Transforming attitudes for participative change

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AT THE 25TH WEDC Conference the following comment was made in general discussion: 'perhaps the water sector is becoming marginalised in not fully taking on board the insights of general development practices'. This paper grew out of reflecting on that comment. It focuses on the necessity for projects and programmes in the water sector to be more sensitive to what should be the undergirdering aim of development: liberating people from all that holds them back from having a full human life. It is a process of enhancing individual and collective quality of life in a manner that satisfies basic needs, is sustainable from an environmental, social and economic viewpoint, and is empowering with the people having a substantial degree of control over the development process. In essence it is about transforming society and the empowerment and transformation of communities through *participatory development*. There needs to be more emphasis on *people* and *process* rather than just on the product. It involves attitudinal change at all levels, reflection, dialogue, participation and emphasis on process following the insights articulated by Paulo Freire (1993), and Robert Chamber (1983, 1993, 1995, 1997). The strategy is very much one of being 'people first' with an emphasis on *their* priorities.

What are the insights that we may not be addressing? Some practitioners might say that when new development practices are focussed on there is 'naught for our comfort'. The lessons from the field are plain for all to see: development is a complex and difficult business and those engaged in it are often reluctant to face the enormity of the fundamental rethink in policy that is required. We need to critically reassess development thinking and development assistance policy in the light of current debates about sustainable development, participation and the abysmal results over the past fifty years. A candid appraisal of the situation shows that trends in development during the 1990's have not really built on previous experiences to any significant extent. After fifty years of development aid, the underlying concepts and methods have not changed radically, even if the donor agencies would argue to the contrary. Donors and recipients are still engaged in basically the same kind of structural relationship, even if the rhetoric has changed to include such words as 'empowerment', 'partnership' and 'participation'. Many development efforts so far implemented have not been concerned with human and social transformation. Indeed to understand the dynamic process of development requires that we strive to really embrace the concept of participation and engage in new forms of engagement, dialogue and reflec-

tion. We need to take steps to develop a truly 'learning organisation' strategy.

Although there is much which is disheartening about development practice, motivation is very much dependent on whether or not one is capable of taking cognisance of what has gone before, really learn from experiences, and move on. Indeed for those who have the eyes to see and are able to face some difficult lessons all is not gloom. In the foreword to a recent text on participation in development and the need for change at all levels (Blackburn, Holland, ed.,1998) Robert Chambers comments:

> 'For us - development professionals in whatever roles, this is a good time to be alive. Much that we have believed has proved wrong; and a new agenda is fast taking form. As *Who Changes?* (*ibid*) shows, this promises, for all of us, whoever we are, whatever our profession or discipline, and wherever we work, the challenge and exhilaration of exploration, innovation, learning, and doing better.'

Participation has become a central theme in development, but as usual with concepts which gain currency, rhetoric has out run both understanding and practice. Some are engaged in participation-speak with their actions showing their real motives. The gap between rhetoric and the day-to-day practice of participation is far too wide. Many of the advocates of participatory rural development have not engaged with institutional blocks to its implementation. Just as crucial to comprehend is that personal behaviour and attitudes need to be changed. Indeed Chambers (in the foreword to *Who Changes?, ibid*) focuses on three themes of effective participation:

> 'Sustained participation in development demands transformation in three domains: methods and procedures; institutional cultures, and personal behaviour and attitudes. All three are needed. Each reinforces the others. Each presents points of entry for change. Of these, personal behaviour and attitudes are crucial. Participation is about how people interact. Dominating behaviour inhibits participation. Democratic behaviour to enable and empower encourages it. For those with power and authority to adopt non-dominating, empowering behaviour almost always entails personal change.'

It is evident that what is required is to be able to conduct more effective training for attitude and behaviour change.

People have to be helped to engage with participation. Some will feel threatened by the concept. How do we encourage a 'learning organisation' approach embracing error, encouraging reflection (including self-critical reflection) and critical awareness, which have self-improvement, built in? How to encourage those in power to realise that power is not a resource to be shared and that empowering others is a fulfilling experience? Participation is about commitment; a commitment to enable the conditions which can lead to a significant empowerment of others to flourish. An implementing organisation can become a learning organisation when it creates space for various actors to interact, question, experiment, share and learn, from one another and from local people. Bawden (1994) has stated:

> 'Learning organizations are collectives of communities of individuals who share experiences and understanding through co-operative learning and genuine participation in those events which affect them. For any organization or community to learn, individuals must not only themselves be active learners, but they must also be committed to sharing that learning in ways which allow consensual understanding or meaning to be reached. Here then is the essence of the participatory process through which 'people-centred development' is made possible through 'social learning concepts and methods'.

