

INTEGRATION AND ASSESSMENT OF PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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Abstract

Starting with the activist participatory research in the late 1960s participation of beneficiaries became a keyword in the relations between target groups of development projects, donors and implementing organizations. Definitions of participation, applied participatory approaches and their perception by the involved parties, however, vary widely. This paper has two objectives. First, it will give a brief overview on how participatory elements may be integrated in the different stages of development projects. Second, it presents a comparative approach for evaluating the success and perception of participation by the different players in the context of a project. An empirical example from Burkina Faso serves for demonstrating the evaluation approach.

Introduction

Starting with the activist participatory research (Freire, 1968), participation of the target population in decisions and implementation of development activities was recognized by researchers as an essential element for setting up projects that fit into the real situation of the intended beneficiaries. The rapid expansion of new participatory methods and approaches since the early 1970's represents nowadays a significant alternative to the practice of the top-down approach, i.e. project design and implementation by outsiders based on information that is extracted from the target population (Pretty et al, 1995, pp.55).

A lot has been said about the advantage of participatory approaches, which are undoubtedly an indispensable element in planning and conducting successful and sustainable development programs. The consequent application of participation, however, implies that virtually every step of a project, from the basic idea up to the implementation of the required activities, is to be decided on and implemented by the concerned people. This concept, which is known under the term of self-mobilization (e.g. Pretty, 1994), has its limits if funding from external sources is required. Investors in development, may this be the society of a nation or foreign donors, have a stake in deciding on the use of their financial resources and in monitoring the resulting impacts. Other shortcomings of an exclusively participatory approach, where development practitioners act only as facilitators, are related to the potential impacts from innovations on the interdependent elements in a society, which may be hard to oversee from the point of view of indigenous knowledge alone. This holds all the more as it may prove to be impossible to ensure participation of all concerned members of a target population in a region-wide project. Participation of the concerned people in the identification of projects seems to be an obvious requirement, but it is limited by the mechanisms that lead to the decision of investing national or foreign public funds in development programs. Public funds are always taxes, which are after all purchasing power taken from some elements in the national or global society, and there is some reason for the argument that these funds have to be redistributed according to macro-economic criteria. On the other side, macro-economic indicators are the result of

micro-economic decisions that are made up under complex conditions, which may differ significantly between regional systems.

It would go far beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the question of participation all the way down from the national level to the project level. However, it should be kept in mind that the methods of decision-making on the national level may be a valuable indicator on how participation is traditionally handled in the concerned society and what the potentials for successful participatory approaches are on the project level. Participation on the project level starts when at least the basic decisions on what economic sector and what regions to support are already made up and the financial frame for a project is already set.

Development projects are the smallest operational element prepared and implemented as a separate entity in a national program of development (Gittinger, 1982). Thus, they are the usual level on which governmental and non-governmental intervention meets the target population of support activities. The task is to find an optimal equilibrium between participatory elements and expert input within the different stages of a project's cycle. Any planning in this regard, however, bears the inherent risk that participatory elements planned by experts in participation do not coincide with the perception of participation by the target population. Accordingly, the intention of this paper is not only to give an overview on how participatory elements may fit into development projects but also to present an approach for evaluating the success of efforts for participation.

1. Participatory elements in the project cycle

Common principles of participatory approaches are that they consist out of a defined methodology that considers the multiple perspectives of the concerned people by group learning about systems and the relations between different elements in those systems (Pretty et al., 1995; FAO, 2000). The focus of participatory approaches allows for the distinction of three domains of their application. The first is the exchange of initial information between different parts of the target population as well as between the concerned people and external experts. An example from the large variety of more or less comparable methodologies in this sector is the participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and its predecessor, the rapid rural appraisal (RRA, e.g. Chambers, 1980, 1991). The second domain of application focuses on participatory learning and action that, while accommodating local knowledge and skills, tries to facilitate changes that people regard as appropriate (Pretty et al. 1995). Participatory monitoring and evaluation of activities and objectives as the third domain deals with the assessment of the results from development activities.

