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Communication in community participation

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"The basic idea of community participation can be stated very simply. It is true partnership between those who have special knowledge, skills and resources, and those who can and want to utilize them effectively.....

Community participation recognizes that knowledge, skills and resources do not solely belong to the educated, the powerful or the wealthy, but that each of the partners has something valuable to contribute."

David Drucker in Addis Ababa, March 1986. (Ref. 1)

(1) If we agree with David Drucker's definition of Community Participation as a partnership between a community and outsiders then a basic question will be: How can the two parties understand one another to be able to share knowledge, insights and values? Only such an understanding can foster a functioning partnership which can bring about development. The purpose of communication is primarily to create understanding.

(2) The aim of this paper is to describe the role of communication in the process of community participation and to give some practical examples on how it can be done.

What is Communication?

(3) To express it simply: It is the process by which a message is transferred from one person to another. The reason for sending a message is usually a need, which the sender of the message hopes the other party will respond to. But a human being can respond only if he/she has understood the message.

(4) Our thoughts (mental models) are connected to certain signs (e.g. words, pictures, movements etc.) which can be

rendered as signals (e.g. spoken or written words, gestures, display of artifacts etc.) We experience and learn most of our mental models, signs and signals in our childhood, within the culture in which we are brought up. Our mental models are much more than intellectual entities and include values coloured by emotions, purpose etc. and shaped in the culture of our origin.
(5) For two persons to understand each other: they must be able to understand one another's signals and mental models. Even when people speak the same language their mental models may differ. A common misunderstanding can occur this way:

PERSON A. sends a signal to PERSON B.

a question: GOOD WATER?

B. answers: YES

but while for A. 'good water' is
PURE, UNPOLLUTED

for B. 'good water' is water
GOOD FOR BREWING BEER

A.'s reaction: B. IS IGNORANT, USING
DIRTY RIVER WATER RATHER
THAN GOOD BORE-HOLE
WATER.

B.'s reaction: A. IS STUPID THINKING THAT
WE CAN MAKE USE OF SALTY
WATER FOR BEER OR TEA.

The difference of concepts (mental models) as to what constitutes GOOD WATER causes not only a misunderstanding, but also a breakdown of relations between A. and B.

(6) Our human communication instruments are formed within our culture. In order to be able to communicate with one another, we must thus know and understand each others' culture. In the context of a partnership in development it is primarily the outside expert who must learn to know the culture of the community.

(7) Each culture has its own communication system. A communication system consists of:

- * Mental models-signs-signals which form and transmit the messages.
- * Channels through which the messages pass (e.g. the social networks through which rumours travel)
- * Media which strengthen the signal outputs (either by strengthening a particular signal as e.g. radio does; or by providing many signals e.g. in a dramatic presentation of a message).

(8) The particular communication system within a community is called its Internal Communication System (ICS). Often the outsiders bring along their own communication system, which is an External Communication System (ECS).

Whenever we as outsiders enter a community and apply our own mental models (e.g. of what 'good water' means), use our signals (e.g. the English language) apply the channels of our own choice (e.g. the English speaking youth) and make use of media which only a minority can make use of (e.g. written texts), we have made use of an ECS. The chances of being understood by the community are much smaller than if ICS were applied.

(9) ECS will also make it very difficult for a community to express its own opinions, knowledge, suggestions etc. By using its own ICS the community gets the upper hand, it can exercise more of a control over the communication. No project can afford to undertake work with a community without the project staff learning at least the basics of its culture.

(10) Certain projects have engaged people with a very good knowledge of the culture to carry out surveys on needs, local resources etc. Based on that information the experts then decide on what intervention shall be undertaken. The people are the source of information, but the project is decided upon by the

experts. In such a case the community has been deprived of its right to real participation. Instead it is the community that should be the leading partner. The outsiders' role is to add their resources to those of the community.

(11) How can an outsider learn to know the culture of a community and its ICS? Primarily by being together with the community and learning from its members. A background in social sciences is of help in knowing how to ask the right questions. (Ref. 2)

Can these principles be put into concrete action?

The following two examples illustrate the idea:

A Village Workshop on Water

(12) A village had appealed to the Project for help with getting a supply of good water. The place was already known to the Project staff which had been working in the area for several years. A Community Contact Worker (CCW) was sent to the village to discuss the matter with the elders of this community. They talked about the needs and how they best could study the problem together with the Project. The CCW suggested that, instead of talking with the whole village, it might be better if a smaller group of villagers with a special interest in and understanding of water problems, met with a couple of Project people to study the matter. They agreed on how and when they would meet in the village.

