



Participatory Communication in Practice: The Nexus to Conflict and Power

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Abstract

Practitioners of participatory communication commonly encounter episodes of conflict in their work with communities. The first type of conflict is among peers and members of the community which occurs when people with diverging priorities attempt to address shared problems. Conflict may persist due to inability of processes to resolve disagreements and competition. The second type of conflict is between the community and influential elites who possess powers which they wish to continue asserting in a top-down fashion to shape events and influence outcomes within the community. These experiences suggest a necessity for practitioners of participatory communication to build interdisciplinary linkages to the area of conflict management and theories of power in their continuing efforts to develop approaches which are capable of processing conflict involving communities they serve. This contribution explores the nexus between participatory communication and the closely related theories and realities posed by conflict and unevenly distributed power within communities.

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Introduction

Why Practitioners Adopt Participatory Approaches

The first practitioners of participatory communication (practitioners) began their careers working with conventional mass communication methods. They discovered and then adopted participatory processes after experiencing setbacks using top-down approaches with the communities they worked. Many of these practitioners started their work in offices far away from farms and villages, designing extension-support print material, recording radio programs, and writing agriculture stories for provincial newspapers. Many were employed by organizations and government agencies set up to encourage villagers to adopt new ways of farming to increase yields and income.

The Training and Visit (T&V) system of agricultural extension was one such initiative promoted by the World Bank (Benor et al. 1984) where a continuous series of regimented training sessions is conducted by “subject-matter specialists” about scientifically prescribed farming methods. Such training originated at the “zone” headquarters of the extension services. It was then repeated at the “district” and afterward the “subdivisional” levels before being finally taught to the village extension worker. This worker, at the end of the pipeline of specialist prescriptions, then mounted a bicycle or motorcycle to visit his or her circle of about eight farming groups. At each stop the extension worker taught the methods which he (they were mostly men) had just learned to about 10 “contact farmers.” These farmers are provided with communication and learning support materials and “inputs and supplies” – these may be seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, or tools and sometimes even lent money – so that the farmers could carry out what they have been taught.

The role of communication then was in the classic mode of “development support communication.” Communicators were there to produce media materials specified by the technical staff of the program. The work was essentially “mass” communication – to take the centrally designed messages from the “expert” few to the groups spread across a farming district. As the T&V system and other similar programs proved over time to be less effective than conceived, everyone involved scrambled to review and pin down inadequacies in their work. A fairly common complaint was that the “communication shop” was issuing boring and unclear training support material which the contact farmers either did not understand, will not use, or both.

Some communicators responded to the criticism by pretesting the media and training support materials they were working on with the intended audiences. For many, it was the first time they had travelled to the villages and farms and showed their prototype print designs, played back recorded radio programs, and screened training films to the people who comprised the readers and audiences for these material to determine scientifically if they understood the messages being mediated.

The efforts invested in pretesting did lead to the production of more effective development support materials that better served the purposes of top-down initiatives. However, it did not solve all the problems. Communicators began probing deeper during their fieldwork and sometimes found while the materials they had

produced were effective in communicating intended messages, they failed in changing people's behavior and practices. The simple answer they sometimes discovered was that targeted audiences were not interested in the issues and topics being promoted. The top-down objectives defined by the experts were not the ones the targeted "audiences" wanted to work on. Technologies and solutions were being promoted that did not meet an urgent need nor solve a priority problem of the people.

Some communicators took liberty in altering their own work-briefs, and instead of just broadcasting recommendations of the experts to the people, they also attempted to open feedback channels to the experts and subject-matter specialists in attempts to reorientate program and project objectives to match the people's needs and wants. Many of these initiatives by communicators to make available feedback from the field were not appreciated by the hierarchically more senior subject-matter specialists who found the intervention to be insolent of their "juniors" and promptly snubbed their efforts.

While this was happening, communicators made contact on their field trips with social scientists immersed in field projects aimed at doing just what they had attempted with opening feedback channels. Some of the social scientists had adopted participatory research methods (Tandon 2005) which encouraged people to take an active part in the research process and shape the directions of their work. Paulo Freire's (1970) critical thoughts on pedagogy – or more appropriately "andragogy" – would at about the same time strike a chord with some of the communicators who found resonance of their work experiences with parts of his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It proposed a new relationship between the teacher, student, and society. Freire criticized "traditional pedagogy" – which was very much the way in which development support communication engaged with target audiences – as the "banking model of education." In this model learners were approached as "empty vessels" to be filled with knowledge. He proposed that students be treated instead as co-creators of knowledge with their own contributions to what should be taught and shared. This was the new pedagogy to free the "oppressed." The early practitioners' adoption of this Freirian concept may have marked the beginnings of participatory communication.

The significance of this approach changed the focus of the work of practitioners from media materials production to the facilitation of communication and social processes for social change. The emphasis moved from the mechanics of mass communication – the printing presses and recording studios – to the people, to facilitating the expression of their ideas and group-processing these ideas to trigger collective action to solve community problems.