The three domains for the application of participatory approaches coincide with the logical sequence of development projects and thus do not alter the project cycle. A project is usually defined as a set of specific activities intended to accomplish, within a specific time, specific objectives (Gittinger, 1982, p.5). The four stages in the project cycle consist of the phase of a project's identification, it's planning and appraisal, it's period of implementing activities and the final stage, where the specified objectives are achieved and initiated activities require no more outside support. Continuous monitoring and sequential evaluation throughout the period of implementation are intended to ensure the control of progress and help to adjust the project's objectives and activities to its changing environment (Doppler, 1985, pp.4).

From a more functional point of view, the tasks to accomplish within the project cycle can be subdivided in analysis, planning and decision-making, organization and implementation of required action. Participatory approaches, too, allow a similar distinction, whereby participatory appraisal, monitoring and evaluation correspond to analysis and participatory learning and action to the tasks from planning up to the implementation of action.

1.1 Collecting information and analysis

From the methodological point of view, the analysis of the initial situation and of the situation after the implementation of activities, in other words the first and third domain for the application of participatory approaches, are closely related. In both situations, methods for participatory appraisal share some disadvantage with formal surveys. Both approaches, if carried out professionally, require a substantial amount of time, expert input and financial resources.

Participatory approaches for information collection and situation analysis have the clear advantage over surveys to ensure the simultaneous feed back of local results to the concerned people. Moreover, they are much better suited to understand linkages, potentials and bottlenecks in people's livelihood systems and allow eliminating erroneous observation and poorly adapted proposals by experts on the spot.

Results from those approaches are, however, neither verifiable with regard to their representativity for the total target population nor do they deliver sufficient quantitative information for judging the returns from the project funds, which are clearly of quantitative nature. While the latter is an important issue for decision makers on the usually scarce funds for development support, the first issue may also lead to severe problems for parts of the target population itself. Even the participation of all individuals in a project region in meetings for information exchange - as illusory as this may be in the case of regional projects - can hardly overcome existing social and gender hierarchies and the related behavior in public debates. Thus, participatory approaches also bear the risk of neglecting the underprivileged, a shortcoming that is usually blamed on formal surveys (e.g. Chambers, 1991, p.516).

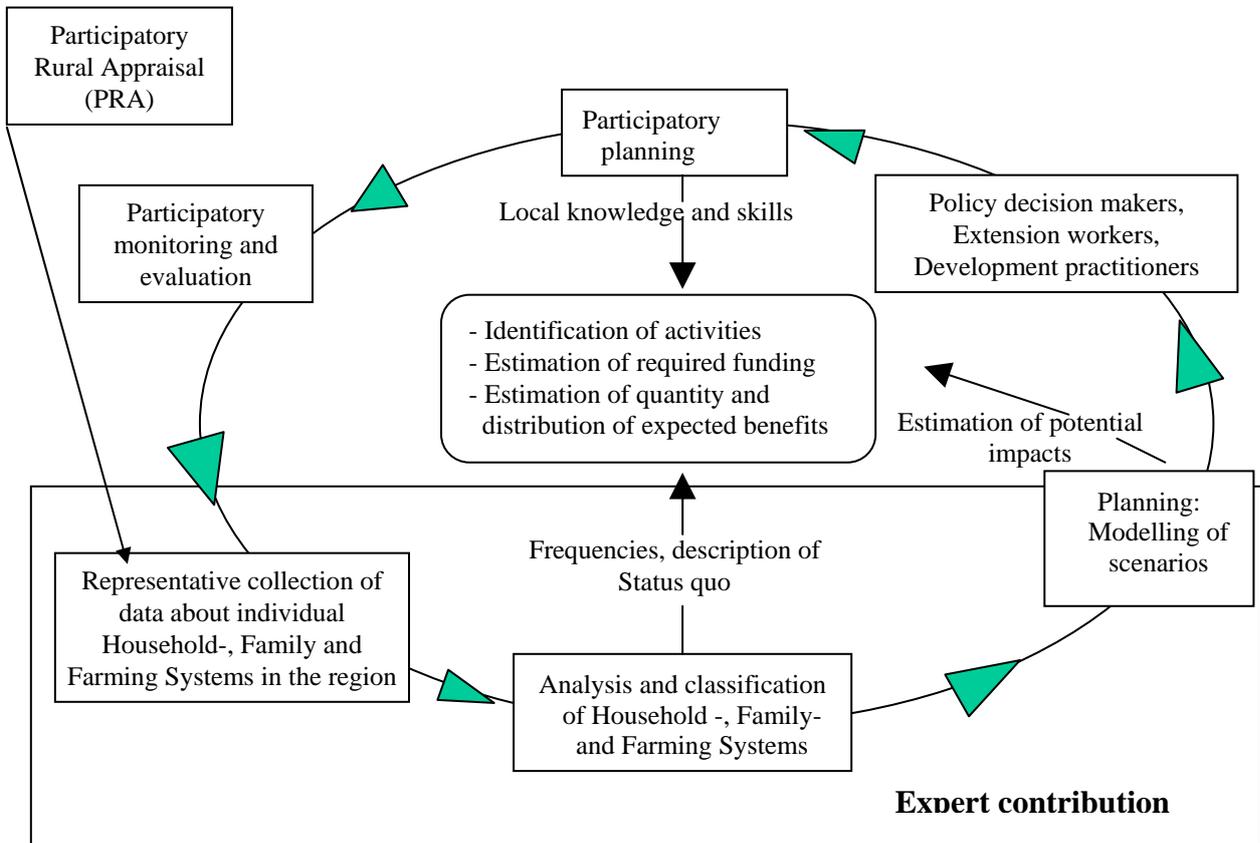
Formal surveys have the potential to fill in the gaps of approaches for participatory appraisal and evaluation, but they cannot compensate for the interactive elements that lead to the basic understanding of local livelihood systems, the resulting mechanisms in individual decision-making and the subjective perception of progress by local communities. On the other hand, surveys have the potential property to collect quantitative information in a way that allows verifiable estimates of the total population. Moreover, they offer the possibility to provide individual members of the target group with information that compares their situation with that of other members who find themselves in similar circumstances, thus helping in identifying and overcoming bottlenecks in the organization of individual household and family systems.