Particular sector development may prove to be of little long-term advantage if it does not address the underlying problems. Improvement in water and sanitation must go hand in hand with the development of a participatory strategy. It calls for a rethink of who are really the experts; we need to address the fact that local communities possess a great deal of knowledge of their situation and of the potential for change. The insights of Paulo Freire are particularly apt here; the following extract highlights Freire's humility and attitude towards 'experts' and his ongoing quest for dialogue (Freire in Maria, Freire, Macedo, ed.,1998):

> ' — as I travel more and more and share in the struggles of the people in various places, I learn to be modest in my claims. When I am asked if I know Africa or Latin America well, I reply 'no' And with each journey I know less!'

He then goes on to comment on so-called 'experts':

> 'They go and stay for two or three years and then become specialists in Latin America or Africa. With every journey I make, I become less of a specialist, a non-specialist in Africa and Latin America, precisely because I discover these essential differences — for me the essential is the 'differences', and since each time I discover more differences, each time I become more aware of how little I know. That is the way of modesty, and it is the essential way. — As Hegel said 'The true reality is in becoming'. It is not *being* or *not being*, but

the tension between ——. Thus when you put forward the idea that truth lies in the quest and not in the result, that it is a process, that knowledge is a process, and thus we should engage in it and achieve it through dialogue, through breaking with the past - that is not accepted by the great majority of students, who are used to the teacher, the wise man, having the truth, hierarchically, and thus do not accept dialogue.'

We need to become more aware of the development mind-set that many of us have become conditioned to. The concept of education, development and dialogue that Freire drew attention to is foreign to many of us who have been subject to a form of education, training and way of working, which is far from being process, orientated. We need to move from product to process.

In some countries the participatory development process has been introduced via a broader philosophical framework. (Hagman, Chuma, Murwira, 1998) For example, in Zimbabwe a training programme (originally initiated in Kenya): Training for Transformation (TFT) (Hope, Timmel, 1984) is based on the pedagogy of Freire (1993) and is built on the notion of conscientization through participatory education. Learning is based on the experience of confronting and reflecting together on problems and issues as they occur and makes use of dialogue. Through dialogue participants ask relevant questions and find causes and solutions for themselves, rather than receive teaching based on 'outside' knowledge and realities. The Training for Transformation programme empowers local people to gain greater control over their circumstances by participating actively in their own development through the sharing and formulation of ideas and knowledge. It stresses the importance of participation and co-operation as key elements in the building and strengthening of institutions which enable people to become self-reliant. It also aims to strengthen people's confidence and include tools to facilitate social analysis to help groups find the causes of problems. The philosophical depth of Freire's concepts of dialogue and concientization has made his broad approach relevant and powerful for people of different disciplines, backgrounds, status and personality.

Projects which demonstrate a significant community participation and empowerment component are few and far between. Too often funding bodies are too focussed on particular projects and are not really interested in finding out the priorities of the local community. A project in South Africa (Makhetha, 1997) demonstrates that development really takes off when the local community are asked to prioritise projects and are given help in developing skills to enable them to participate more effectively. The capacity building and empowerment engendered in the project raised the confidence of the community to such an extent that they started to use their skills to negotiate with other funding and government agencies. In this project the funding agency was totally committed to community participation and control and was able to respond flexibly to change.

There was a respect for the dynamic nature of community participation. The programme was able to adapt to changing needs in the community, including being responsive to changing priorities with time. This is an excellent example of how boundless enthusiasm, creativity and innovative spirit can be released when people feel they have seized on something that can make a difference. 'Success' was defined as the moment local organisations took over and managed their own projects.

Broham (1996) states: 'Discipline-centrism is an ongoing problem in development studies. The development process is artificially fragmented and compartmentalized to fit the areas of specialisation. (In contrast) interdisciplinary approaches to development have yet to gain much respectability in an intellectual environment which tends to favour more 'scientific' and 'rigorous' research in disciplinary specialisation.'

