relevant stakeholders as an initial stage in stakeholder participation. He mentioned that it was very common in development projects that stakeholders were engaged only in decision making during project implementation - which is late in the game. He argued that besides increasing the stakeholders’ participation level, early engagement also improved the facilitator’s understanding of the variety of needs and priorities held by different stakeholders. In addition, Butler and Adamowski (2015) argued that early engagement was an

appropriate way to identify and reduce barriers (such as the choices of days and time, venues, methods and so forth) that could impair the involvement of members of marginalized communities. Detecting and reducing these barriers could increase confidence and eventually support fuller engagement during the activities. Furthermore, early engagement is important to build trust - an essential element in working with marginalized people. In the case of NTFP management for instance, many villagers were pessimistic that their voices would be heard by the board of the national park due to their trauma related to the threat of violence that had resulted for strong top-down policies that had lasted for decades (Barnaud & van Paassen, 2013). Interaction in early engagement may minimize misleading information that could lead to biased interpretation of current issues.

5.1 Stakeholder identification

Stakeholder identification and analysis are used to recognize power imbalances and to categorize members of marginal communities in the project. Tools such as a stakeholder analysis grid or campfire analogy can be selected to accomplish stakeholder identification and analysis. Facilitators need to observe, identify, assess, and position relevant stakeholders in relation to power dynamics in the project prior to selecting the appropriate strategies to empower marginalized people. Butler and Adamowski (2015) pointed out the vital part of initial stakeholder identification: when facilitators successfully identify the correct marginalized communities in the beginning, it will be easier for them to recognize and link with other marginalized groups across the area. Within this process, conscientiousness is required because more powerful stakeholders might use their influence to eliminate the inclusion of other members of community on the project site (Barnaud & van Paassen, 2013). Additionally, carelessness in stakeholder identification, for instance by using demographic representation in a place where different demographics have wide gaps of power and social status, can lead to inequitable representation because people who have more wealth would strive to win the top position (Butler & Adamowski; Chambers, 1994).

5.2 Neutral or not?

In the phase of early engagement, Barnaud & van Paassen (2013) underscored the importance of defining the posture that should be constructed by facilitators. They suggested that, in a situation where power asymmetries occur, taking a non-neutral posture (meaning that the project decides that only some stakeholders will be empowered) may be an appropriate way to prevent the increase of social inequity discussed by Kothari (2001). The less powerful stakeholders would be not have the ability to defend their interests in front of more powerful stakeholders should they be divided and be less prepared in the decision-making process. Employing exercises such as preliminary discussions, caucuses, and workshops are needed to reach a mutual perspective among villagers to strengthen their position in discussing with more powerful stakeholders. In their study regarding forest management issues in Thailand, Barnaud & van Paassen used the Companion Modeling (ComMod) method to mediate conflict between Royal Forestry Department (RFD) and two communities within the Mien ethnic group. A series of workshops were held to enhance the villagers' awareness of the importance of mutual understanding through collective reflection regarding the issues they faced, and to increase preparedness for the discussion with the board of the National Park. A critical role of the

facilitator in this phase is to explicitly expose the posture to allow all local stakeholders to either accept or reject the idea that only part of them will be empowered. The objective of this strategy is to be transparent and to gain legitimacy regarding the non-neutral posture.

5.3 Encouraging representative leadership

Marginalized people need representatives to allow their voices to be heard. Leaders are needed not only to sound the people's interests in decision-making processes, but also to defend and to argue while decisions being made. In a meeting, gaps of social status within participants often become communication barriers in development programs. An example was shown by Barnaud & van Paassen (2013), where two poor women who previously said that NTFP for food was more important than commercially-bought food, stated the opposite during a subsequent meeting due to the village leader who had influenced them to change their minds. We perceive that representative leaders who are able to speak their minds freely and articulate ideas clearly in front of powerful people are required to maintain fairness in opinion sharing during discussion, increasing the likelihood that the views of marginalized people will be taken into account. Failure to properly address these views will lead to biased understanding of the real voices of marginalized people. Facilitators need to recognize and mentor people who are capable of becoming the representative leaders. Interaction during early engagement (such as preliminary discussions, pre-workshops, etc.) may serve as a space for social learning between marginalized people to discuss issues at stake and to draw common perspectives toward solution, as well as to recognize and develop personal leadership capabilities that come from internal group collaboration. Further activities such as leadership training might be an option to foster representative leadership.

