

Participatory Assessment: A methodology to Leave No One Behind Launching Webinar Event: Wednesday November 23, 2022

Accompanying text to IDS/ Jo Howard's inputs (slides 10-18).

It is a privilege to be part of this launch of SDC's participatory assessment guidance in the context of the SDG's call to Leave No One Behind. I work in the Participation Inclusion and Social Change research cluster at the Institute of Development Studies, where our work focuses on methodologies to enable the meaningful participation of the most marginalised in development and humanitarian contexts.

It is important to contextualise SDC's work on participatory assessment in a broader context going back 50 years. 'Participation' as we understand it today in the international aid and development arena, and in governance, builds on decades of theory and practice. A major and enduring contribution comes from the Latin American thinkers Paolo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda who saw participation as emancipatory, requiring professionals to engage directly with communities in processes which recognized their knowledge and enabled oppressed people to analyze their realities and identify actions for transformation of injustice. Their work was enriched by feminists who challenged the theories of social transformation that neglected the need for transformation of gender relations. In Africa and Asia, pioneers such as Robert Chambers and Rajesh Tandon shifted how knowledge is understood in development. They highlighted the importance of accessing multiple sources of knowledge, especially local or 'lived experience', developed tools for participatory data gathering and analysis, and challenged aid professionals to become aware of our biases and 'blindspots'.

These traditions informed an explosion of participatory initiatives in the 1990s, when theories of participation were drawn on to develop institutions of participatory governance such as participatory budgeting in Brazil, barangays in the Philippines, and gram sabhas in India, through which citizens were encouraged to engage in decision making. In informal settings, the earlier approaches developed as 'Rapid Rural Appraisal' and Participatory Rural Appraisal', matured into Participatory Learning and Action (although still generally referred to as PRA), which built in processes for learning and action based on a sequence of participatory tools, and added more principles – of humility, power sharing, gender awareness, and researcher reflexivity.

The 2000s saw growing critiques of the instrumental use of participation in development programming, and superficial or coopted participation in participatory governance – which triggered new scholarship and the development of power and empowerment frameworks such as the [power cube](#). These emphasized the need to analyze how power operates, and how less powerful groups can build, shift, or influence power. In the 2010s, the aid and development community focused on analyzing the MDGs which highlighted the need for interdisciplinary working, collaboration, and a focus on those furthest behind. Since 2015, the development community got behind the SDGs and the LNOB agenda.

However, in the current era international cooperation is faced with challenges of widening inequalities and intersecting crises - the climate crisis, conflicts, migration, and authoritarianism, as well as challenges from the majority world, for aid and development to decolonize. It is in this context, that SDC can and has provided leadership, building on Switzerland's commitment to and practice of meaningful citizen participation, to consider how it can draw on this wider history, scholarship, and practice of participation in different settings and act to embed participation into its programming. The Participatory Assessment approach is rooted in this rich history. It seeks the meaningful participation of marginalised groups of people in development and humanitarian contexts as active agents, and not as passive beneficiaries. It models democratic practice.

In the context of intersecting crises and political polarisation, responses need to be informed by a complexity approach which seeks multiple perspectives, and adaptive learning. Coupled with this, analysis of people's experience of participation in development programming and participatory governance has highlighted the challenges of co-option and tokenism. Approaches that promote participation in aid and development therefore need to be rooted in deeper conceptual foundations and principles. These include:

1. **Dialogue** – Meaningful participation is rarely possible through a one-off event. Neither can it be achieved with the right or latest technology or widget. It needs to facilitate recurring dialogue between different perspectives and sources of knowledge. This can enable deeper understanding of the systemic barriers to inclusion.
2. **Knowledge** – Enabling dialogue between multiple perspectives that includes those who are most marginalised requires a shift in thinking about whose knowledge counts, and recognition that people with lived experience are knowledge and rights holders, that their knowledge is important and relevant, and needs to be brought into dialogue with other forms of knowledge e.g. that of duty bearers and service providers. This means enabling people to gather data and makes sense of it in their contexts, and for their data to be valued and acted on.
3. **Power** – processes which respect diverse knowledges and enable marginalised groups to engage in dialogue and analysis promote a shift in power. Well facilitated processes can enable the agency of those who participate, giving importance to the capacities, confidence and knowledge they gain, as well as generating knowledge for external stakeholders.
4. **Accountability** – Participatory processes build shared understanding and capacities for accountability – downwards as well as upwards, as aid and development professionals listen, respond and engage meaningfully with participants; and also horizontally, as groups of citizens exchange perspectives and navigate differences.

Facilitating participation therefore needs to consider how those involved are sharing power; whose knowledge is privileged, whose agency is enabled, and who is accountable to whom. Participation, whether in the governance arena or beyond in other areas of development and humanitarian assistance, should not be regarded as a 'luxury' or optional add on. Participation is a right and democratic value – and those who have power to enable it (i.e. Robert Chambers' 'power to empower') can strengthen their capacity to do so through developing the necessary attitudes and mindsets, and availing themselves of tools and methods such as the PA guide.

In the context of the SDGs, international actors have committed to LNOB, although national governments show weak overall engagement or prioritization ([ODI 2021](#)). International and national actors face political and budgetary constraints to prioritizing those furthest behind, and to operationalizing the concept to develop policies that recognize and target intersectionally disadvantaged groups. Collaboration is needed - between development and humanitarian actors, and through participatory processes which share power and agency with marginalized groups, to make progress towards the global goals. This requires development and humanitarian agencies to have access to knowledge about the ideas, principles and practices that underpin these processes, and access to methodologies that they can adopt in their contexts, to genuinely enable the agency of those who are marginalized.

