Importance of Facilitation in Participatory Development*
Experience from Nepal

Kamal PHUYAL**

Beginnings

The terms ‘participation’ and ‘participatory approach’ have become very popular in development circles. These terms have been widely accepted and used by the development actors for last two decades or more. Many development organizations have proclaimed “people's participation”, which is a very appealing idea, as their major principle of development. It has even been embraced by international and multilateral agencies as an essential ingredient for sustainable development (Gomez 1999). However, different actors describe it in different ways. Some take it as a means (Chambers 1997) for the completion of ‘development projects’ with the involvement of local people. They advocate for the use of participatory approach to complete the project in more effective and sustainable manner. Some have accepted it as the process in which local people play active role to analyse their situation and plan for the better future. Some explains that people-centred, people-managed, people-controlled, people-led (Datta 2003) and the like are the major characteristics of participatory development process. Nevertheless, a fact is that, all the development actors, both government and nongovernmental, have accepted people’s participation as the foundation of development process.

On the contrary, many have commented that ‘development actors’ define and mould the forms of participation for their manipulative purposes. ‘Participation’ has been made a tool in order to impose their predetermined agendas over the people. People are dragged into partaking in operations of no interest to them, in the very name of participation (Rahnema 1992). Some have commented that ‘many facilitators’ collect the local people to facilitate participation, where as they explain the local people their ‘already prepared’ plans and ask people for their comments. These remarks point out the intentions of the development actors to use, or misuse, ‘participatory development concept’ for their own purposes. However, people’s participation in the development process cannot be ignored. People participation in the development process to think, discuss, and decide the whole development process that affects their lives and conditions. It is their rights. Facilitators work together with local people in the process as supporting actors to secure such rights. But, facilitators attitude, knowledge, skills play the vital role to encourage local people for their active participation in development process.

Understanding facilitation and facilitators

Facilitation simply can be understood as helping people to achieving its goals. In facilitation process people gather the information, analyse the situation and think and plan for the social change. For this, facilitators help to have more appropriate communication among the people. Facilitators also observe the situation, give feedback, and raise questions that will help people to generate insights. Thus, facilitator can be regarded as a true communication professional (White 1999). They always pay attention to activate marginalized people by making the process simple and easier.

* Key words: Development, Participation, Facilitation, Facilitator
** Kamal Phuyal is basically a community development facilitator working in Nepal and some other countries. He partly teaches in universities as a visiting teacher. He taught in social work Department of Kwansei Gakuin University in April-July 06 as a visiting professor.
Facilitators can be local or external. However, external facilitators must have a good immersion with the local people to work together with the local people. External facilitators always endeavour to develop local facilitators and reduce the external roles gradually. To create an easy and simple process is essential so that local people can decide their goals and control the whole development process. Some regard a facilitator as a neutral third party who supports the local people to gather, think, and plan the development activities. Such facilitators try to be accepted by all the members of the community: men, women, rich, poor, and others. Some view that facilitators cannot be neutral but must take the side of marginalized section by dealing strategically with others. Facilitation process must support and encourage marginalized people to speak out against the unjust existing in the society and act for social change. Facilitators’ attitude, knowledge, and skills are essential to accomplish this task minimising the conflicts and creating win-win situation as far as possible.

Importance of facilitation

In 1989, I was working as a community facilitator in a remote village of Nepal through one International non-governmental organization. It was my first experience of involving in development work. I once encountered with a very strange experience in that village:

One day, many villagers had gathered for a meeting. Women, men, children, elderly people, teachers, local political leaders and others were present. They had called a mass meeting to put a demand to the ‘development organization’, which was working with them for last three years. Organisation was supporting local people for various things; school building construction, scholarship to poor children, drinking water project construction, women empowerment, etc. The organisation was spending a huge amount of money as well as providing technical, moral and other supports to the local people. The villagers were happy with the organisation’s support, which had contributed to initiate a gradual change in the society. Organisation had recently decided to transfer a facilitator working in the village to other place. Actually, the villagers had called that meeting to pressurise the organisation to abandon their decision and not to send the facilitator to other village. They wanted to keep the facilitator to work with them. In the meeting many villagers said pointing to the facilitator- “If organisation leaves us, we do not mind, but we do not want him to leave us.”