Such an approach was very difficult for early practitioners to reconcile with the exigencies of their organizations which had a predetermined agenda and a clearly defined mandate that often did not match the interests of the people they tried to engage with. Very few communicators working in development enjoyed the freedom of engaging with a community in a completely open-ended manner in which the people were free to address only the issues and problems that were important to them. One of the earliest groups which did enjoy this freedom was Colin Low, a filmmaker, who worked with Fred Earle of the Extension Department of Memorial

University in making a number of documentary films about the 5000 residents from 10 fishing villages on Fogo Island in Canada. The fishing folks on the island were in dire straits. Catches had dwindled to uneconomic levels, and the government was seriously mulling the options of making welfare payments to the islanders or relocating them to the mainland where they could seek other forms of employment. Low had picked the island because of three factors: (1) the residents were experiencing many social and economic problems; (2) government policy for the region was being formulated, and hence ideas and options from the people were being sought; and (3) the island was large enough to experience “inter-community communication” problems which the team could attempt to develop methods to overcome (Nemtin and Loh 1968).

What emerged from the innovative approaches and processes pioneered by the team as they filmed from 1964–1967 became known as the “Fogo Process” – often described by practitioners as the first participatory film/video method. The National Film Board of Canada which funded the work called it “The Newfoundland Project,” while others refer to it as “Fogo Island Films.” This was before portable video cameras were available and film was shot on celluloid. The participatory element did not come in the islanders handling the camera but in their close involvement in deciding what to film, in agreeing to be filmed, in stating their views on record, in watching the “rushes” (raw, unedited footages) and deciding how sequences and footages should be edited to make up a complete film, and in watching the finished film and reflecting on the issues and views it presented.

A challenge by some of the Fogo islanders that the filmmakers “would not dare to run the statements (which the islanders had made on the films) in St John’s or Ottawa” (where the provincial and national governments are based) encouraged the filmmakers to screen the films to government officials. The officials’ response was “critical but supportive,” and the filmmakers filmed one of the officials responding to the statements made on film by the fishing folk in Fogo Island and then took the reel back to the island and screened it for the islanders, thereby creating a two-way communication opportunity where people in different locations could see and hear each other’s views, decades before the advent of videoconferencing and Skype.

In the Fogo Process, people who would otherwise be treated as the “target audience” played an active part in focusing the communication medium on people, scenes, things, and issues that were important to them. The finished product was presented back to themselves and other people of their community. It served as a mirror for the community. The reflected reality of their problems helped define these problems and mobilized community to act on the issues identified. Fogo Island communities were ultimately not disbanded and relocated. They continue to thrive today.

Participatory Communication in Practice

Early practitioners of participatory communication had to be creative and developed new ways of working as there were no manuals and not many cases of tried and

tested methods for them to follow. Some of these new methods were borrowed and adapted from others working in development following participatory approaches.

Putting people of the community in the “director’s chair,” as we saw in Fogo, proved to be a sound approach to participatory communication. Community radio soon evolved (UNESCO undated). The practitioner’s main role in this case was installing the hardware – recording equipment, transmitter, and broadcast tower – finding the money to pay for electricity bills and maintenance, and training members of the community in using the equipment and managing a broadcast station. The differentiation between the broadcaster and listener blurred as people took turns in “appearing” on broadcasts and programs got recorded in different homes, workplaces, markets, and community centers. Program producers did much of their recording “on the go,” travelling to where the stories were breaking and visiting the homes of people who had news and stories to share. Many adopted the position that production values were not as important as having the people of the community – the listeners – in charge. Apart from in-depth programs on community issues, some of the more popular programs involved entertainment where different families and groups took turns in performing music or oral presentations which were often broadcasted live to save the cost of magnetic tape and the time required in postproduction. Personal and family information were also closely listened to on most community stations. The author recalls visiting a remote radio station which served communities living in an isolated valley dispersed on the slopes of two high mountains, where it sometimes took a day to hike from one side of the valley to the next. These quick and dry interjections over the air of family information ranged from calling family members to return home due to sickness or deaths to happier announcements of births and marriages. Besides serving a telegraphic service, such messaging knitted the communities closer in the sharing of sad and happy milestones of their members.

The print medium followed suit. Village wall newspapers were “published” on large bulletin boards hung in central locations such as community store, tea shop, meeting hall, or school (Practical Action 2007). People could pin stories and drawings on to the boards for all to read. An editorial committee would keep postings going in an orderly manner and, when the occasion called for it, write editorial pieces on community issues. The illiterate members of the community or the elderly with poor eyesight would get help from people present around the boards to read the postings to them.

