

MODULE 4

PARTICIPATION

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Introduction

Africare’s food security DAPs adopt a participatory approach as the one that is most likely to achieve their double objectives of (1) improving the food security and nutrition situation and (2)empowering local populations to better solve their own problems over the longer term. While it is easy to speak of a participatory approach, it is often difficult to know exactly what these words mean in practice. This module offers definitions of what is meant by participation in this context and then looks at how the approach will be applied, in practice, in Africare’s food security programs.

What is Meant by a Participatory Approach?

There is by now considerable evidence suggesting that participation is a critical factor in the success of development activities. As a result, agencies have, increasingly, adopted a participatory orientation. Their approaches are anything but standard, however, suggesting that there are as many ways to implement participation as there are groups committed to doing so.

Table I shows how three different groups of observers of the development process have categorized different kinds of participation. They all place community decision making at one end of the participation scale. This is sometimes known as “interactive participation” where the community takes an active role in defining activities and determining how they will be carried out. Moving toward the other end of the scale, we find that populations are less and less

involved in decision making, and instead are consulted, or merely provided information for decisions that are made by others. This type of participation is often called “passive participation.”

The purpose of such topologies of participation is not to judge the different approaches as more or less valid, but rather to distinguish between them. The appropriateness of each type of participation will depend on the community, the situation, and the kind of results that are expected from the process. The different approaches will also make different demands on the executing agency in terms of time and money. The more the DAP seeks the interactive participation of the population (in the choice of activities, administration of the budget, etc.) the greater the investment that is likely to be necessary in capacity building and empowerment. The pay-off to this investment is to be reflected in the sustain ability of the results of any activities that are carried out.

Table 4.1 Three Ways of Looking at Participation
(the lower in the table the more participation is interactive)

Topology 1	Topology 2	Topology 3
Passive Participation		
Participation in information giving	Information	
Participation by consultation	Consultation	
Participation for material incentives		Cheap Labor
Functional participation		Financial inputs Contract obligation
Interactive Participation	Deciding together	Community participation in decision-making
Self Mobilization	Acting together Supportive of local initiatives	
Ref. Jules Pretty et al.	Ref. David Wilcox	Ref. Lyra Srinivasan

Africare’s approach to participation in its food and nutrition security activities is oriented primarily toward supporting local community initiatives. In particular, the agency seeks to enhance the community’s capacity to analyze its situation and to define, carry out, and eventually evaluate its own action plan with the goal of improving the local situation. This is to say, Africare is working toward a more interactive participation by local communities.

The basic principles of interactive participation, as described in IIED's Trainer's Guide¹, may be summarized as follows:

A defined methodology and systematic learning. The focus is on cumulative learning by all the participants, which include both professional trainees and local people.

Multiple perspectives. A central objective is to seek diversity, rather than simplify complexity.

Group learning process. The approach assumes that the complexity of the world will be revealed through group analysis and interaction.

Context specific. The participatory approach must be sufficiently flexible to be adapted to diverse conditions and actors. Variants of the methods are encouraged.

Facilitating experts and stakeholders. The approach is concerned with the transformation of existing activities to try to improve people's situation. The role of the external "expert" is best thought of as helping people to carry out their own study and so achieve something.

Leading to change. The process of joint analysis and dialogue helps to define changes which would bring about improvement and seeks to motivate people to take action to implement the defined changes.

The empowerment of local populations to develop and implement Action Plans to improve their food and nutrition security in the short and long term suggests that they must play a central role in deciding which activities will be carried out in their community. A principal role of the DAP is thus to help the population develop the skills needed to make decisions that are useful and fair and to give them the tools to evaluate their own progress. This requires a substantial investment in developing organizational skills as needed to carry out these tasks.

The approach promoted here is based on the assumption that communities learn best by doing. It avoids, therefore, separating out the empowerment training from other DAP activities and carrying out one set of food security initiatives and another set of parallel empowerment activities. Instead the community gains experience by analyzing its food security situation, planning and implementing the activities needed to address priority concerns, and then evaluating their impact. All of this takes place within the context of the PRA.

During this process, the community will therefore undertake the following tasks:

1. Carry out a situational analysis of their food security and nutrition status
2. Describe the situation in operational terms
3. Analyze the causes and consequences of problems identified
4. Identify their strengths and weaknesses to address the situation and achieve the

¹Jules Pretty, Irene Guijt, John Thompson, Ian Scoones: Participatory Learning and Action: A Trainer's Guide. London: IIED, 1995, p. 56-57

- desired goals
- 5. Identify potential solutions
- 6. Prioritize and select most appropriate solutions
- 7. Draw up a Community Action Plan
- 8. Implement the Plan
- 9. Monitor the implementation of the Plan
- 10. Evaluate whatever actions are undertaken
- 11. Revise and add to the plan as necessary

Many of these tasks involve the community's use of information, whether collecting information about their situation, analyzing it, or using it for planning purposes. PRA provides the communities with tools to carry out these various tasks, as described in Module 7.

