



## Transforming attitudes for participative research

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THE MAIN AIM of this paper is to stimulate reflection on where we are as regards water and related developments at the start of a new millennium. It is perhaps a more philosophical offering than others and it touches on aspects of development which many of us may not take sufficient time to consider in the course of our normal professional duties. Such areas as complexity assessment, change management and related psychological factors will be discussed with particular emphasis on those factors which block progress. The paper is intended to stimulate thought on issues related to transforming attitudes, questioning motives at the individual and organisational level, and suggests action for the reforming of organisations and training programmes based on participative action research. It may well be somewhat controversial and may even question some long-held perceived development wisdom. The challenge is to 'think the unthinkable' - and one of the 'unthinkables' which we may all too easily brush aside is that our best efforts in attaining meaningful development is too often thwarted. Are we wasting time, effort and resources on basic policies which are clearly not working?

The terms 'integrated development', 'sustainable development', 'participatory development' and the like are catch phrases that have been used on and off for decades to point towards a possible panacea towards some form of development breakthrough. On the one hand, and at a rather cynical level of debate, it could be claimed that their use was too often to lend some credence to projects and programmes that claimed to be 'breaking new ground' - whether they were or not! On the other hand, and at a more benevolent level of assessment, the use of the above terms signified an honest striving to attain, what at times seems to be an unattainable quest - *real meaningful development* with all parties/partners in step with each other, with a high level of local participation and lasting benefits for the beneficiary community. Right from the start it has to be recognised that the word 'development' in many circles has degenerated to the level of derisory comments such as 'who/what is developing?' and 'development! - who is kidding who?!'. Many are engaged in a 'development game' in which there are many losers and few winners - and so often the latter are not those whom the 'development' is directed towards. Indeed the whole concept of 'development' can so easily be derided in the same way that the term 'property development' is received by rural/urban communities in developed societies when they learn that their environment is to be 'transformed' by vested interest, i.e. in a word speculators. Are we nothing more than development specu-

lators? But this time the speculation in terms of 'success' is more akin to a kind of lottery.

At the start of a new Millennium are we really any further forward in the quest for integrated or sustainable development? Meaningful development can only be achieved if there is an emphasis on the development process in which the *transforming of attitudes* by all concerned must be a priority. It must involve participative action research and the reforming of organisations and training programmes. In short it calls for the fundamental rethink and critical review of much of the past and current development scenarios. Any review geared to *process* must question the attitudes, beliefs and motives of all the participants and calls upon expertise in many diverse disciplines, especially psychology, systems thinking and change management. Development programmes have failed in the past because over-simplistic development models have been used with inbuilt biases and prejudices inhibiting a truly people's development process, i.e. one involving a sensitive truly participative process of initiating and enabling change. *Process* is all important; the way projects are conceived, initiated and progressed is often more important than short-term end results which may be impressive at first sight but may not have been actioned in a manner which builds in a dynamic sustainability.

Participative action research is all important in the achievement of meaningful development. Paulo Freire had an important input in linking the process of knowing and learning, via an ongoing cycle of action and reflection (Freire, 1972). An excellent example of his work is contained in projects implemented in Kenya and Zimbabwe in the publication (three volumes): *Training for Transformation* (Hope & Timmel, 1984).

One of the main issues about the participative-action-research (PAR) method is that it has profound implications for the role of the facilitator. de Konning and Martin (1996) have commented: 'A process of critical reflection and action is developed to enable us (as facilitators) to become aware of where the images, ideas, positions and opinions we have of ourselves and others come from, and to gain the possibility of giving a different meaning to who we are and a different direction to our lives. The use of 'us' and 'we' is important in this context. It is not only the poor, illiterate, and other categories of people classified as marginalised and deprived who need to think about how, in what way and why they experience themselves and the world as they do. It is equally important for more privileged groups such as health professionals, researchers and activists to do the same'.

Khanna (1996) who considers herself to be 'an enabler, a facilitator' in women's health education has noted that: 'Participatory-action-research requires an attitude of mutuality, an openness and a commitment to learning on the part of all those involved. These words have acquired a different meaning for us, as programme planners: we have really learnt how difficult it is to open ourselves as recipients of traditional knowledge. And how difficult it is to leave the position of those who have all the answers.'