After that meeting, it became a very big issue in our organisation. Why do the villagers want a facilitator more than the organisation, which is spending a huge amount of money for the village’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Villagers said about the facilitator:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• He has been a part of our community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• He always thinks about our village. He always talks about our development when we meet him.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• He listens to our ideas. He respects our knowledge. You know, he makes notes a lot when we share our experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• He never asks us to do anything, but supports us for what we want to do.</td>
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<td>• We can easily understand his suggestions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• He is a very easy person. He is like our own son.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We see his loves to us on his face.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• His suggestions have contributed a lot for the betterment of our village. But, he never tried to take any advantage from us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• He is really a nice human being.</td>
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Source: An introduction to PRA: concept and practice, 1997
development? Why do people give more preference to an individual facilitator than a big organisation?
This case provoked a discourse among the staff members from the centre to grassroots level of the organisations. Villagers were also consulted later on to learn the reasons. They were asked that why they liked that particular facilitator. The villagers were found influenced mainly by the attitudinal aspect of the facilitator, as shown on the box one.

This instance astonished me very much. It raised different questions to my mind and also encouraged to see various aspects of development. I realised that development is not only taking resources to the community. It is not only building infrastructures. People do not care much about the amount of money spent in the village. Process is more important for them. They give more preference to the relationship facilitators have established with them. I also felt that local people prefer to have them who want to work ‘with’ them not ‘for’ or ‘to’ them. The trust of the people, gained by the facilitators, count a lot for people’s participation. I, thus, internalised that facilitation plays a vital role for the success of participatory development process.

Do facilitators’ skills affect in people’s participation? Or, how much influence does it make for people’s participation? These questions are often asked and discussed among the development facilitators. Skills sometime can be destructive if a facilitator lacks positive attitude. I would like to share an experience in this regard.

I was facilitating a workshop on ‘Attitudinal aspect of PRA’ in 1996 in Nepal. One of the participants who hold a responsible position in a development organisation shared his experience. He shared:

We had two ‘facilitators’ working in a village. They had little bad image among the villagers. The villagers commented for many times about their miss-behaves. Villagers mainly commented that they are lazy and cheating the works, lying to the local people, misbehaving and so on. We also found them once preparing fake reports. We had a staff meeting and discussed to dismiss them for the job. However, one of our colleagues suggested giving them a chance for improvement. He also suggested to send them in a PRA training that might help for changing them. That time PRA was very popular. We agreed on him and decided to send them for a PRA training. Due to some family reasons, one of the ‘facilitators’ could not participate. The other one participated in PRA training and came back to his work. You know, the one who participated in PRA training became more difficult person. Local people’s comments to him arose. We found that he learnt various tools and techniques of PRA, which he used cheating his works and local people by pretending to be more participatory though his intention was not to respect people’s knowledge, skills and desires. He also started submitting very ‘nice reports’ included diagrams, maps, and other participatory tools. But, we found nothing was done in the village. He became more skilled to dissimulate the organisation after the training.

Box 2

Components of facilitation

- Attitude
- Knowledge
- Skills

Source: Introduction to participatory approach, 2005
This case was discussed prominently during the whole workshop. We all, participants of the workshop, discussed a lot and realised that only learning PRA or any other participatory approach technically is not an important matter. If the facilitators have negative attitude, there is a high chance of misusing participatory tools and techniques to cheat the people more efficiently.

In my experience, the combination of three components is essential for effective facilitation: attitude, knowledge, and skills. (Box 2). Facilitators should have strong knowledge and skills about the particular topic or content that the people are addressing to achieve the goals. However, attitudinal aspect deserves the most important role for successful facilitation. Facilitators’ negative attitude lead ‘participation’ turns into a parody (Rahnema 1992) and become an invitation to manipulative designs. One of the prominent facilitators view that if we starts development with our heads-intelligence only, if our heart is not in it, it’s difficult to have the compassion, passion and commitment we need to make development a success (White 1999).