These properties, however, hold only if formal surveying relies on some of the guiding principles that are valid for participatory approaches, too. It has to follow a defined methodology for data collection, editing and processing, it demands a holistic approach and it must be context specific. It also requires that survey results be communicated back to the people that had provided the information, an issue that is unfortunately neglected in most survey activities. Examples of surveys in recent years that didn't meet these requirements and yielded - if any - poor and delayed results (e.g. Schönhuth et al. 1993) or kept the results for the analysis and use by external experts only (e.g. Chambers, 1991) are a pitiful example of shortcomings in the application of the highly demanding methodology but do not invalidate the survey approach itself.

The comparison of the pros and cons of analysis and evaluation by participatory appraisal and by formal surveying indicates, that both approaches complement and require each other (figure 1). The exclusive use of only one approach bears problems, which cannot be solved by just refining the respective methodology. Formal surveying alone easily ends up with a vast amount of unnecessary information and still has a good chance to oversee vital issues within concerned communities, even if all methodological requirements are met. Participatory approaches seem to have the advantage of yielding, in any case, at least some results that

reflect the opinion and perception of some of the concerned people. This, however, is dangerously misleading, in particular if internal power structures in the target population are neglected and if results have to serve as a basis for generalizations of people who did not participate personally in the meetings and workshops.

Figure 1 Combining participatory and expert elements in analysis and evaluation



Source: Wolff (2000), adapted

1.2. Planning decision making and action

Participatory approaches for learning and action focus on supporting the concerned population in finding their own appropriate solutions to overcome bottlenecks in their livelihood systems. Development practitioners are supposed to act rather as facilitators than as protagonists, thus ensuring the accommodation of local knowledge and skills in the identified solutions (FAO, 2000).

The level, where planning and action may be put at the disposal of participatory decision-making is primarily linked to questions similar to those that determine the involvement of the target population in setting up a project in the first place. Projects dealing with complex administrative tasks and technical innovations, which may engender complex impacts that are hard to oversee from the local population's background, are likely to require more expert decisions than projects that support organizational innovations and locally initiated approaches for development¹.