In the above context three R's can be identified: respect, recognition, resources:

#### *Respect*

Real respect for the people we too often glibly refer to as those we are 'participating' with. Real respect implies treating everyone as an equal - not just from a sentimental humanitarian stance but by acknowledging the real expertise that local communities have in their own survival strategy and in their inherent wisdom and realisation of the possibilities for change.

#### *Recognition*

Of the real outcomes of projects/programmes, together with a proper monitoring of how they have progressed and in many cases what was the factor (s) that lead to their success/failure (especially those which failed); proper consideration of the development process - if there indeed was one identified!

#### *Resources*

Does not just mean the acquiring of external funds and personnel but the real utilisation of the experience, etc of the local community; which also implies the *recognition* of the value of that know-how and the real human *respect* of the individuals in that community. Indeed in many cases viable small-scale initiatives involving real participation of the local community often receive a kind of kiss of death when they receive undue external *recognition* for their efforts. Often excellent fully participatory initiatives have to be protected from external interference from the external/international community - whether it be central government, NGOs, international development agencies, etc.. An excess of resources, too quickly and/or at the wrong time can be detrimental to a grass-root project which may well have the effect of eventually transforming it from a potential 'sustainable' venture to that of being over-dependent on external influences and inputs.

Sustainable and/or integrated development can so often be meaningless catch phrases. 'Sustainability' should not be interpreted as the search for the perfect equilibrium, some steady-state balanced situation. The world will never stop changing, so what sustainability is really about is the capability to respond, to adapt, and to invent new activities. The power to do this does not lie solely in 'conservation measures' or in extreme efficiency, nor can it be had by simply distributing cash. The power lies in *creativity*, and

this in turn is rooted in diversity, cultural richness, openness, and the ability and will to experiment and to take risks. Nor should the concept of 'integrative development' be seen to be an easily identifiable task. It is not! At a fundamental level we have to ask: what exactly is being integrated? In general it is naive to assume that there is any simple 'answers' to rural development problems. Shades of grey, subjective judgements, post hoc rationalisations, multiple understandings and complex motivations are what characterises any real situation.

In Malawi (Muskwa, 1994) has noted that poverty has been institutionalised, i.e. politics and power has been the reality. We must move away from slick policy statements. Throughout this process it is necessary to monitor who is gaining from 'economic growth'. Poverty cannot be fully understood unless it is realised how it is linked to prosperity. Unless the grip of institutionalised poverty is broken, it will be impossible to make progress. In the past Malawi Government policy had deliberately defined who should benefit the most from policies. Only a relatively small section of the population had access to unlimited land, non-restrictive crops and free market policies, commercial credit.

Although the concept of participatory development has gained much credence in the development literature, the poor do not participate in public policy decisions that affect their lives or in choosing the kind of services directed towards them. Policy-making for poverty alleviation is still top-down. Most resources and decision-making are still heavily concentrated in central ministries, not at the local government or community level. Empowering the poor needs fundamental change in individual attitudes at all levels, institutional reforms to promote the decentralisation and participation appropriate to development, public sector reform and private sector re-orientation.

Khanna (1996) has commented that: 'Truly participatory action research results in all the actors going through a process which transforms them at a very personal level and politicises them with respect to relationships at another level. —The transformation has to do with different ways of perceiving things.

Further, PAR can succeed in or through organisations whose objective is empowerment. The chances for success are less in organisations whose ultimate goal is efficient service delivery. This is because the values which govern the two kinds of organisation are different. — There is a difference between PAR and PR methods. The assumption that the use of participatory research methods is actually participatory research leads to serious problems. It is an entire process which includes education, pain and struggle and results in empowerment.'

In summary the practical implications of the issues addressed above is focussed on the necessity for participative-action-research (PAR) to seek ways in which it can be part of an ongoing process, a process which integrates the following points:

- develop a process of critical reflection on reality;
  - confirm the knowledge and experience of the 'common people'
  - identify training needs for practitioners in PAR
  - acknowledge that the power relationship of the practitioner/enabler is problematic
- develop ways in which different interest can be negotiated by less powerful groups.

All of the above can only be initiated if there is a serious attempt to assess our own individual way of working. Can we truly say we have personally been transformed by the development experiences we encounter - or not?

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