The challenge to the development and humanitarian world is to recentre the LNOB agenda, to amplify it, with an intersectional and power-aware analysis. For example, it is not just about reaching those furthest behind in order to gather better data - although disaggregated data (and diverse perspectives from age, disability, gender, economic class etc.) are essential. It is about shifting power to people in communities, enabling their active participation in identifying what needs to change, and in developing and testing out theories of change. Moreover, for aid and development professionals, engaging people in gathering and analyzing data has the potential for a better understanding of the 'system' and where to intervene. It also reduces bias (e.g. of the researcher, programme staff, or more dominant groups).

Research undertaken at IDS in partnership with local organizations provides some examples of participatory processes which have involved people from marginalized groups as co-researchers and peer researchers. These processes involve cycles of reflection, analysis, and action, which engage with questions of power both within the group, and with other stakeholders, test out actions for inclusion, and navigate different perspectives, identities and power differentials. This attention to power, participation and inclusion is an essential component of an adaptive strategy for change. To give some concrete examples:

- In Ghana, women who depend on artisanal salt winning from the Songor Lagoon, were excluded by local power dynamics from decision making over the resource, which more powerful stakeholders were proposing to privatize. An extended participatory process with them, needed to include building a group identity and cohesion so that they could take action together. This also meant overcoming differences between them. Once they had developed their sense of group and agreed on actions, they were able to approach the traditional leadership, establish alliances and communicate the situation and their proposals via community radio. Attention in participatory processes needs to be paid to internal as well as external dynamics.
- In India, Denotified Tribes are a large and heterogenous but extremely marginalized population. A group was supported to share and analyze their diverse experiences of marginalization, identify commonalities, and link these to the SDGs. In this way, they produced participatory data that could be fed into policy discussions.
- These methods extend into the humanitarian sector. In work with WFP in Uganda, we have used participatory methods to generate data with people in refugee settlements that can contribute to more sustainable solutions to local food insecurity – although there are challenges in embedding a participatory approach into the institution's M&E system.

To situate these examples and the Participatory Assessment approach in the wider participatory research scholarship, there is now a wealth of methodological knowledge about participatory approaches. Researchers at IDS working with others around the world, have produced a [Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry](#), which includes sections on key influences and approaches, and includes a section on Participatory MEL. The Handbook includes examples and guidance on conducting action research, using visual methods, digital methods, and mixed methods. It highlights approaches which shift power to marginalized groups such as peer research – when people who share particular identities, geographies, and experiences (e.g. of exclusion, discrimination) can research their own realities, with support, training and accompaniment from professional organizations.

A key message throughout the Handbook is that these methods cannot achieve their potential without understanding and practising the principles of participation. These include:

- Attitude - Outsiders must have an attitude of respect, humility and patience, and a willingness to learn from the local people.
- Sharing power – ‘hand over the stick’ means learning from, and with local people, eliciting and using their symbols, criteria, categories and indicators; and finding, understanding and appreciating local people's knowledge.
- Group based – facilitate group analysis of the issues for themselves, and learning through dialogue.
- Facilitation – the emphasis is on enabling a conversation; listening and being flexible is very important.
- Power aware - be aware of our own biases and positionality in order to be inclusive (biases and positionality are experience and identity-based, but also linked to our geography, income, profession, discipline etc).
- Flexibility – don't be rigid about the method, adapt it where appropriate in the context
- Action-oriented – participation is about building capacities for action for change.
- Seek diversity: People often have different perceptions of the same situation! Use a range of methods, triangulate, get different perspectives, and bring these into dialogue.

There are challenges for aid and development agencies to put these principles into practice. Externally, the multiple and intersecting political, economic and climate crises in a context of widening inequalities, are creating huge pressures on development and humanitarian agencies to find solutions, and quickly. However, the widening distance between those with wealth and power and those who are marginalized makes it more urgent than ever to strengthen legitimacy through meaningful participation. Participation also needs to respond to the imperative to decolonize aid, both development and humanitarian. Beyond the rhetoric, decolonizing is fundamentally about working with the participatory principles outlined earlier: shifting power and enabling agency, recognizing different sources of knowledge, rethinking accountability as multi-directional, and investing in processes and relationships as much as in outcomes.

Within aid agencies, there are also challenges for adopting participatory approaches: We have found that staff capacity to use participatory approaches in their work depends on:

- Institutional/manager support – are you encouraged and supported to use ppy tools?
- Time pressures - is there the time and opportunities to think, reflect and learn? Do organizational systems support learning and adaptation?
- Partnerships - what is the relationship with implementing partners – how is power shared? Are you creating capacities and enabling dialogue? Do you enable honesty - to reflect on failures as well as report on successes? What is the implementing partners relationship with 'primary stakeholders' – how do they share power?

The challenge to make progress on LNOB also offers opportunities for institutionalizing a participatory approach in programming. SDC can make progress on LNOB through participatory approaches which build strong local partnerships with local partners and communities, and target groups where the intersection of inequalities they experience means they are most at risk of continued or increased marginalization. There are also strengths within the organization that can help to make participatory assessment a success.

SDC embraces participation, not just paying lip service, and prioritizes a presence on the ground and staying for the long-term. This accompaniment approach creates opportunities for listening, learning and adapting, which is essential for participatory approaches to be meaningful and to contribute to reducing exclusion.