(13) On that day, early morning, three Project people arrived in the village, one was the CCW who was from the area, another was a water specialist and the third dealt with communication. The village had designated a few elders, the rain chief, two female healers and some other women as its representatives. As the whole group sat in a circle in the traditional meeting place some other villagers came to see what was happening. They were invited to form an outer circle.

(14) The participants were introduced to one another. An elder then explained the problem the village was facing. The Project representatives began asking the villagers how they thought the problems could be solved, what the villagers themselves could do, what was needed from the outside etc. etc. After a couple of

hours the villagers began asking for the Project workers' opinion.

(15) The CCW and the water expert began by using a simple flipchart produced to fit the local culture, to explain how they understood the problem and what solutions could be applied. For each one, (surface water, a shallow well, a borehole etc.) they described the technique used, the resulting supply, maintenance, costs etc.; the pros and cons. A discussion followed where more clarification was sought and given on the various solutions suggested (both by the villagers and the Project).

(16) The village representatives decided to present the matter to the whole community for discussion. It was jointly agreed upon that the representatives would divide into three groups, each one preparing a presentation using a particular medium. One group would present the question of 'good water' in the form of a drama, one group would use the flipchart to explain the Project suggestions, plus the villagers comments to it. The third would create a song expressing the need for all to participate. The communication person from the project assisted in some details on the various media.

(17) The rest of the day was spent in discussion and preparation for the presentation. In between they had tea and a meal prepared by the villagers.

(18) In the late afternoon all villagers gathered in the village square and the representatives presented their productions and recommendations. A discussion followed where clarification was sought. The villagers then adjourned and the matter was discussed for a couple of weeks in the village until they had made a decision. On a number of occasions the village had asked for clarification on certain points from the Project.

(19) On basis of this decision an agreement was made with the Project on how they could assist and when the work could begin. The Project and the villagers honoured their undertakings, and the water supply system in this village came to be regarded by the community as its own.

(20) Some crucial factors in the process:

- * The villagers and the project staff knew each other.
- * The initiative was taken by the villagers.

- * The village selected its own representatives and the meeting-place.
- * The villagers were given the priority to explain their views. The Project came in later to present various alternatives.
- * The village representatives decided on what information should be given to the rest of the community.
- * The villagers were given time to evaluate the proposals, seek further clarification etc.
- * Once the decision was taken both the villagers and the Project staff followed up on the steps they had agreed to take.

Production of Media

(21) In selecting the media that were used in the village workshop the following factors had been taken into consideration:

1. Which media were particularly suitable for the message? Could they help to keep the attention of the audience? Did it need a visual element? Could a media be found which could carry the information which was included in the message? Could it help the receiver to retain the message? Could a combination of several media be considered if one medium was not adequate to convey the entire message?

2. Would the media selected permit people to participate? Traditional media such as songs, drama, storytelling, demonstration etc. could be used by the community as well as outsiders. (Most group media are of that kind. Also massmedia can sometimes be used e.g. radio as an input in a discussion group, a radio forum).

3. Could the media selected be produced locally and maintained on local resources? In this way it could be specific to the message, the local language could be used and expressed in a way that people could understand. By recognizing themselves in the media the members of the community could more easily apply the message to themselves. They could also exert control over the message and how it was being used. (Ref. 3)

The three media selected, drama, songs and the flip-chart presentation, did indeed meet the above requirements.

(22) An additional note on media: It is important that both project staff and community are trained in the use of media.

This applies both to the production and the use of media. Each development project should have staff trained in communication and who can assist both the project and the community in making use of sound communication methods.

Notes:

Ref. 1) Yemane Tekeste (Ed.):
Proceedings of the Workshop on
Community Participation in Water
supply and Sanitation projects.
UNESCO Addis Ababa
June 1986. p. 47.

Ref. 2) Further information on these and related questions is found in
Lundstrom-Smith-Kenyi-Frerichs:
Communicating for Development.
A Practical Guide.
Evangel Press Nairobi, 1990.
pp. 32-42.

Ref. 3) Ibid. p. 62 ff. for further
information on selection and pro-
duction of media.