In order to strengthen our understanding of the development process, and to enable us to make a more meaningful contribution to the lives of the world poor and disadvantaged, a much more direct involvement in the process of development itself is required with a greater disposition towards 'listening and learning'. Meaningful development research and practice can only be achieved by a mix of professionalism and individual characteristics akin to integrity of motivation and, perhaps even bordering on particular personality types. I have come to the conclusion that the personality of the development practitioner is as important as his/her's experience. Development work is not just a discipline; it is a state of mind involving dialogue; it is a way of life. Opening people's minds is what it is all about - and that applies to everybody involved in the development process - particularly the professional. We must get away from the 'them and us' approach. The experience is for all of us to share and be transformed by the experience. As a development practitioner - when were you last transformed by engagement in development? Doing development work is a way of life. It is akin to the difference between a tired disillusioned teacher, who should have got out of the profession years ago, and the committed teacher who strives to engages pupils and really enables them to fulfil all that they are capable of. The committed development professional must have all the personal traits and characteristics of the devoted teacher since bringing out the best in others, enabling and empowering is what it should be all about.

We also need to take credence of the increasing realisation from diverse areas of expertise from sub-atomic physics to ecological awareness, through to complementary medicine, psychological insights, systems thinking and spirituality of the interconnectedness of all things. A holistic approach is a fundamental pre-requisit.

Parnwell (1999) gives the following development worker personnel specification:

'— the 'ideal' development scholar would appear to require many if not all of the following qualities (and presumably several more besides). —— The ideal person should have adequate skills of language and cultural understanding, should have the simultaneous powers of detachment and involvement, and should pursue a holistic understanding of the problems and process of development. He/she should be flexible, self-aware, humble, altruistic, sensitive, compassionate a good listener, and should seek to contribute knowledge as well as acquiring it. The person should also, somehow, seek to achieve an appropriate balance between breadth and specialisation, focus and comparison.'

Quite a tall order! However the point to be made here is that we are not just talking about a professional person but also an individual with a range of personal attributes. It is the sort of person who is adaptable and is willing to learn from mistakes. Only such a person is able to contemplate attitudinal change. Parnwell goes on to comment on personality:

'Ultimately, I believe that the personal dimension is a key variable. A myriad facets of personality might be discussed, but I shall touch on just a handful. Of paramount importance is self-awareness. One has to understand who one is, and where one is coming from in terms of culture, background, experience, training, philosophy and so on if one is to be able to shed certain forms of 'baggage' in order to 'see' or 'experience' things in the way that a target society does - which I believe is a key to effective understanding and thus action. An ability to recognise, for instance, Eurocentrism, stereotype, romanticism and so on is crucial if we are to minimise the influence of these things on our judgement, perceptions and action recommendations. Linked to this is what I call 'immersibility' - the willingness and ability of the researcher to become deeply imbued within the context of the problem or phenomena with which he/she is concerned, as opposed to retaining a degree of detachment and thus isolation. The researcher must possess skills of both intuitive and objective interpretation of events, opinions, actions, processes, circumstances and settings, and also the ability to recognise appropriate signs that might warrant interpretation. Flexibility is also important. Two further traits of personality that I personally believe are indispensable are altruism and humility'

All of this has considerable implications for education and training in this area. This must include sufficient attention being paid to behaviour and attitudes training. Hence learning how to use participatory methods is not enough. The true test of engagement with participation has much to do with one's personal motivation and commitment. It is about vision, not only about methodology. That vision has also to be taken up by our organisations - are they committed to joining with others towards becoming a more learning orientated movement?

For those who have ears to hear there is a universal cry to rethink development practice. In conclusion, two quotes:

'Find out what the people are doing and help them to do it better'

E.F. Schumacher, Founder of the Intermediate Technology Development Group

Go to the People
Live with them,
Learn from them,
Love them.
Start with what they know
Build with what they have.

But with the best leaders
When the work is done
The task accomplished
The people will say,
'We have done this Ourselves.'

- Lao Tsu, China, 700B.C.

Conclusions

The main purpose of this paper is to stimulate comment and reaction on possible training programmes for participatory development. Sensitivity training and reflection is required of practitioners together with the development of the learning organisation approach. Bureaucratic structures need to be changed to allow for a flexibility of approach, with people-centred development being the focus. A spirit of true participation needs to be engendered. We need to listen and learn from each other. It is to be hoped that the forthcoming WEDC conference will be an opportunity for this to happen. Let us find out what we are all doing and strive to do it better through participative learning. The author is currently engaged in a project, the aim of which is to focus on practitioners' sensitivity training, the development of learning organisation methodology and the collating of experiences of participatory development.

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