The potential for participatory approaches in learning, decision-making and action, even on projects of the first type can be significantly improved, if experts and development

¹ Pretty et al. (1995, p.55) introduced a distinction between functional participation and interactive participation, whereby the first designs the forming of groups in order to meet predetermined objectives and the latter the participation in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and gives the concerned people a stake.

practitioners contribute more than just a catalytic function to discussions among the concerned people. Provided a sufficient database, the available quantitative methodology comprises elaborate tools that help in estimating the outcome of action before people have to suffer from inadequate decisions, (e.g. Doppler, 1994). The potential for realizing optimal solutions from mathematical and statistical models, however, depends crucially on their adaptation to the perspectives and perception by the concerned people.

This emphasizes again the requirement of holistic approaches by external researchers and demands imperatively the feedback of results to the target population in meetings and workshops that follow a participatory approach (figure 1). Experts may hardly be able to simultaneously fulfill a role as participants and facilitators in such meetings. The question of how to fill in the position of a moderator in such cases and if, for example, this position or parts of it could be handed over to local representatives will have to be answered by researchers in education, extension and learning.

The latter already refers to traditional decision-making in the concerned communities as an additional factor in participatory approaches for learning and action. While participatory analysis and evaluation may have the potential to overcome at least some of the minor barriers in the internal power structures, this is quite unlikely if it comes to issues of authority and decision-making, as for example the distribution of funds and tasks. This implies that while participatory methods may be proposed from external experts, participatory approaches as a set of methods have to be strongly context-specific.

2. Assessment of participation

Participation is a tool rather than an objective in achieving development progress. Consequently, an overall assessment of the success of participatory approaches must be based on the evaluation of the achievements of a development project. Participation, however, is in first place a matter of perception by the involved people. A partial assessment thus helps in identifying and rectifying differences in the opinion about applied approaches by the target population, development planners and practitioners.

Since methods and applications of participatory approaches vary widely, a respective assessment has to focus on the elements that represent participation rather than on the success of implementing elements from a specific approach. The primary objective is the analysis of the involvement of individual target group members in analyses, decisions and activities on the project level. Moreover, adequately standardized scales for measuring participation may allow for comparisons between different participatory approaches and between those approaches and traditional local decision structures at least on the regional level.

2.1 Participation profiles

Participation profiles offer a relatively simple tool to identify and display the perception of participation by members of the target group as well as by involved experts. The profiling approach is based on a distinction between the different domains and components of participation. The concerned people then rate the components within the domains according to the perceived degree of participation.

The domains correspond to the four major fields in the project cycle that are subject to potential participation of the target group, i.e. (a) the identification of a project and its objectives, (b) the definition of the projects' activities, (c) the decision on the implementation of identified activities in a specific location and (d) the organization and realization of these activities. Within each domain, the basic model of participation profiles considers the three components of (1) the impact of the target groups' opinion on decisions and implementations, (2) the representation of the individual target group members in consultations and (3) the representation of the target group members in decisions. The latter two issues are required in

order to analyze the directness of participation by the concerned individuals as well as internal power structures. These components are of an affective nature, i.e. express emotional evaluations and subjective feelings. Cognitive components, which focus on knowledge and criteria by which involved people rate specific participatory methods, are useful for the analysis of expert opinions, but are of lower importance for evaluations on the level of development projects. Accordingly, so-called "one-dimensional" methods that consider one type of components only (e.g. Henze, 1994, p.49) are an adequate tool for setting up participation profiles. The most renowned approach of this type is Likert rating scales (Likert, 1932). The rating of the components requires standardized nominal scales that allow for comparing the opinions of different target group members and project experts. Direct application of such scales presupposes the knowledge of the meaning of expressions in the project region in order to create scales according to Osgood's semantic differential (Osgood et al., 1957). While the use of those scales may yield results that are as close to an objective evaluation of perceptions as possible, problems arise from the relatively high demand in terms of methodology and resources for setting up the scales. Moreover, different scales may be required on the levels of the target group and the project experts, making a direct comparison of the resulting profiles difficult at least. An alternative approach is indirect scaling by paraphrasing through respective questions (e.g. Wolff et al., 1997), which leaves some doubt regarding the absolute objectivity of the results but is sufficient for comparative analyses of the results, provided that the derived scales are consistent on all levels.

