Participatory learning and communication approaches for managing pluralism

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Using participatory learning and communication tools for a better understanding of natural resource management.

Consider three blind people, each feeling different parts of an elephant - the trunk, the tail and the leg - and thereafter describing three very different "animals". They could bring together their descriptions and agree on one "common elephant". In such a case, their perceptions would have been enriched by a group learning process which created new common meaning beyond individual experiences. But group learning for natural resource management is substantially more complex:

- there tend to be more than three people or organizations involved and it is not always clear *who* they are, under what criteria they will be considered stakeholders, *who sets* those *criteria*, *what goals* they share or for *what purpose* they are coming together, if at all;
- they perceive their "reality" through different methods and means; they use different senses, media and learning tools for different *purposes (*while the blind all used *feel* to get to *know the shape* of the elephant*)*:
- the "object" is far more complex than an animal and is often referred to as a 'system" or an "environment"; while a natural system *(*e.g. a watershed*)* has physical boundaries, it is often difficult to agree on them *(*landscape boundaries, constructed fences, legal designations, spiritual attributes*)*; it is influenced directly by political and normative dimensions *(*political/fiscal designation, norms and laws of tenure*)*; it includes social and institutional aspects *(*social groups living on/from the land; institutional activities influencing the use of the resource; financial and private organizations operating in the area*)* and it is in constant evolution.

The concept of "agency" or capacity to intervene also merits consideration: *who* has the legitimate right to intervene, *under what conditions, with what purpose*, and with what expectation of shaping outcomes ? These questions refer to power and control - critical issues at the heart of pluralism.

A systems approach is essential to understanding the complexity inherent in pluralistic resource management, because it addresses - in addition to a multitude of actors - other dimensions such as linkages between them, the performance of their relationships and the

social, institutional and biophysical boundaries involved.

Learning to navigate in pluralism

The challenge is not in understanding a messy, complex system, but in "learning to navigate" in a changing environment and using new instruments.

Institutional dynamics

Over the past two decades, the institutional dynamics of natural resource management have changed considerably. Interinstitutional collaboration resulting from growing trends of decentralization, privatization and public-private sharing arrangements has shifted the balance of power and responsibilities between the state and the private sector. Furthermore, the great variety of small, profit-seeking producer groups, credit and service organizations and NGOs represent intermediary organizations with much at stake in sustainable natural resource management. But despite longstanding pleas for reform *(*bureaucratic reorganization, participatory development and more bottom-up, learning-oriented approaches*)*. in most countries the structure and performance of government agencies still does not satisfy the requirements of sustainable development *(*Pretty. 1995*)*.

Network relationships as a source of knowledge and innovation

> "Innovation is fostered by information gathered from new connections; from insight gained by journeys into other disciplines or places; from active, collegial networks and fluid, open boundaries. Innovation arises from ongoing circles of exchange, where information is not just accumulated or stored, but created. Knowledge is generated anew from connections that weren't there before."
>
> *(*Wheatley, 1992: 113*)*

Discussing network relationships in the Phillipines

Much of the interest on networks has focused on information dissemination and communication *(*Nelson and Farrington, 1994; Richardson, 1996*)*, and on their potential in natural resource management *(*Alders, Haverko and van Velduizen, 1993*)*. Network analysis has rarely yielded new participatory methodologies for action, perhaps because the stakeholders that networked tended to come from what Engel *(*1995*)* refers to as the same "knowledge circles". Nonetheless, we can find stimulating ideas about network analysis relating to business management *(*Krackhardt and Hanson, 1993*)* and from agricultural knowledge and information systems *(*AKIS*)* where innovation is seen as the product arising from social organization among *different* kinds of actors.

In this context, the notion of platforms for multiparty negotiation has been proposed. From this perspective, networking takes on a more challenging meaning:

> "The 'networking' required for implementing the platform approach, making the best of pluralism, and finding extension financing consists of bringing a multiplicity of actors together to identify mutual interests and to break out of limited knowledge spheres. '
>
> (Christoplos and Nitsch, 1996: 49*)*

Policy, negotiation and conflict resolution

> Because innovations or policies must be subject to reexamination and reformulation during implementation, the measure of success of a policy should

> not be how closely its implementation matches the original formulation, but how closely the reformulated policy meets the needs of those affected and promotes ongoing adaptation.
>
> (Christoplos and Nitsch, 1996: 29*)*

This leads to the notion of adapting policies on an ongoing basis and in consultation with different stakeholders. The integrative policy perspective funkier overlaps with the literature from other fields: negotiation in social conflict *(*Pruitt and Carnevale, 1993*)*, conflict management and resolution *(*FAO, 1997a; 1997b*)*, collaborative learning *(*Daniels and Walker, 1996*)*, adaptive management of ecosystems *(*Lee. 1993*)* and collaborative management *(*Borrini-Feyerabend, 1996*)*. What brings them all together is the notion of communicative "spaces" wherein learning can take place.