Finally, we perceive that those strategies are paramount to increasing participation of marginalized communities through reinforcing their position towards encountering power asymmetries with respect to issues in decision-making processes. Other strategies exist in the literature and in practice. Some of the strategies were focused on selection of methods by, for example enhancing powerful stakeholder's awareness concerning diverse of interests of marginalized group through card-ranking technique to visualize and discuss prioritized problems (Barnaud & van Paassen, 2013), or by giving more power to marginalized group during decision-making processes through voting modification where a larger size is given to the marginalized group (Butler and Adamowski, 2015). Others emphasized negotiation by convincing the powerful stakeholders that fulfilling the interests of marginalized group is also part of their interests (win-win solution).

6. LOOKING TOWARDS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF FACILITATORS

We would like to turn the discussion in this paper now to the implications for professional development of facilitators, and retention of high quality practitioners with respect to power issues in settings with marginalized communities. As a field worker in a community development project, the facilitator is a vital instrument who translates concepts into practices, whereby the effectiveness of program implementation depends on facilitator skills and capacities to select and use appropriate methods and strategies on the field.

Processes in early engagement involve continuous and dynamic interactions between facilitators and the institutions or NGOs who employ them; marginalized groups; and powerful

stakeholders. In order to be successful during this process, first and foremost, facilitator needs to build trust so that marginalized people believe that the process being offered will allow them to be involved not merely in the form of tokenism, and the output of the process will benefit them both economically and socially. Challenge arises when marginalized people have experienced trauma due to conflict with other stakeholders or institutions, or from being excluded in development planning that employed top-down approach that happened in the past. The case of NTFP in Thailand for example, reflects how past conflict between villagers and the national park officers increased suspicion and bigotry (Barnaud & van Paassen, 2013) which likely functions as a barrier to building consensus or agreements. Facilitators should be able to tackle, or at least acknowledge, this issue in the very beginning of the engagement process. Furthermore, to legitimate the non-neutral posture to practice a meaningful early engagement requires compliance from powerful stakeholders. Facilitators should be testing whether stakeholders will accept this approach for reducing prejudice against the posture, where powerful stakeholder might see it as intervention and that could ultimately lead to rejection.

Capacity building of facilitators should take into account those and many other issues. We also claim that, alongside technical skills, empathy is key aspect that should be aimed in professional development of facilitators, and is supported by the social-psychology theoretical base for many participatory approaches. Sensitivity and responsiveness are required, in the sense that facilitators should be able to notice behaviors that reflect disagreement and inferiority. Training design should also encompass continuous learning processes that transform facilitators' empathy toward marginalized people, and at the same time build confidence in working with powerful stakeholders.

Another remark appropriate here is that facilitators should be capable enough to understand and employ various tools and techniques that suit the current situation, to individually assess diverse responses affected by the tools being used, and assist selection of the most appropriate tool that would change circumstances or even modify them to get the best advantage. Skills on tools and strategies favoring marginalized communities in early engagement process should be developed and disseminated, and facilitators should have appropriate mentoring and the support of their institutions. Facilitators should be given space to share experiences with peers to integrate meaningful learning process among them.

7. CONCLUSION

Dealing with power asymmetries in public participation is a complex process that requires facilitation strategies that favor marginalized communities through early engagement. Awareness on non-neutral posture and its legitimation, capacities on identifying stakeholders, and understanding of various methods and techniques and abilities to employ them in different situation where power structures occur are some of the important elements to allow powerless stakeholders to achieve meaningful participation. Further research is needed to improved strategies to empower marginalized communities to encounter power imbalance especially during decision making process in natural resource management.

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