Participation: A Key Element of Sustainable Development

The Lao PDR is faced with the challenge of reducing poverty among the 80% of its population (i.e. about four million people) who are mainly engaged in subsistence agriculture, fishing, hunting, gathering and forestry. Reducing poverty, through wise use of natural resources and adoption of appropriate upland farming technologies, is the goal of most upland development and poverty alleviation programmes.

The challenge is complex and solutions are not simple. However, achieving these goals becomes more attainable and sustainable if people are not just passive recipients but take the role of active participants and

- Participatory development means involving people in diagnosing the situation and problems, planning and deciding courses of action, implementing agreed upon tasks, monitoring, evaluating and sharing the benefits as well as responsibilities of joint action.

- Participatory methods allow stakeholders to interact and build a kind of partnership which allows better understanding of the important elements, dynamics, problems and opportunities of local communities.
responsible decision-makers. One of the strategic approaches to poverty reduction being explored by the government is ‘improvement of livelihoods focusing on people-centred participatory development’ (GoL 2004).

People’s participation has been recognised as a key element towards relevant and sustainable development. Thus, many programmes try to integrate participatory methods into their work. Various organisations and projects have developed different approaches, tools and techniques in an attempt to promote people’s participation. This has resulted in a variety of participatory methods ranging from the simple to the complex, and from the practical to the fashionable. Because of the excitement surrounding participatory methods, some people have been tempted to label just about any method as ‘participatory’. However, basic questions remain. How participatory are these “participatory methods”? Who participates, when, how and why? The quality of participation is often in question.

Who participates?

Within the community, is it just the village officials, the men, the better-off farmers and the educated who participate, or, do women, the youth, the very poor, and the landless participate? Beyond the community, it is important to determine who the other stakeholders are and in addition, to determine the roles expected of them and how they will perform these roles. Who decides who has access to and control of resources? Who should benefit? Whose needs count?

When do people participate?

People are involved at different stages in the development of initiatives. Sometimes they are only allowed to implement projects conceived in meeting rooms. In other instances, they are involved right from the start in understanding their situation, defining and analysing root causes of problems and in planning, implementation and monitoring.

Another common problem is that people are only involved in the implementation but are left out of the monitoring and evaluation phase. Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation can, if conducted properly, provide the setting where stakeholders can together assess the progress, outputs, outcomes and impacts of a programme. How people participate or are allowed to participate can be grouped into two general levels:

Passive levels of participation:
- Informing, where outsiders merely tell people about a project to be undertaken.
- Consulting, where villagers are given the opportunity to express their concerns and suggestions.

Active levels of participation:
- Partnership, where there is an exchange and sharing of benefits as well as responsibilities to achieve a common goal. Outsiders and villagers are partners.
- Self-management, where people take initiative and collective action for their own development.
Some useful questions for development workers to ask:

- Are people merely respondents and beneficiaries or are they active decision-makers?
- At which level are people involved in their own programmes?
- What do we need to do to move to the next (higher) step?
- Will people’s decisions be respected?
- To what extent do people participate?

Why should people participate?

In order to better manage natural resources, active participation and decision-making is key. The ‘dole out’ mentality, waiting for help to come or waiting to be told what to do, should be set aside. The end goal of participatory development must not be just helping people in the present but helping people to help themselves. In the future, they should be able to deal with problems even if outside assistance is no longer there.

Points to consider when using participatory methods

The benefits of participation have been well-discussed in other documents but what should we be careful about when using participatory methods?

- **Don’t create false expectations**
  Using participatory methods creates both excitement and anxiety among people, who tend to expect financial support or material rewards in exchange for their participation. Thus early on, the objectives, methods, expected outputs, roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders have to be well clarified.

- **Rushing leads to superficiality**
  Sometimes development programmes are too eager to see results overnight, and so they do the programme ‘for’ the community instead of ‘with’ the community. Unrealistic time frames can short-circuit systematic participatory processes. Doing a programme in a participatory way requires more time and effort.

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Don’t create false expectations

Only use tools when appropriate

Don’t assume communities are homogenous

Do sustain participation

Do enable participation

Think about the consequences of participation
- **Use participatory tools appropriately**
  Participation is not ensured by using a wide variety or large number of tools. Production of Venn diagrams and seasonal calendars is not the aim of the process. Participatory visualisation tools should aim to stimulate both dialogue and critical thinking among stakeholders. The Eco-Development and Irrigation Project in Xay District, Oudomxay, revealed that their Participatory Needs Assessment/Village Level Planning method was more effective when used as a process of facilitating and raising awareness rather than as a data collection instrument.

- **Communities are not homogenous**
  Laos is an ethnically diverse country. What may be a good approach for one ethnic group may be totally unacceptable to another. There is no one magic formula that ensures success. Participatory approaches need to be tailored to meet specific needs.

- **Enable people to participate**
  The ability of people to participate actively depends on certain basic knowledge. Knowledge builds confidence and emboldens people to communicate their ideas. The ability to communicate sensible ideas enhances the ability to participate, and negotiate while allowing people to make intelligent decisions.

  The Sustainable Agriculture Forum, an autonomous coalition of international NGOs and Lao development workers, emphasises the need for social preparation and awareness-building to enable people to participate effectively in long-term development.

- **Sustain participation**
  Participatory methods can only bear fruitful results when community plans are secured with immediate follow-up action. Support services like training on technical, managerial and marketing know how; animal vaccination
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Target group</th>
<th>Comments and lessons learned</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude and behaviour change</td>
<td>Development workers and, to a lesser extent, villagers</td>
<td>The focus of attitude and behaviour transformation should be to improve the ability of development workers to facilitate and guide change processes. Thus an attitude of learning and mutual respect should be fostered.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institutionalisation of participatory methods</td>
<td>Development workers</td>
<td>The social and institutional environment plays a role in advancing or slowing down the promotion of participatory processes. Participation is not something that should be switched on only when development workers go to the field or work with villagers.</td>
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<td>Decentralisation</td>
<td>Politicians and civil servants in central, provincial and district government institutions and local communities.</td>
<td>Mass organisations should play an important role in mobilising and empowering communities. In addition, decentralised participatory approaches should be institutionalised (through testing alternative approaches) into the structure and systems of government.</td>
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<td>Political will</td>
<td>Politicians and civil servants</td>
<td>Participatory policy initiatives need effective implementation.</td>
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<td>Responsible partnership</td>
<td>All stakeholders</td>
<td>It is important that the donor community, NGOs, and other stakeholders continuously work with the government to bring its goal of genuine participatory processes into reality.</td>
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and parasite control programmes; credit; or agro-industry linkages need to be in place.

The capacity of DAFO/PAFO staff should be strengthened so they can provide these support services effectively. Policy makers need to come up with facilitating mechanisms so that rather than being hampered by administrative procedures, staff are able to respond quickly to villagers’ needs. Participation is sustained when people see some tangible benefits: then their degree of involvement gradually becomes enhanced.

**Consequences of participation**

Participatory methods involve social mobilisation, which may threaten existing power structures in the community. It is important to identify existing traditional mechanisms of participation and build on, not against them.

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**Selected references**


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