> In communicative action, participants can pursue a common goal, which is also consistent with their individual goals, through understanding their respective positions in the overall situation and harmonizing their plans of action accordingly.
>
> *(*Habermas, 1984*)*

The meaning of information, communication and learning in a pluralist world

In a pluralist context all stakeholders are legitimate users, providers and managers of information. If information is to serve as a source of innovation and communication, it must be accessible, relevant and credible. This will depend on:

- the nature of the information;
- the means, methods and media used to record it, process and communicate it;
- the individuals charged with selecting, documenting and processing it;
- the means of verifying its authenticity, etc.

The search for consensus needs, then, to begin with agreed language *(*concepts, frames of reference, points of departure*)* which will allow participants to bridge differences in beliefs and facilitate dialogue *(*Bernard and Armstrong, 1997: 14*)*.

A concrete example comes from recent work in Africa engaging local artists in message development. After conducting research on rural people's perceptions about the environment and population issues, communication professionals invited local artists to discuss the findings and to present them in the form of music and drama. The outcome was credible and relevant because it was delivered in the "language" of the people who had generated that knowledge *(*FAO, 1996*)*.

Interactive procedures for data capture and information generation *(*Burnside and Chamala 1994: 255, 234*)* consider the user of the information from the start. They recognize the complementary roles of "hard" scientific and "soft" process-oriented information *(*Engel, 1995; Lee. 1993*)*.

Various interest holders share their views in Ethiopia

Case 1. Electronic relationships within organizations
Experiments are under way in the electronic world where community networks are emerging with strong grassroots involvement At FAO headquarters in Rome. some 80 professionals from many disciplines have maintained an informal network focused on participatory approaches for six years. This experience demonstrates the potential of electronic networking as an alternative e means of making and maintaining relationships across hierarchical organizations.

The people themselves become central rather than the "tools" or 'instruments". Herein lies a paradigm shift towards emphasizing information stemming from new relationships and assigning a complementary role to information about things; solving problems more with negotiation than instrumental reasoning, and giving as much attention to peers as to experts, as sources of relevant knowledge (Jigging and Röling, 1997).

Learning and communication in a pluralist environment

Coordinated social action is very much a political process, where power relations play a central role. The objectives of sustainable resource management will not be fulfilled without ''the emergence of groups or alliances which can challenge the power and influence of traditional élites, constitute new support groups, and bring pressure to bear on policy makers" (Utting, 1993: 167).

In the following sections of this article, several approaches are characterized based on how they address *power and policy issues* and how they *integrate other learning tools*.

Joint forest management

In joint forest management (JFM). forest departments and local user groups share products, responsibilities, control and decision-making authority over forest lands. Contractual agreements specify the distribution of authority, responsibility and benefits. The goal is to improve forest conditions and productivity. as well as equitable distribution of forest products (Hobley, 1996: 16). Initially, this approach was entirely top-down and controlled by the Forestry Department. However, Hobley (1996) reports that National and State Forest Departments in India and Nepal are turning to more process-oriented, less target-based planning, aimed at shifting control and management of forest lands from the Forest Department to decentralized people's organizations.

From a communication point of view, it is the shift away from a focus on institutional linkages and roles to one of *exploring the learning opportunities that emerge through new relationships* which is significant.

Stakeholder analysis

Stakeholder analysis (SA) is designed to increase understanding of a system by identifying the key participants and assessing their respective interests (Grimble and Chan, 1995: 114) .

Grimble and Chan argue that the value of stakeholder analysis lies in complementing other methods for strengthening policymaking. This approach acknowledges that stakeholders value resource use differently and do not bear the costs of their conservation in the same way.

Case 2. Video for conflict resolution

In 1981-82, a conflict arose in the Arctic between the Inuit people of the Canadian far-North and government biologists over the Kaminuriak herd of caribou. Both sides distrusted the other's opinions on the size of the herd and on practices for its preservation. The creative use of video played a key role in diffusing a volatile situation by- bridging gaps in perception and understanding.

The videos provided both parties with additional perceptions, information and ideas to consider. Although the video did not resolve the conflict on its own, it certainly helped the parties replace emotion with logic, speaking with listening. rhetoric with considered thinking and ignorance and lack of concern with understanding and caring. In the process both sides retained their sense of dignity; nobody lost and everybody was a winner.