The empowerment of local populations to better manage their food security and nutrition situation implies building capacity in a range of skills that goes beyond the technical skills related to cultivation, constructing dikes, marketing produce and other activities stemming out of their Action Plans. Often, as communities acquire these skills, they also develop new perceptions about themselves and what they are capable of accomplishing. The following list suggests some of the areas in which communities may develop their skills and the DAP can assess progress toward its capacity building objective.

- C skills in collecting and analyzing information about their situation and in interpreting the results
- C a sense of commitment to meeting clearly defined food and nutritional security objectives
- C growing social awareness
- C increasing independence in decision making
- C greater ability to manage collective ventures
- C skills in planning
- C skills in problem solving
- C ability to carry out an action plan
- C greater sense of initiative
- C skills in negotiation and conflict resolution
- C increasing self confidence
- C emergence of new and stronger leadership

This type of participatory approach seeks to unleash a development process that is as important and intended to be more sustainable than the immediate concrete improvements in food or nutritional security. This is why the empowerment objective of these DAPs is given the same importance as improvements to food security and nutrition.

The dual DAP objectives require evaluation of both types of results at the same time. The DAP needs to assess progress toward community empowerment, as well as changes in the food security and nutritional status of the population. Guidelines for how this may be done will be offered in Modules 5 and 8.

Site Selection in the Participatory Approach

Having good participatory methods is not enough to make these approaches work. It's also important to choose "good communities" in which to implement them. The choice of sites will be based on such factors as need and the likelihood that any efforts that are undertaken will succeed. The needs of the population will be determined in relation to the DAP's food security framework which will, in turn, be based on information gathered in RRA studies and surveys. For its part, the likelihood of success will depend on whether the resources of the DAP match the needs of the community as well as the population's interest in participating and the skills they bring to the process.

There is no automatic guarantee that a population will want to engage in a participatory process or that they will have the skills needed to carry it out successfully. Some communities will simply not be interested in investing the time and effort needed to make this approach work. Some communities will be able to demonstrate that they are well suited to carrying out these approaches by showing how they have confronted and resolved problems in the past. In other communities there may be major blockages to this type of community mobilization. Such blockages may either be socio-cultural (e.g. ethnic or religious conflicts, highly hierarchical structures where participation is not valued by the leadership, weak village leaders) or geographic (e.g. vast distances between households and limited mechanisms for communication, massive outmigration, physical inaccessibility to the community and its members).

Finally, communities will have their own "participation histories" that you will want to know before beginning to work with them. This will enable you to identify the starting point for the process in terms of their organizational situation and planning capacity (a baseline of sorts) and also assist in identifying people, institutions, and organizations with whom you can begin to work most effectively.

Throughout the DAP, it will be important to work with the local population not only to analyze information about their food security and nutrition situation, but also to reflect on the process they are carrying out. These discussions may address issues such as:

- C what the participants feel they have learned from various exercises
- C brainstorming of key issues that were worked on during each session
- C identification of problems that have been resolved as well as those that are still outstanding.
- Identification of capacity building needed to manage their food security and reduce their vulnerability

This type of discussion is important not only for the community but also for DAP staff since one of your tasks is to monitor progress toward the capacity building objective. Discussions of this type will provide important indicators of whether both the knowledge and the capacity of the population has increased through their work with the DAP. Capacity building is measured not only in terms of improvements to food security and nutrition but also (and especially) in terms of long term capacities to assess and manage issues that affect households, groups or the whole community, including planning, implementing plans, advocating, finding resources, etc.

It is important to keep in mind that communities may make progress in developing these

analytic, planning, and management skills without all ending up at the same level of competence. Progress depends on what the population's skill level was at the outset and should be measured from that point.

The Role of DAP Staff in the Participatory Process

The role of DAP staff is not the same in this type of activity as it would be in a more "classical" project where the emphasis is largely on technical objectives and material outcomes. Rather than managing physical resources and infrastructure development, the task is to support and work in collaboration with the local population as they develop action plans to improve their food and nutritional security. This includes:

- C encouraging the development of technically appropriate activities that can effectively address problems of food and nutritional security and supporting the population's efforts to implement these activities
- C encouraging and supporting the villagers as they develop their skills in managing their food and nutrition situation and their capacity to effectively use PRA methods
- C promoting the capacity of the population to engage in analytic discussions and to resolve conflicts between individuals and between competing ideas.

The disciplinary and sectoral skills (credit, health, agriculture, education, nutrition) that staff bring to the DAP are critically important. But equally important are aptitudes in:

- C discovering, promoting, and finding ways to effectively use local knowledge and expertise in the development of DAP activities
- C promoting and respecting decision making by the local community
- C building a relationship of collaboration and mutual respect with the local communities.

The attitude of the outside facilitator is essential to building an effective learning process that leads to community empowerment. The general aim is to increase the community's confidence in solving its own problems and to develop the local leadership needed to guide and sustain the process over the longer term.