Practitioners also introduced visualization methods into community gatherings and meetings. The most commonly adopted method involved writing answers and comments about issues raised during meetings on cards and dropping them anonymously into a heap (Salas et al. 2010). Participants would then work together to sort and group the cards according to themes and pin them on a wall in clusters. Discussions which follow tend to be more focused and productive when guided by the thematic clusters of ideas and comments visualized on the cards. As participants wrote the cards at the same time, rather than take turns at speaking, more ideas were collected, and everyone got an equal chance at contributing points to the discussion, and the risk of the articulate few dominating discussions was minimized. The other

advantage of cards was that ideas and comments were not easily identified with the people making them and therefore got sorted and discussed less emotionally, especially when issue addresses proved to be personal and divisive. The process recommends pasting the cards on large pieces of paper after a meeting to serve as a ready record of points discussed which could be conveniently displayed in follow-up meetings so that the group did not go around in circles tackling the same issues at subsequent meetings. In communities with large numbers of illiterate members, agreed symbols are drawn on to cards instead of written words.

When done effectively, visualization processes will help groups arrive at a unanimous decision on action to be taken by the community. Often, unanimity may not be the outcome of visualization in which case a short list of options and alternatives proposed by the members will be the outcome. If not all options on the short list can be acted on at once, conducting a poll among all members to pick the priority action is often the most commonly accepted way forward. Practitioners could play the role of the neutral pollster in such a case and design a more engaging process of polling rather than a simple vote for the preferred option. A municipality in the Malaysian state of Penang involved all members of the community above 10 years of age in a gender-responsive and participatory budgeting process to decide how municipal funds budgeted for their neighborhood should be spent (Shariza 2016). After a participatory consultation process which identified a short list of neighborhood facilities which could be built using municipal funds, a poll was called. Every resident above the age of 10 years was given five ballots, each ballot representing RM (Ringgit, the Malaysian currency) 100. The residents had to decide for themselves how to spend the RM 500 they held and drop the five ballots into the respective boxes for the various options. The children in the community had mobilized themselves to lobby their parents, relatives, and friends to allocate their money votes to a playground. They won convincingly and a playground has been built for the community. While the playground is the concrete result, the more profound achievement by the people is their meaningful role in deciding how public resources allocated for their benefit are used.

Practitioners make use of different combinations of methods and strategies, such as the examples mentioned above, in designing processes for the communities they work with. Field experiences of the practitioners and advice sought from members of the community and people who know the communities intimately should guide the design of processes. Practitioners should keep an open mind about their designs and be alert to the responses of members of the communities once these processes are launched and be ready to tweak and even make major changes to processes to improve them once members of the communities engage with these processes and test their acceptability and efficacy.

The unsung hero of designs and processes that do work is often the “facilitator.” This is the person who convenes the meetings and chairs them. He or she also acts as the liaison between members of the community, practitioners, and development workers who provide support to the community’s efforts. The facilitators are often overlooked because they tend to work in a low-key manner and many of them are not trained media practitioners. In the case of the Fogo Process, most scholars who have written about the experiment came from specialized media and communication

backgrounds and had researched the impact of the Fogo Process from the perspective of filmmaking. What was often overlooked or given less prominence in their analysis was the quiet work behind the scenes rendered by Fred Earle, the extension agent.

According to Susan Newhook (2009) and sociologist Robert DeWitt, who undertook sociological research on Fogo Island in the autumn of 1966, Fred Earle's arrival as the new extension field officer in 1964 had given "new hope to all those who claimed an interest in improvement. Here was the man, they felt, who could provide a well-needed link with the remote government in St. John's. It is hard to imagine any of the developments that followed Earle's appointment happening without him and his employers at the Extension Service. In the Fogo Island films, he appears to be an interested but uninvolved observer of events, but nothing could have been further from the case. Earle was no outsider: he was born on nearby Change Islands and moved to Fogo Island in his teens . . . had once worked . . . as an errand boy and later as a bookkeeper" on the island. It is very likely that Colin Low, the filmmaker, had selected Fogo Island for his experiment from a short list of several potential sites, because of the availability of Earle as a facilitator for the project.

Experienced practitioners of participatory communication have long recognized that an effective facilitator is the key element in participatory communication that is the hardest to replicate when a project proves successful in one community and it attempts to scale up or expand its processes to serve other communities. This chapter will attempt to understand what is it about good facilitators that remain elusive to upscaling and replication. The above analysis of Fogo Island suggests that facilitators must know the community as intimately as an "insider." In addition to inside knowledge and an empathy for the place and people, good facilitators must also be credible individuals who engender trust and goodwill among most, if not all, possible fractions or interest groups within a community. A facilitator who possesses these attributes enjoys a better chance of engaging a community in activities and processes launched. Just as importantly, if not more so, such a facilitator will play a critical role in helping the team from the outside understand sensitivities affecting members and groups within the community and disagreements on divisive issues. An effective facilitator is the frontline member of the project team who manages conflict when they happen and transform such conflicts into opportunities for solution and change.