(Snowden. Kusagak and Macloed, 1984)

In this example, communication facilitated listening, learning and negotiation. The process described would be referred to as interactive participation.

Authors who focus on collaborative learning use SA as a tool to bring participants to the negotiating table, not as a tool for understanding the system. An understanding of the system emerges as a result of the interactions and relationships among the stakeholders. This difference is significant: we return to the issue of observing from the outside as researchers, policy-makers and donors versus acting and facilitating from within.

Collaborative management

Collaborative management begins with stakeholder analysis and participatory appraisal activities, followed by a series of negotiation and planning meetings to reach a basic consensus. Agreed language *(*concepts, frames of reference, points of departure*)* is essential to bridge differences and find "common mental maps" *(*Bernard and Armstrong, 1997: 14*)*. This process may require extensive negotiation using a variety of planning tools (and Walker, 1996*)*. Finally the agreement is applied through the necessary institutional arrangements and tested to gather system feedback and adjust the strategies and procedures. Being in a position to play a role depends on the actors' power to become involved, to be heard and seen; on their readiness to learn; and on legal, political, institutional, economic and socio-cultural questions of feasibility *(*Borrini-Feyerabend, 1997: 34-35*)*.

Tracking and monitoring system feedback

Tracking change refers to a group learning process by which participants monitor their work in managing a natural resource using qualitative and quantitative indicators. This provides the basis for corrective action and also stimulates new learning about the requirements of the management system *(*Burnside and Chamala, 1996*)*.

Participatory learning and communication

The Table shows the varying degrees in which individuals and groups can "participate" in local natural resource management. Only the last two types of participation *(*interactive and self-mobilizing*)* are relevant to participatory learning and pluralism, as they imply that the different parties are independent stakeholders.

Case 3. Local development plans using video

The Mexican PRODERITH project *(*Programme for integrated rural development in the tropical wetlands*)* is comparable with the previous case in that video v as used to enhance rural groups' capacity to articulate their perspectives, hut it involved more stakeholders and eventually grew to become one of the largest communication for development systems in a developing country.

Development work requires a collective perception of the local situation and options for improving it. Information and testimonials on video were used during PRODERITH's early contact with communities to explain the Programme and its development focus. This provided a crucial step in gaining acceptance and in opening a dialogue. Video recording and playback were then used to stimulate and deepen the debate within the community about its past. present. and possible future. For the communities, video recordings made with them were somewhat like looking into a mirror: they provided new perspectives.

*(*FAO, 1996: 21-22

This case illustrates an earl! Exploration into using communication for 'participator! planning", which on the basis of Table I would be referred to as 'functional participation", although it aimed for 'interactive participation" and. in some instances, achieved it.

FAO's experience with rural radio is similar in terms of the commitment to share perceptions by the use of' a modern communication medium. The rural radio effort continues soda! in West African countries,

involving local communities in national programmers (FAO. 1991) and serving as a form of' social mobilization. Even if the process is not fully interactive from a participation point of view, the media can make this process much more powerful.

The role of communication in a pluralist context

The following examples illustrate the shift from the use of communication as a tool to support a consultative process towards its gradual integration into methods of collaborative learning. For this process, the enabling or limiting role of institutions is critical. Public organizations have sometimes used communication to obtain the views of disadvantaged groups, but in most cases communication activities have been to the training and transfer of technology functions.

Issues and opportunities for participatory learning and communication

In a pluralist context, participatory learning is a process with unpredictable outcomes. However, it can yield powerful results when stakeholders can reach early agreement on the purpose of working together. The challenge lies in combining stakeholder analysis methods with other participatory research tools (Gass, Biggs and Kelly 1997). A range of learning and communication tools will be necessary to enable different stakeholders to come together and agree on methods, and indicators to track change collectively. A number of issues require attention:

Facilitation/agency. There is a need for trained professionals skilled in participatory appraisal communication and stakeholder analysis and natural resource management. Moreover, they must be able to work as facilitators and brokers of methods and information.