I would like to share one more case that I experienced while working with a group of women in a rural village of western Nepal. The case tells about the importance of attitudinal aspect of facilitator to bring a development process into success.

I was involved in facilitating a ‘participatory monitoring and evaluation’ workshop in 1998 organised for a team of Japanese overseas volunteers in a western district of Nepal. We all participants had been to a village for practical evaluation exercise. We had taken a ‘drinking water project’ constructed and managed by the women group as the case for evaluation. During the whole evaluation period, the village women repeatedly mentioned a name of a facilitator involved from the initiation phase of the project. The villagers explained that the facilitator was the crucial figure for whatever could be done for the village development. Unfortunately, we could not meet the facilitator as she had already transferred to other village. The village women’ impression about the facilitator was like this:

Rashmi Didi came to our village about four years ago ‘to work with us for village development’. We did not have good impressions about the ‘development workers’ due to the behaviours of some previous development workers. So, nobody cared her coming. Rashmi Didi tried to talk to us for many times. Villagers denied her. Some even scolded her for couple of times. But, she did not mind it. We did not see any negative sign on her face though she was harshly behaved. She never reacted negatively. You know, we latter came to know that she even spent many nights unslept thinking and planning to improve our condition. She ultimately won our heart. She helped women to organise and plan for betterment of the village. Now, we have a very strong women group, we have a cooperative. We also did a literacy campaign and all the women are literate now. More importantly, we could recognise our strengths. Now, we are working for the village development together with men. We feel shame now when we recall our initial reactions to Rashmi Didi.

It became a key case for all the participants to discuss the main factors for the success of development process. We found that the organisation spent only a sum of 40,000 Nepalese rupees (about 600 US$) for the drinking water project. All other things were done using local resources and efforts of the local people. We saw encouragement, confidence, and eagerness among the local people for the village development, which cannot be gained just by spending money. We all realised that proper facilitation is the vital for the initiation of the change process. On top of that, facilitators’ positive attitude is more essential.

Fortunately, I happened to meet Ms. Rashmi in her new working village after two years. We talked about her facilitation. Very surprisingly, she does not have any theoretical knowledge on participatory approach and facilitation. I learnt and realized that somebody can be a ‘good and able facilitator’ without

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1) Rashmi (name) Didi (sister) is a facilitator who worked in that community. But, the real name has been changed in the article.
having theoretical knowledge on participation and facilitation. I also felt from the interaction with Ms. Rashmi that her way of living itself is participatory and positive.

At the end

People’s empowerment starts when they can participate in a decision-making process. It is local people’s rights to work together to think, plan and act for social change. However, this is a complex process, which needs to be supported. Facilitation can play an important role for providing this support and protect people’s rights. Facilitators do not make any decisions, but can work as a process leader to show people choices. They provide real and valid information to the local people to think and decide for right plans. Facilitators must take a side of marginalized people to organise them for social change. For this, facilitators must be aware of social power structure of the society to facilitate the change process. S/he also must be aware of the existing cultural context of the society.

Facilitators should have various skills and knowledge. Likewise, his or her attitude makes a big difference. The table presented below highlights some of the qualities a good and able facilitator should have (Box 3).

Facilitators must believe in people’s capabilities and respect local culture. Development must starts from the community being based on the local cultural context. Facilitators must be aware of social power structure and support the marginalized people to speak out against the unjust social structure and plan for structural change. Facilitation skills must make the whole process simple and easier in which grassroots people can actively participate and start the change process.

Reference:

Phuyal, K. (2005) Reference material: A brief introduction to participatory approach for community development, Nepal
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ABSTRACT

Facilitator’s skills, attitude and knowledge play a vital role for the success of the participatory development process. Erroneous facilitation can ruin ‘participatory development’ and disempower the people. I would like to share some of my experiences from Nepal, which reveal how facilitation plays an important role to organise local people for their active participation in the development process, which ultimately contributes to social change.

Key Words: development, participation, facilitation, facilitator