Transforming Conflict and Competition

Practitioners sometimes begin their work in communities believing so deeply in the intrinsic good of participatory communication that they are sometimes caught unprepared when processes lead to conflicts among the people taking part and the mood in the community sours. An experienced facilitator is indispensable at the outbreaks of conflicts to tap the opportunity it provides to define disagreements and find ways to resolve them and move the community pass the conflicts, hopefully stronger for their occurrence.

Colin Low and his colleagues filming on Fogo Island saw an important role for conflicts. This is what they wrote in their report reflecting on the processes they innovated:

We think the intensity of discussion should be related to the effect discussion has on direct development. In other words, if, as we were doing, the purpose of the project is inter-community communication and creation of consensus, the degree of conflict then can be constructive; will be less than with other projects. A project that channels the responses into direct action can handle more. The reason for this is obvious. A small isolated community can be torn apart if its people and problems are left exposed and unresolved. The motivation to reconcile problems is greater when direct action is being considered. In a discussion the influence to reconcile conflict comes from the discussion leader. His is a difficult role, for if no conflict or tension is elicited, it usually means that little communication has gone on. The position between definition and recognition, and division, is quite precarious.

Perhaps our films could have catered to the defining of conflicting opinion, more than they did. Although we presented views supporting the adoption of longliners [large ocean-going fishing boats,] and a centralized school, and also opinions against centralization off the island and the effects of welfare, we never heard opinions counter to these. The closest we came was with the *Billy Crane Leaves His Island* (NFLD Archive 2015) reel, and it was the most successful one.

Colin Low felt that the film of fisherman Billy Crane quietly but very thoughtfully and forcefully explains why circumstances on Fogo Island had deteriorated to the extent that he had lost hope for its future and had decided to move to the mainland, as his most successful reel. Crane's repeated mention in the film of "long-liners" – larger fishing boats that could sail further from shore to richer fishing grounds – as a solution and his rejection of government "welfare" payments to islanders proved eventually to be the solution that saved the fishing industry in Fogo.

Given that conflicts are unavoidable and even "good" when effectively processed, how should facilitators and practitioners prepare themselves for their occurrences? Referencing conflict at the workplace, Madalina (2016) identified four types of conflict classified according to "who" are the people involved:

- **Interpersonal conflict** refers to a conflict between two individuals. This occurs typically due to how people are different from one another.
- **Intrapersonal conflict** occurs within an individual. The experience takes place in the person's mind. Hence, it is a type of conflict that is psychological involving the individual's thoughts, values, principles, and emotions.
- **Intragroup conflict** is a type of conflict that happens among individuals within a team. The incompatibilities and misunderstandings among these individuals lead to an intragroup conflict.
- **Intergroup conflict** takes place when a misunderstanding arises among different teams within an organization. In addition, competition also contributes to the rise of intergroup conflict.

Another way of classifying conflict is according to "what" is causing it. Jehn and Mannix (2001) proposed that conflict in work groups may be categorized into three types:

- **Relationship conflict** where there is an awareness of interpersonal incompatibilities involving personal issues such as dislike among group members and feelings such as annoyance, frustration, and irritation.

- **Task conflict** is an awareness of differences in viewpoints and opinions pertaining to the group's task which may coincide with animated discussions and personal excitement but, by definition, are void of intense interpersonal negative emotions that are more commonly associated with relationship conflict.
- **Process conflict** is where controversies arise about aspects of how a task is accomplished, specifically regarding work and how resources are shared – such as who should do what or how much should one receive to get the job done.

A third and potentially more disruptive form of conflict comes from the much appreciated “empowering” nature of participation. When the processes adopted by the people begin to take effect, a couple of things happen – the first may be that participants have been motivated to set aside apathy about an immediate need and begin to work together on addressing that need. The other possibility is that people want to tackle root causes of their problems so as to regain control of their lives and do things their way rather than listen to powerful elites who hitherto have led the community in a top-down manner. Participation is therefore empowering because people are reclaiming power to shape their own lives. Conflict may then follow as previously influential elites attempt to resist and retain the power the people are cooperating toward seizing back. Experienced facilitators are sensitive to preexisting power distributions and of the elites who hold power over the community they are working with. Most facilitators will prefer not to threaten existing arrangements until such time the community is ready to negotiate for new power-sharing arrangements to be made.

Just as many practitioners of participatory communication are not trained in processing conflict, many are also not familiar with the concept of power and how it is wielded.

Issues of Power in the Practice of Participatory Communication

Power has been much studied by both civilians and the military because it rests at the core of administering and protecting communities, kingdoms, and nation-states. Civilians study power as it is the grand prize in politics, business, and religion. The military was the earliest to master power and has been projecting and wielding it over the past millenniums. Practitioners of participatory communication should study power to become sensitive to the potentials of processes as well as the unpredictable dynamics we expose members of the community to when participatory processes begin to adjust power distribution within the community.