Trying to Identify and cart out conflicting interests can be a messy business. in the photo: a diagram of interest linkages from Ethiopia

TABLE. A typology of participation

Typology	Characteristics of each type
Passive participation	People participate by being told by an administration or project management what is going to happen or has already happened.
Participation in information giving	People participate by answering questions posed by researchers using questionnaire surveys or similar approaches, but do not have the opportunity to influence proceedings. The findings of the research are not shared with the participants or checked for accuracy by them.
Participation by consultation	People participate by being consulted on their views. External professionals define both problems and solutions, and may(but are not obliged to) modify these in the light of people's responses. However, local people do not share in decision making.
Participation for material incentives	People participate by providing resources - for example labour, or land - in return for food, cash or other material incentives. Much on-farm research fails in this category, as farmers provide the location but are not involved in the experimentation or the process of reaming. It is very common to see this called participation, yet people have no stake in prolonging activities when the incentives end.
Functional participation	People participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project, which can involve the development or promotion of externally initiated social organization. Such involvement tends to come after major decisions have been made, rather than during the planning stage.
Interactive participation	People participate in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and the formation of new local institutions or the strengthening of existing ones It tends to involve interdiscipilnary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and make use of systematic and structured reaming processes. These groups have control over local decisions, and so people have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
Self	People participate by taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change

mobilization	systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used. self-initiated mobilization and collective action may or may not challenge existing inequitable distributions of wealth and power.

Source: Pretty *(*1995: 61*)*.

Case 4. Communication to stimulate critical thinking

A small communication study was conducted in Colombia to find out how campesinos perceived the issue of loss of native seeds and to evaluate the potential of the issue to become a rallying point for the communities.

Eleven interviews about the possibility of losing local seed were carried out with subsistence farmers in Colombia. The campesinos at first seemed unconcerned. It was only later, when they heard accounts of earlier interviews, that they began to consider the seed loss issue as a real possibility. This highlights the importance of horizontal campesino communication as a means of preserving their agricultural traditions.

The study confirmed that discussion on relevant issues in agriculture and natural resource management need not depend on strategically planned programmes by large institutions. It showed the high potential which horizontal communication offers for self-mobilization when the issues are immediately relevant to the farmers. However. It also showed the need for a process of facilitation to catalyse this horizontal communication.

The problem with conventional communication projects is that even when participation is interactive, a process of learning is not evident. For the most part, one single stakeholder *(*the public agricultural organization*)* is expected to sustain the communication efforts. For this reason, these projects fail to address a pluralistic reality where many actors have a stake in maintaining a communication system.

Case 5. Combining the knowledge systems approach with participatory appraisal

The importance of the learning and knowledge side of pluralism is manifested in the method known as Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Knowledge Systems *(*RAAKS*)* developed by Engel and Salomon *(*1994*)*. RAAKS is based on the knowledge system perspective, and is:

"a structured approach for engaging social actors in inquiries, decision-making and the design of actions and/or interventions to improve innovative interaction ... an approach to enabling stakeholders to (re)design the way they organize themselves for innovation."

*(*Engel, 1995: 52*)*

RAAKS is one of the few participatory action-research methods which embraces multiple perspectives, multiple objectives and offers multiple tools to choose from to analyse relationships. It is unique in the sense that it cannot perform outside a pluralist context because it is based on the notion that innovation stems from relationships.

A communication study was done in the Philippines using participatory rural appraisal and some elements of RAAKS. Using this approach researchers, field workers and rural communities jointly identified the networks of information exchange, and made possible a closer learning and planning process. The approach followed three stages:

- mapping *(*graphic description*)* of actors and linkages;
- analysis of linkage performance;
- an action plan to modify roles and improve linkages.

When applied properly, this approach lies in the "functional" or even in the

"interactive" mode of participation *(*Ramírez, 1997a*)*. It is pluralist in that it seeks explicitly to map and analyse multiple stakeholder relationships. In the communication area. it has thus far relied only on simple graphic media, but could well embrace other interactive and group media which would make it more powerful.

Adaptive management. than focus on managing a complex environment on the basis of artificially constructed outcomes or applying a new policy to passive actors, adaptive management considers that the environment responds to multiple influences and requires that stakeholders monitor change on the basis of their interactions with the ecosystem.

Information on things and on process. Participatory learning and communication relies on methods of learning and tracking change as well as on an information base to organize, store, translate and access data. Participatory reaming requires both "information about things" and the complementary information stemming from new processes and relationships among stakeholders.

Participation. Independent actors capable of voicing their goals and strategies will demand either interactive and/or self-mobilization.

Methodological innovation for participatory learning. A combination of action-research methods is required for stake holders jointly to monitor their social interactions as well as the technical dimensions of their environment.

Conclusion

> "Intelligent stewardship of the planet is unlikely to be found at the individual or species level ... If there is a better path, it must be found or built by human institutions, organized entities that can act beyond the reach of individuals."
>
> *(*Lee, 1993: 4*)*

Participatory learning and communication are tools for facilitation and negotiation. They will yield the best results when they are put to work in a context of negotiation and collaboration among stakeholders *(*preferably on both local and national levels*)*. A new understanding of natural resource management is needed, one which is less prescriptive and more open to exploration, acknowledging that outcomes are dependent on a multitude of factors which no one actor can control.

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