Participatory methodologies: double-edged swords[1]

Eliud Ngunjiri

At a PAMFORK workshop attended by Robert Chambers — the guru of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) — a range of development organisations came together to exchange ideas on how to improve the Participatory Methodologies (PMs) they currently use. PAMFORK (Participatory Methodologies Forum of Kenya), whose mission is to foster an environment where people realise their rights, are empowered to organise, articulate, and promote sustainable community development, argues that '[A]lthough a multiplicity of methodologies and approaches exist, practitioners lack an organised system that facilitates the process of sharing these experiences especially within Kenya.' Hence one of its objectives is to harmonise what is good in different methodologies.

Participatory methodologies are double-edged swords that can be used to destroy or to build the capacities of those upon whom they are used. Development is about people becoming or being helped to become conscious about themselves and their environment, after which plans and actions are expected to follow. The involvement of people in the process of helping themselves is a cornerstone of good development — and their awareness of this explains why development organisations have attached so much importance to PMs.

Principles

The two approaches that I would like to share with development practitioners are guided by the following philosophies:

- The principle and power of positive thinking — for instance that it is better to think of and build on what a community is or can become, rather than to focus on what it is not or cannot be. Instead of looking for the dark side of people or things, we should look for their bright side. Positive thinking is most likely to lead to positive actions and outcomes.

- Partnership of mutual knowledge and/or understanding between the two actors, rather than assuming that only one of them knows, or needs to know about, the other. Thus a community or NGO partner group should know as much as possible about the development agency working with it, without feeling restricted by the relationship between them. Without this mutual knowledge, many things can go wrong. For example, without knowing what it can or cannot do, the local group may have expectations that are beyond the agency's ability or mandate. If these expectations are not met, the group may then find it easier to let the agency decide what is good for them.

- The principle of reciprocal giving and taking. It is, of course, better to give than to receive, for receiving alone erodes the dignity of the recipient. Nobody can derive pride from always being on the receiving end, but one can do so if one also gives in return.

- The principle of shared credit and not where one actor steals the other's credit.

For example, an organisation can help a community solve water problems by giving it ten bags of cement to protect the spring. The community directly or indirectly meets the rest of the cost. When all is done, the community is so grateful to the organisation that it says 'were it not for your support we would not have been able to solve the water problem'. The organisation not only agrees with this but also allows its name to be inscribed on the protected spring. What would be more in order would be to let the community know what its contribution has been, in order to enable it to realise how able it is or can be. Unless this is done, communities will continue to be disempowered and to depend on external support.

- Local resources need to be identified and mobilised to address people's felt needs, rather than adopting an approach where these are not drawn upon.

- Constructive participation and involvement of the community in the entire process of helping itself rather than destructive participation. I regard this as a basic human requirement without which people's capacity continues to be destroyed.

- External support coming to supplement rather than to replace or duplicate local initiatives or efforts. Thus, people should be helped to pursue self-reliance materially, intellectually, organisationally, and management-wise.

- External forms of support should complement each other rather than compete among themselves. Unless different support organisations recognise a common goal and a common playground (that is, the community with whom they are working) for their different development activities, they will continue to undo each other's work, duplicate efforts, step on each other's toes, confuse each other and the community, waste time and money, as well as scrambling for the community. When such things happen, organisations waste a lot of time, energy, and money trying to sort out their differences, more often than not at the expense of what they set out to do in the first place.

Unless PMs are used well and guided by these and other basic principles, many aspects of development will continue to go wrong. The above principles, if applied, will go a long way to building rather than destroying the capacity of the people with whom we work.

The problem approach

Many development organisations have poverty alleviation as part of their mandate. To be most effective in this, they choose to work with the poorest of the poor .

As part of their introduction to their potential partners, these organisations inform them not only of their mandate (poverty alleviation) but also about the type of people they like working with (the poorest of the poor). When it comes to wanting to know more about the potential partner group or community and whether it qualifies to get into partnership with it, the organisation asks what their problems are. Many use PMs to enter into the communities as well as to identify their problems. Even before being asked what their problems are, the potential partner group or community feels obliged to say who they are and what their problems are, in the hope of proving themselves to be the poorest of the poor the organisation is seeking.

When an organisation starts its interaction with a community by asking people to say what problems they have, the community thinks it has been given a chance to show whether it numbers among the poorest of the poor and how it qualifies for support. As a result, people come up with as many problems as possible that can be categorised as real or genuine, discovered and feigned.

They give examples of how they have not been able to do one thing or another because of poverty and lack of external support. Some potential partners even ask development workers from the

organisation to tell them what their problems are — and many of them make the mistake of doing exactly that.

Negative discovery

Asking people to say what their problems are, using all sorts of participatory methodologies, is tantamount to asking them to say how useless, weak, empty, powerless, and worthless they are in order for them to qualify to be helped. Yet this, to many, is called community involvement or participation.