Practitioners from a media background have always worked against a backdrop of power issues. In fact, the news media has been intimate enough with power to be referred to as the “Fourth Estate” across the landscape of power found in a nation-state. The First Estate in the realm of a kingdom is the clergy. The Second comprises the nobility and the Third is made up of the people or commoners, hence “The Commons” in the British Parliament, where the “Lords Spiritual” make up the First Estate and the “Lords Temporal” form the Second. It is useful for facilitators and practitioners to keep these “four estates” in mind when engaging with a community.

One of the earliest authors on power was Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli, a famous writer of the Renaissance period who was variously a humanist, diplomat, politician, historian, and philosopher. His book *The Prince* (translated from Italian) (Machiavelli 1532) published 5 years after his death is the oldest source on thinking about power – not all of it flattering. His name spawned the term “Machiavellian” that refers to the ruthless use of cunning and duplicity in statecraft to achieve one’s goals, revealing the bare-knuckle approaches of sixteenth-century, feudal Europe which many practitioners will tell you are still very much the current approaches in many places where they work. “Machiavellianism” has also become a term personality psychologists use to describe a person who is unemotional, able to detach himself/herself from conventional morality so as to deceive and manipulate others.

A vast literature on power has been published in the six centuries after Machiavelli’s book. Michel Foucault (2001) who wrote extensively on the subject from 1954 to 1984 pointed out the limited power of the Fourth Estate. He wrote about the necessity to distinguish power relations from “relationships of communication that transmit information by means of a language, a system of signs, or any symbolic medium. No doubt, communicating is always a certain way of acting upon another person or persons. But the production and circulation of elements of meaning can have as their objective or as their consequence certain results in the realm of power; the latter are not simply an aspect of the former.” In other words communication is a necessary but not a core element of power. To Foucault power refers to relations between individuals or between groups where certain persons are able to exercise influence over others. The media is a mechanism in this exercise.

John French’s and Bertram Raven’s chapter on “The Bases of Power” (French and Raven 1959) is a useful reading to grasp the types of power that the community need to deal with when interacting with elites who wield it. There are five bases or fundamental elements of power:

- **Reward power:** the ability of a person or social agent to reward another person. For example, agricultural-extension officers who can hand out to farmers free seeds and fertilizer.
- **Coercive power:** similar to reward power but the social agent also possesses the ability to manipulate conditions to obtain the rewards. For example, a minister in the government who can approve the above farming subsidies as well as set new policies to increase such subsidies or waive regulations which disallow them.
- **Legitimate power:** created by the beliefs and values of a group which accord individuals the legitimate right to influence members of the group who in turn have an obligation to accept this influence. For example, a traditional ruler, or a religious leader, who enjoys the faithful support of either a community that reveres the royal institution or a pious community that embraces a set of religious doctrines.
- **Referent power:** an attractive person who has power over others because they in turn may derive prestige from being closely associated with this attractive person. A celebrity, such as a famous actress, wields such power. The greater the attractive attributes of this actress, the greater is her public identification, and consequently the greater the referent power that she possesses and wields. This is

the reason why development agencies appoint popular celebrities as “ambassadors” of the causes they promote.

- **Expert power:** people with more knowledge and more information have power over others who don’t have the knowledge or information. The strong influence doctors exert over their patients who are ill is a clear example of such power. External development “experts,” participatory communication practitioners included, may also possess such power.

Practitioners when faced with challenges posed by the strong influence that the powerful have over a community that resists change are often puzzled by such apparent apathy. Gaventa (1980) suggests that such powerlessness or “quiescence” or motionlessness is due to the mechanisms of power being wielded to curb independent decision-making by the people. He established three “dimensions” within such mechanisms:

- **First dimension:** the powerful is usually the one who always prevail in bargaining over the resolution of key issues – the community or group also frequently surrenders decision-making to this powerful person.
- **Second dimension:** the reason why people surrender their independence in making decisions is because the powerful individual is able to mobilize bias and support through various means including the use of force, sanctions, manipulation, and invocation of existing biases.
- **Third dimension:** the way the powerful individual influences, shapes, and determines issues includes his/her mobilization of communication and information. The Fourth Estate hard at work for the Lords Temporal instead of the commoners, for example! In the same way, this role can be reversed – participatory communication processes can be adopted by the people to mute such influence, to clarify issues, and to shape solutions that better serve the community’s interests.

Empowering the People

Practitioners often find that one of the unspoken, first goals of a participatory communication brief is to design processes and messages that enable people to discover that they are capable of making independent efforts to improve their lives. This may in turn motivate the people to work together to reclaim power and opportunities that they had surrendered to others so as to improve their lives and environment, in short to “empower” the people.