Skills and Characteristics of DAP Staff

The responsibilities accorded to DAP staff under the participatory approach require a special set of skills and characteristics. The importance of analytic and management skills cannot be underestimated. In addition, however, the staff member will need knowledge of and experience in participatory techniques that are used by the community to collect, analyze, and interpret information about their food security and nutrition situation. They will also need to understand well the food security and local capacity building frameworks on which Africare is basing its approach to these DAPs. Module 7 of this manual presents information on the PRA approach. The more familiar you are with this method the better able you will be to adapt the approach to

the specific needs of the communities where you work. In addition, a paper on the framework for local capacity building in food security activities was prepared for Food Aid Management by Suzanne Gervais. This paper is a useful reference that is included in the Annex.

In addition to knowledge about the methods to be used, certain personal characteristics are essential for the successful implementation of this approach. These include, for example,

- C a personal commitment and enthusiasm toward the participatory approach
- C a sense of humility (and lack of arrogance) concerning one's own knowledge and limits
- C an ability to recognize and promote others' strengths (especially within the community groups with whom you work)
- C an outgoing and pleasant personality
- C a belief that development and empowerment of local populations is possible
- C a respect for local populations and their aspirations.

Let us now turn to practical aspects of information management by the local community.

What is Participatory Information Management?

It is clear that if DAPs are to be successful and to have a significant impact on household food and nutrition security, there is a need for good quality information about many different aspects of the problem, including food production and distribution, consumption, and management or behaviors such as mother and child food practices. Information about these issues can be gathered in many different ways. These ways may be more top down or more participatory, meaning that the local populations themselves are involved in the collection, analysis, and use of information. They may be more qualitative or more quantitative. Quantitative information is that which can be reported using numbers and is often quite specific: "32% of the population between the ages of 18 and 36 months are malnourished according to measures of arm circumference." Qualitative information is usually more descriptive and can often provide a richer level of detail that cannot be captured in numeric reporting.

Methods that are more quantitative in their approach include surveys and anthropometric measures such as arm circumference, weight for age, etc. Whether these methods are top-down or participatory depends on how they are carried out. A top down approach would bring in "experts" to measure children's arms and compile the information, usually for a report that never gets back to the village. The same methodology could as well be used by the local population themselves, however. One approach would be for mothers to measure their own children's arm circumference and to record the information. Another might be to train neighborhood representatives to measure and record children's status.

Methods that are more qualitative in their approach include RRA, PRA, focus groups, anthropological observation, etc. While these approaches tend to be more participatory in their orientation, this is not necessarily the case and there are certainly greater and lesser degrees of local participation in the way they are implemented. We can compare an RRA, for example, in which the research team is comprised entirely of outsiders and the report is to be used for academic purposes with an RRA that includes local representatives on the team and puts an emphasis on making sure that information is systematically shared with the local community.

It often seems as though practitioners of qualitative and quantitative methods are at odds and even competing with one another since they spend considerable time and effort in disparaging one another's methods. The authors of this manual believe that this is counterproductive, especially given the general lack of good information from all sources. Qualitative and quantitative methods are different both in their approach and in the kinds of information they are best suited to collecting. The key to gathering information effectively and efficiently is to match the type of methodology with the kind of information that is needed for each different type of user.

Surveys, for example, are often best for gathering straightforward, non-sensitive information from large numbers of people in a way that permits broad comparisons across a large sample. A survey could be used in several regions of a country for example, to find out basic differences in consumption patterns, activities carried out, household social structures, etc. Surveys are less effective at getting information about more sensitive or complex issues, such as in-depth knowledge about true benefits from some activities and their utilization, child care, identity and practices of food insecure persons within households, etc. This is where a qualitative method like RRA can be more effective because it can probe to find out why people make certain decisions or engage in certain behaviors and use a variety of methods to cross-check sensitive information.

Given these differences in quantitative and qualitative methods, it makes sense to consider them as complementary, rather than competing, approaches. If a DAP is establishing a baseline, for example, it will probably want to use a combination of techniques. The survey could be conducted on a large number of people, for example, to gather information about how many people engage in certain behaviors or present certain characteristics. The qualitative method (RRA or PRA) would then take a much smaller sample and go into greater depth. It can bring explanations to behaviors and reveal characteristics of the people or of their environment which were perhaps unknown before and therefore which could not be studied quantitatively in a survey. It can be useful to think of the survey as a way of getting largely descriptive information about what people are doing, with the advantage that it can rather easily be administered to a large sample. RRAs or PRAs are limited to a very much smaller sample, but have the advantage of being able to go into considerably greater depth, focusing especially on why people do what they do and the multitude of constraints and incentives they face.

Module 7 will present you RRA / PRA techniques while in Modules 5 and 8 you will find how to monitor and evaluate these processes and how to integrate information from the RRA / PRA and that from the DAP-level monitoring system.