2.2 Applied participation profiles – an example from Burkina Faso

Results from an assessment of participatory approaches in six environmental projects in Burkina Faso illustrate the application of participatory profiles. Information on the perception of participation was collected by means of standardized questionnaires on the level of the target population and among experts of the concerned projects. Responses to questions paraphrasing the degree of participation were interpreted along normative scales that indicate the involvement of the target population in three basic components of participation (table 1). This procedure was repeated for all of the four above-mentioned domains of potential participation.

Table 1: Scales for the evaluation of participation – Example from Burkina Faso

	COMPONENTS OF PARTICIPATION		
	1	2	3
Rating	Impact of target group's opinion on decisions and implementations	Representation of target group in consultations	Representation of target group in decisions
5	decision solely by target group	concerned individuals	concerned individuals
4	decision jointly by target group and project staff	heads of the families	heads of the families
3	discussions with target group members	elected representatives	elected representatives
2	survey and information collection	traditional authorities	traditional authorities
1	experts' knowledge on the target group	external national authorities	external national authorities
0	no impact	no representation	no representation

The resulting profiles of opinions and perception of the target population's participation are shown, in an aggregated form over all six projects, in figure 2.

Significant deviations between the perception of members from the target group and those of project staff indicate areas, which needed at least some attention and review of the applied participatory approaches. Moreover, comparison of profiles from different projects in adjacent areas allowed for the identification of weakness and strength of the respective approaches. A final objective statement on the suitability of the concerned approaches, however, was not possible due to the relative nature of the indirect scaling.

Additional topics in the questionnaire on the level of the target population and analysis of the initial planning documents of the projects allowed for the set-up of two further profiles along the same scales. The first displayed the traditional approach in concerned villages for consultations, decisions and implementations in situations without external support. The second tried to reflect the intention of the project planners with regard to participation. The results indicated in the case of all six projects a strong deviation with regard to the idea of participation by external project planners on the one hand and members of the target population on the other (figure 3).

Fig. 2: Participation profiles according to the perception of target group members and project experts (medians of data from 6 projects, Burkina Faso, 1997)