“Empowerment” interestingly emerged as a professional term in the 1980 presidential address by Julian Rappaport to the American Psychological Association where he was referring to the work of psychologists and the expert power they held over patients. He explained to his colleagues: “By empowerment I mean our aim should be to enhance the possibilities for people to control their own lives.” Two decades would pass before his colleague Marc Zimmerman (2000) would propose the empowerment theory in a handbook on community psychology edited by

Rappaport himself. The theory calls for a “value orientation” which it succinctly describes:

An empowerment orientation also suggests that community participants have an active role in the change process, not only for implementing a project, but also in setting the agenda. The professional works hard to include members of a setting neighbourhood, or organization so they have a central role in the process. Participants can help identify measurement issues and help collect assessment and evaluation data, but the results are also shared. Feeding back information to the community and helping to use it for policy decisions is a primary goal. An empowerment approach to evaluation focuses as much attention on how goals are achieved as on outcomes.

The theory emphasizes empowerment as context and population specific. Empowerment “takes on different forms for different people in different contexts. A distinction between processes and outcomes is critical.” Empowering processes attempt to establish control, secure needed resources and critically understand one’s environment. Empowered outcomes refer to how these processes were implemented and their impact; not only in material terms but more importantly at the social or community level. Outcomes are determined through studying consequences of the people’s attempts to gain more control of how their lives are lived within their community. In carrying out such study each level of analysis may have to be undertaken separately but it is crucial that the people undertaking the analyses recognize that all these different levels are inherently connected to each other. Such study has to determine how individuals, organizations, and community empowerment are mutually interdependent and that they are all at once a cause and a consequent of each other. “Efforts to understand empowering processes and outcomes are not complete unless multiple levels of analysis are studied and integrated.”

The preceding discussion of how conflict is an inevitable dynamic within participatory processes and its connection to the bases of power is an extremely brief one. It barely skims the surfaces of the disciplines involved and serves to introduce practitioners to these areas for further study and interdisciplinary research by practitioners and their colleagues who work on these issues. Elisheva Sadan (2004) who teaches social work researched the rather wide field of power and concluded that the literature on it diverges. She found that the divergence made it difficult even for us to define power. She proceeded to develop a theory of empowerment in the “shadow” of those disagreements. Her theory is shared here because it had been proposed in the context of community development that most practitioners of participatory communication do their work. Her starting point echoed that of the psychologists – the process of empowerment means a transition by people “from a state of powerlessness to a state of more control over one’s life, fate, and environment.” She suggests that the process is aimed at achieving three conditions:

- Changing feelings and capacities of individuals
- Changing the life of groups and communities
- Changing the professionals (such as practitioners of participatory communication who are involved in projects aimed at bringing about social change) as they learn from their collaboration with people and improve upon their skills in further practice within communities

It is an interesting theory that situates the outsiders – development workers and practitioners – within the process. She sees the work of outside professionals as “methodical intervention aimed at encouraging processes of individual and community empowerment.” Her perspective is encouraging to practitioners who are often reminded by critics who hold the view that true empowerment cannot come from the outside. Their argument is that facilitators and professionals are creating pseudo-empowerment at best or introducing new kinds of dependency among the people they work with if the outsiders became overly active in the processes they are facilitating within communities.

The starting point, for Sadan, is the empowerment of the individual. It can happen in “an immense variety of circumstances and conditions” quite independently of the presence of outside facilitators or the empowerment of the groups that the individual is a part of. However, individual empowerment carries greater value when it occurs as a result of the individual’s participation in social change processes and activities that are connected to groups and organizations as both the individual and groups derive “special value” from this communal experience.

Next is empowerment of a community which involves organizing and creating a community which shares a “common critical characteristic,” for example, suffering from social stigmas and discrimination – this may range from small communities of people living with HIV to population-wide groups such as women who are segregated by glass ceilings within their communities. Sadan says such community organizing and building help strengthen the ability of people to “control its relevant environment better and to influence its future. . . develop a sense of responsibility, commitment, and ability to care for collective survival, as well as skills in problem solving, and political efficacy to influence changes in environments relevant to their quality of life.”

Among the many cases of community empowerment, some of the most effective and inspiring have been led by women who rally their own strength to improve their lives and conditions. It was perhaps Caroline Moser’s (1993) book on gender planning and development that made the term empowerment familiar to many professionals working in development. “The Empowerment Approach” proposed by Moser, while acknowledging inequalities between men and women and the subordination of women in the family, questions assumptions between “the interrelationship between power and development.” The approach identified power “less in terms of domination over others. . . and more in terms of the capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength.” It was an approach which did not frame power as a zero-sum equation – the power gained by women did not mean a corresponding loss by the men. It was an approach with a conflict-transforming ethos embedded within. The other notable conflict-transforming feature of this approach is how it “utilizes practical gender needs as the basis on which to build a secure support base, and a means through which strategic needs may be reached.” Moser’s differentiation of these two gender needs was an elaboration of Maxine Molyneux’s (1985) conceptualization of the practical and strategic interests of women in the following manner:

- **Strategic interests** are the “real” interests identified logically via analysis of the root causes of problems faced by the people – in the case of women, their subordination and discrimination – and from the visualization and articulation of a happier and more acceptable way of living and working for the hitherto disempowered people.
- **Practical interests** are about immediate needs which even if met do not help to advance the people’s strategic interests. In other words practical interests don’t help to overcome root causes of problems, for example, government handouts to poor farmers which while meeting the immediate practical needs of the farmers to put food on the table fail to overcome the conditions causing them to be poor.

