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Participation for development: a good time to be alive

By Robert Chambers
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This presentation is based on a keynote to the ACFID conference '[The Challenges for Participatory Development in Contemporary Development Practice](#)' in Canberra on 28 November 2012.

For us engaged with participation for development, why is this a good time to be alive? There are so many negative trends in our world – in climate change, rising inequality, abuses of globalisation, the glorification of greed... and so much else. But for participation for development, I believe the glass is not half empty but half full and filling, because there are so many wonderful realities and potentials for making a difference for the better.

First, meanings. *Participation* in development-speak is used to cover a multitude of practices, some inspiring and good, and some depressingly bad. I shall not define it but simply say that *participation* has implications for power relations, personal interactions, and attitudes and behaviours – and that *participatory* can apply to almost all social contexts and processes, not least in organisations, education, research, communities and the family. For its part, *development* can be taken to mean good change, raising questions of power and relationships concerning who says what is good and who identifies what change matters – whether 'we' professionals do, or whether it is 'they' – those who are poor, marginalised, vulnerable and excluded.

In our contemporary context, four major trends are both significant for participation for development, and easy to overlook or underestimate.

First, change accelerates for poor and marginalised people – changes in the conditions they experience, and changes in their awareness, aspirations and priorities. The revolution of the mobile phone in the past decade is one spectacular dimension, but more broadly social change, including changes in gender relations, appears to be more and more rapid. In consequence the challenge to development professionals to keep in touch and up to date is

greater now than ever.

Second, development professionals are increasingly isolated from poor people. This applies especially to senior people in governments, aid agencies and NGOs. Many are caught in 'the capital trap' – capital cities in which they are imprisoned, held tight by meetings, visitors, internet and the digital tyranny of email, skype, webinars and the like. Field visits outside the capital have become more difficult to find time for and rarer. And when donor staff from OECD country headquarters say they are visiting 'the field' they often mean the capital city of a recipient country.

Third, tensions have become more intense between the Newtonian paradigm of things, design, planning and predictability (the domain of the left hemisphere of the brain) and the complexity paradigm of people, participation, processes, emergence and unpredictability (the domain of the right hemisphere). The buzzwords empowerment, participation, partnership, ownership, transparency and accountability all imply changes in power and relationships, but these are contradicted especially in aid by top down standardised demands and the mindset that goes with 'delivery' (a prominent word in AusAid and other aid literature). The Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness repeatedly talks of *partners* and *partnership*, which added together are used more in the Declaration than any other word or word root (my count is 96 times) and *monitor*, *measure*, *assess*, *performance* and *results* are very common, but *poor*, *vulnerable*, *marginalised*, *people* and *power* are not to be found anywhere. The 1990s were a time when people and participatory approaches were being mainstreamed; in the 2000s the pendulum swung back towards things and preset planning and continues to swing in that direction.

So why is this a good time to be alive as a development professional? The fourth trend – the quiet revolution of proliferating Participatory Methods (PMs) – is one reason. We now have an extraordinary variety of PMs. The named brands of the 1990s – PRA, Appreciative Inquiry, Reflect and many others – survive but increasingly now practitioners adapt and improvise their own ways of doing things to meet their particular contexts and needs. ICTs, most notably mobile phones, but also Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and other technologies, have added to the ever richer range of participatory methods that can be combined with others.

Three Rs are relevant here– reversals, reflexivity and realism. For **reversals** there is now vast scope, with many ways of reversing adverse trends. Reality checks, pioneered in Bangladesh and used by AusAid for learning about basic education in Indonesia, are one: researchers live with families in representative communities for five or so days and nights, and then come together to compare experience and learning – revealing very rapid social

change of which those in capital cities are often not aware. Participatory statistics are another with huge potential for win-wins – outsider professionals or local people facilitate the generation of up-to-date statistics about qualitative changes, and those whose participatory analysis generates them themselves learn and change as a result. Behaviour, attitudes and facilitation are more and more recognised for their primacy as drivers for change in almost all contexts.

Reflexivity – becoming aware of and offsetting the biases and frames of one's mindset and beliefs – is a key way forward, with each discipline looking at itself in a mirror and good professionalism being recognised to require this sort of introspection in order to do better in development. It will be a great day when this is integral to all university courses.

Realism is the nub. It demands being in touch and up to date with rapidly and unpredictably changing grass roots realities. It requires recognising and rewarding those who learn from what works and what does not, acknowledging failure, and learning and changing fast. It means being constantly alert to learning from new insights, like those to be published this month (December 2012) as *Listening for a Change* [yet to be released]. 6,000 recipients of aid were listened to, in some 20 countries. From these voices we hear strong appeals for smarter aid, and not too much too fast. We learn how bad the effects are of 'proceduralisation' with its log frames, lists, matrices and templates, closing off as they do the 'spontaneous and respectful interaction' that recipients want.

The primacy of the personal and personal relations comes powerfully. Very widely recipients would like their donors to be present and to have direct relations with them. *Time to Listen* reports that

Every story of effective aid told by aid recipients included a description of particular staff who worked in ways that developed respect and trust with aid recipients.

The implication is more donor staff, closer to the ground, with continuity, and continuous mutual learning of recipients and donors together.

This reinforces a point much wider than aid – that each one of us can make a difference, and on a daily and hourly basis. Many big changes come from many small actions of many, many people. Before Palestine was recognised in the UN as a country, 1.8 million people had signed a petition on AVAAZ, each taking perhaps less than five minutes to do so. As *Time to Listen* concludes:

'Every moment of business as usual is a lost moment for making change'

And Gandhi's much quoted 'We must become the change we wish to see in the world' is as pertinent today as ever.

So across a wide front we have more and new challenges and opportunities – in participation for development and through its wide interpretation and implications. In our globalised world, and with all the innovations to hand, we have scope as never before to make a difference. Creativity, fulfilment and fun are there waiting for expression and experience. And we can show and know them immediately in this Conference. So let us make these two days, as we can, a time to share, to learn, to change and to enjoy, so that between us and individually, we can truly make a difference. And as part of this, let us make it a good place to be, and a bloody good time to be alive.

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