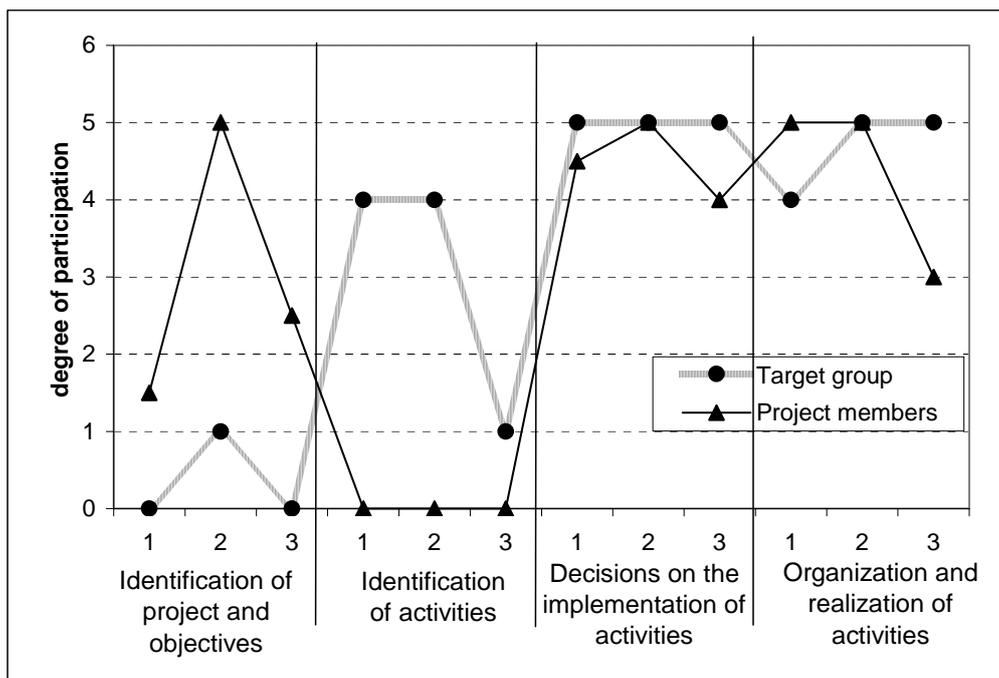
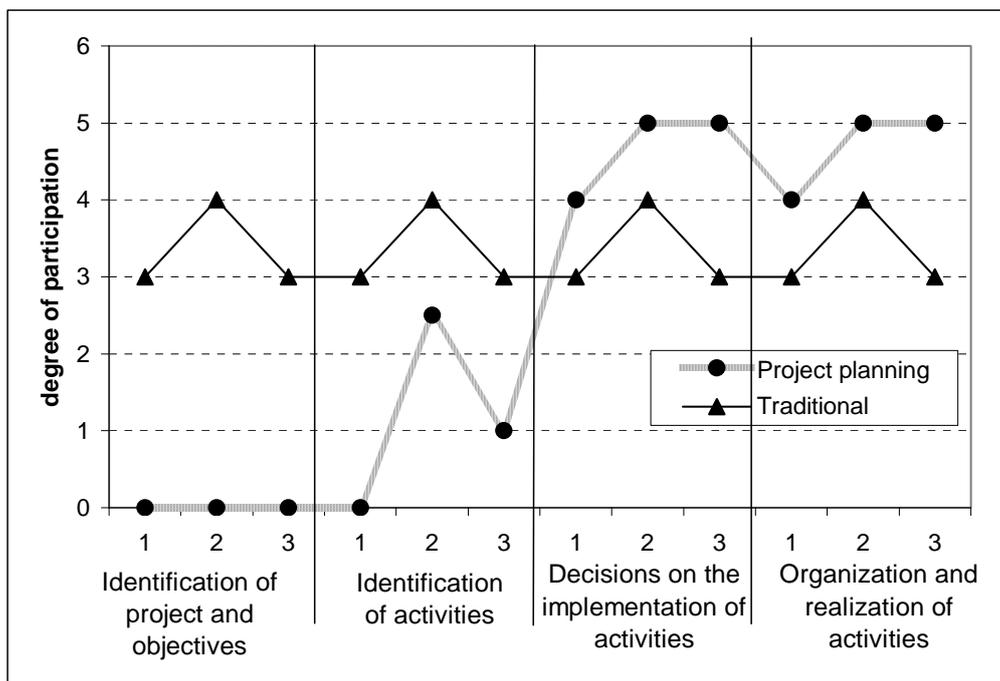


Fig. 3: Participation profiles of traditional approaches and project planning documents (medians of data from 6 projects, Burkina Faso, 1997)



X – axis:

- 1 Impact of target group's opinion on decisions and implementations
- 2 Representation of target group in consultations
- 3 Representation of target group in decisions

Y – axis: rating according to table 1

Source: Wolff et al., 1997, 1998

Conclusion

Participatory elements are an indispensable requirement in development projects but are not fully exchangeable with expert contributions to analysis, planning and decision-making. This holds all the more if the innovations intended by a project have the potential to initiate effects on layers of the society that do not or cannot participate in the respective participatory discussions and workshops. An exclusive use of participatory approaches may work excellently and be fully sufficient only if the circle of involved and concerned individuals can be easily overseen and no outside support in terms of funding and technical expertise is required. Expert tools in analysis and planning, on the other side, can contribute essential information to the identification of optimal decisions. Their sensible application and impact, however, depend crucially on information and communication platforms that may only be obtained through participatory approaches.

Participatory approaches as a set of defined methods are, like expert methods for analysis and planning, basically an invention by external experts. Their contribution to learning and action, which cannot be replaced by expert approaches, depends on their perception by the members of the target group of development projects. Identifying deviations between intentions of project experts and perception of target group members is an essential part in the evaluation of projects that claim to follow a participatory approach. The same holds for the comparison

and alignment between participatory elements initiated from the outside and traditional approaches for dealing with consultations, decisions and implementations. Adequate tools for an assessment in this respect are participation profiles, which allow for a comparison of perceptions and approaches by analyzing the individual elements of participation.

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