The Approach to Practicing Participatory Communication

Where to Start?

Moser’s and Molyneux’s advice is to begin with practical issues even though the overriding imperative in development is often to tackle root causes. Beginning directly with root causes, particularly if you are new in practice, is designing difficulties – and even failure – into your project. New practitioners should not only consider practical issues but also the less complex practical issues. For example, work initially on water shortage for farming in a small neighborhood rather than attempting to reform the entire irrigation system of a district. Starting with little practical things allows everyone to get acquainted, develop robust processes, and build trust among those participating. Trust is essential for sustaining members of a group through difficulties they will face when tackling the bigger issues. Keep people who hold reward, coercive, and legitimate powers informed. Involve them in a support role if their involvement does not entail risks of curtailing what is planned. Beginning with small issues is unlikely to threaten them into undermining your work.

Begin with Individuals

The urge is to work with groups given that participatory communication is the process. However, groups are only as vibrant as the individuals who form them.

Paulo Freire (2007) in his influential book about critical pedagogy – *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* – highlighted the relationship of nonparticipation to nonconsciousness of deprived groups trapped in highly unequal power relationships. The people in such groups live in “closed societies” that renders them powerless and highly dependent upon the powerful. Their isolation paralyzes people from initiating independent action. They are unable to reflect on their actions and understand outcomes of their quiescence. Freire’s solution to these two conditions is “conscientization” – from the Portuguese term *conscientização* or consciousness-raising (Freire Institute undated). The concept of conscientization is often mentioned by facilitators as one of the processes that help to “empower” passive individuals and groups. This is best achieved by first focusing on the needs of individuals participating in group activities.

A good way to start is with a small group of about half a dozen to a dozen people in a community who show an interest of working with the participatory communication team. This may take the form of a nonformal education activity which will be the least threatening to everyone within and outside the community. This small group can together select a topic or theme that they all share an interest in. This could be learning to read and write or how to get online and do e-commerce. The manner in which the activities are conducted is probably more important than the topics selected. Adopt participatory learning approaches where the participants play an active role in planning the program which could include fun, social items if the participants opt to do so. The facilitator is the resource person who responds to the queries posed by individuals.

The aim is twofold to Rowlands (1997):

- Developing a sense of self, individual confidence, and capacity and undoing the effects of internalized oppression
- Developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of relationships and decisions made with others whom an individual works with or relates to

The “internalized oppression” that needs undoing is succinctly described in a case study (Chan 1997) of young women recruited from villages to work on the high-pressured assembly lines of high-tech factories in an export-processing zone: “Daily experiences of emotional subordination generate feelings of shame, guilt, inadequacy, self-doubt and inferiority. The cumulative effect of these experiences is to ingrain a deep sense of helplessness, fear, ineptitude and incapacity. Minds become blank and dulled over time . . . various approaches have been experimented with, to facilitate the healing and recovery. . . Story-telling-sharing has been used extensively and effectively as a tool for consciousness-raising and mobilization. . .” This overcoming of internalized oppression is at the same time also the resolution of intrapersonal conflict discussed previously.

Iterate with a Community

Storytelling and sharing is also an effective process for groups. Stories told or presented by actors may be used to discover causes and define issues; these are the “stories without a beginning” where the actors or storyteller presents a story which mirrors the current plight of the group or community. After the presentation the facilitator invites the audience to suggest reasons for the problems faced by the characters in the short play. In “stories without the middle,” actors present the recent past of the community followed by a portrayal of its preferred future. The audience is then invited to essentially discuss what happened in the present that helped the community overcome the past and achieve its future. The third variation is “stories without the end” where the past and present are acted out and then the audience visualizes how it all ends up. These “stories withouts” process is potentially non-threatening and conflict-managing if the performances, while mirroring the situation of the community, are presented as entertaining street theater about an imaginary

place and people so that members of the community in the audience may be free to analyze causes, make criticism of their current plight, and visualize their desired future, as if they were addressing it to the supposedly entertaining play which serves as a proxy punching bag. If the actors or storyteller are/is skilled and experienced in the process, the sessions can end with the missing part of the stories presented spontaneously based on the story line which emerged in the discussions. The process can make a profound impact on the actors if they happen to be members of the community itself. The preparatory processes involving scripting of the stories, rehearsing the lines, and presenting it before the community can leave deep conscientizing and empowering impressions on those actively involved.