It would be correct to say the community has participated in its own destruction in that after listing their problems, real, discovered, and unreal, they discover how useless they are and feel worse off than before the exercise. They actually discover how poor they are and feel they seriously need external support. This is a negative discovery and however real or otherwise it may be, it can disempower or depress a community. Negative discovery works the same way three people can have a bad effect on you by separately telling you that you look ill. At the end of this you most likely end up feeling ill and wanting medical attention. It is as serious as that.

Adding insult to injury

After proving that it is the poorest of the poor, the community, as expected, comes up with a lot of expectations that it hopes will be met with the support of the development organisation. The community sees the organisation as its God-sent redeemer, endowed with the right skills, knowledge, and ability to identify and solve its problems. The funny and disturbing thing here is that the development organisation does not seem very much worried by the whole misconception. Rather, as a way of encouraging community participation, it asks the community to prioritise its problems. At some stage the development organisation invokes its programme themes and the community is left asking (without saying it) 'Why ask us all these questions if you knew what your area of interest was?' The community, already trying to heal the wounds of negative discovery, sinks deeper into disappointment and frustration on realising that its apparent redeemer can only help in a mediocre way. The heart of this community gets broken after going through such destructive participation.

The available resources approach

The suggested positive and empowering approach requires firstly that the organisation, in the course of introducing itself to a community or when doing a needs assessment, makes it known that it works with people with resources, plans, aspirations, and who are willing to do things for themselves.

There is nothing wrong with an organisation having a poverty focus, or having poverty alleviation as a mandate, or wanting to work with the poorest of the poor . What is wrong is forgetting or not knowing that:

- poverty is a highly complex syndrome or problem with many signs, symptoms, and causes and is perceived differently in different communities;
- its origins can be traced in both national and international circles;
- poverty is linked to denial and abuse of basic rights;
- poverty is about lack of control over resources including land, technology, skills, knowledge, capital, social connections, etc.;
- poverty can be aggravated by negative discovery or negative self-consciousness;
- even in an apparently poor community there are things that keep it going which can be built on in poverty alleviation;
- poverty and problems are commonplace and if your mission is to look for them you will always find them;
- poverty will always emerge if you make a community think you are looking for the poorest of the poor or wanting to know what people's problems are as your starting point.

Using PM tools, a development organisation should help a community to identify its resources, and come up with aspirations and plans that its members would be willing to implement themselves. A community should be helped to come together — get organised — firstly to identify its resources. This is important because:

- people become their own resource or realise they are already;
- participation is triggered;
- accountability among themselves and between them and others can develop;
- people start to form a structure that can stand on its own and relate with others; and so
- they acquire a louder voice and gain strength.

When it comes to listing their resources or wealth, people do a lot of thinking and identify resources that are real and tangible, they discover new ones, and their creativity and innovativeness in themselves bring forth new resources.

At the end of this exercise, more often than not, the community will heave a sigh of relief on discovering how wealthy, resourceful, and powerful it is or can be. This is nothing short of positive self-discovery. People feel wealthier and stronger than before and full of energy that they are eager to utilise.

Positive self-discovery (a resources-oriented development approach), community participation, and community organisation are powerful community capacity-building tools.

Problem listing

After a community has genuinely proved to have resources, and is ready to do things for itself, the development organisation should ask whether it has any problems it would like to address, using its own resources as far as possible. Let the community know right from the beginning that much as the external organisation would like to help, it may not have all the resources required to solve the problems.

With this approach, it is likely that the community will come up with genuine problems and expectations that the development organisation can help it to address.

Facilitation and problem-solving

Once resources and problems have been identified, the development organisation and the community will have before them some of the vital requirements to genuine ways forward and partnership. Both actors should play the vital role of finding solutions to the problems from the available resources. The development organisation's main role should be that of a facilitator. Challenging questions and creative input from both actors will emerge and many problems will be solved.

The remaining ones can be prioritised and plans made to resolve them, through the processes of brainstorming placed in order of priority. Once a solution is defined, what should follow is a listing of the required resources, separating out those that are available and those that are not. Ways to get hold of the latter should be established, and this is where the development organisation and others should come in handy. The next steps are those of community organisation and mobilisation plus drawing of action plans.

Conclusion

As double-edged swords, PMs can be used to destroy or to build themselves and their environment, after which plans and actions are expected to follow. Whatever the source and the direction of these plans and actions, it follows that people (beneficiaries) should not be denied participation in the process of helping themselves. The involvement of people in the process of helping themselves is a cornerstone of good development. This has been realised by many development agencies, hence the importance they attach to PMs. Today, no NGO or development organisation worth its reputation feels it is doing, or is seen to be doing, a good job without using a PM of one kind or another. I have no quarrel with PMs as such, it just depends on how one uses them. My main concern is that, despite the increase in the number of NGOs, PMs, and after many years of poverty alleviation, poverty continues to be rife and communities continue to languish in it. There is no doubt, then, that something is wrong. It must either be that NGOs and/or PMs — the tools of their trade — are ineffective, or that NGOs use PMs wrongly. My view is the latter.

Note

1 An earlier version of this article was presented by the author at a PAMFORK Participatory Methodologies Workshop held on 24-27 September 1996 at Resurrection Gardens, Karen-Nairobi, and was published in Baobab, Issue 22 (May 1997).