Participatory communication teams may engage with a group or community directly, without the prior step of conscientization of individuals within the group, if they are able to engage with organized communities, such as those on Fogo Island, who have already established a working relationship with development agencies that share similar interests and objectives of the participatory communication team. In other communities, individual-focused programs such as the ones described above may naturally lead to the formation of groups. For example, individuals learning together how to start an e-commerce business may decide it is advantageous to group together and run a community website and shared order-fulfillment facilities to enjoy some benefits of scale and at the same time take advantage of the possibilities of cross-selling to each other's customers. Efforts which began with "training" the individuals can now progress to facilitating the individuals consulting with each other and exploring how they can work together to tap synergies and powers offered by collaborating within a group.

In the past practitioners had thought of communities as groups of individuals who live and work in locations close enough for them to share the same problems and environment. Their proximity gave them the opportunity to meet face-to-face to share their problems and work together on possible solutions. However, with the advent of the Internet, online communities comprising people who live in locations distant from each other have been formed. They are also known as "virtual" or online communities. They meet remotely via email threads, chat groups, or gaming sites, and these exchanges can be either "public" (where anyone can chip in) or "private" where a participant needs to be preregistered. The remote and virtual nature of these online gatherings limits what these communities can do to address local development issues. Online communities have proven to be very effective in mobilizing support and conducting advocacy about issues at both the national and international levels. Such communities have also been effective in raising funds and asserting political support for disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups trapped within harsh regimes.

Communities of neighbors who live in the same village or neighborhood also frequently make use of online networking facilities to keep in touch with each other. This fusion of actual and virtual networking processes creates some of the most powerful linkages for keeping a community informed, organized, and mobilized for coordinated action. The advent of web-based social media has offered practitioners with a low-cost but highly potent channels for participatory communication.

In communities where Internet access is affordable and universal among all members of the group, set up a chat facility or a simple group email account where members can keep everyone in the group updated on what has been done, and is being done, by individuals on furthering the group's work plan. The success or failure of the individuals and subgroups can be shared. The facilitator can take the lead in reflecting on the action taken and encourage everyone to share their analysis on why efforts worked or failed and to suggest the next course of action. This process is what Freire described as "praxis" – people acting together to address issues and afterward reflecting on what they had done (Freire Institute [undated](#)). Such action and reflection, which is usually followed up by further action and reflection, helps members of the group to gain deeper understanding of their lives. It also strengthens senses of affinity and confidence among members of the group to mount increasingly complex action which addresses the bigger challenges or strategic interests of the community.

The aim here is to discover the attributes of the collective. To learn that individuals working together will make more extensive impact than each could have achieved on their own. This includes appreciating the efficacy of collective action based on cooperation rather than competition (Rowlands [1997](#)).

Everyone Is Unique

Facilitators should always remind themselves that all individuals are unique. When they get together and form groups, these individuals also make their communities unique. As such the practice of participatory communication is rarely always done according to the same methods and designs and at the same pace. Always get the individuals and groups involved in deciding what to do next and how to get it done. In this way their unique attributes and considerations will drive their unique processes forward at a pace and level of risk they are comfortable with.

Participation Costs Valuable Time

Practitioners and outside development workers often do not realize that members of a community sometimes decide not to participate in an initiative because they cannot afford the time to do so. Members of the project and participatory communication teams are often paid a salary to do their work; they assume that the people in the community will be happy to participate in activities they initiate because it aims to benefit the people.

However, time is more precious to people in a community than what outsiders can sometimes sense. People in villages often quietly work longer days than people in "9-to-5 jobs." Some of the work may be done at home – men busying with postharvest processing of crops they have grown, women sewing and weaving, and children often taking small animals out to graze after school. Find out how much time people can spare for activities and what times of the day, week, and year are most convenient for them. Prepare the project team to work according to the convenience of the people rather than your own "office hours."

A fair way of compensating the participants in project activities is to host a simple meal before or after a gathering or work session. The meal also offers members time

to socialize and bond. Allow parents to bring their children with them – many mothers have no one at home to look after their youngest children and therefore may choose not to leave them at home alone and uncared for. Make arrangements for a member of the team to plan activities for the children so that their parents may focus on project activities.

Value Local Contributions and Risk-Taking

Practitioners need to be mindful that seemingly modest contributions by the community may be more significant than they appear to the better-resourced project team. Villagers who rarely treat themselves to snacks and hot beverages are demonstrating generosity when they serve such snacks and drinks at gatherings. They probably had to make use of laboriously gathered fuel to boil water and contribute items from their family's sometimes sparse pantry to make the snacks.

Subsistence farmers who agree to take part in trial planting of a new seed are taking a huge risk on behalf of their families who will face food shortages for a long time if the trials prove unsuccessful. For the same reason, allow the people to do their own risk assessment when opting for a solution that makes use of unproven solutions. This is where the strength of the group and participation may be demonstrated and learned. The community may opt to share risks and carry out the field trials on a shared plot and apportion the cost of failure or taste the harvest of a successful crop. Success is not measured by how many farmers and plots get planted with the new seeds but by how risks are appraised in a participatory way and how the risks of trials are shared.

Be Prepared to Transform Conflict into Praxis

Make sure everyone in the project team is trained to recognize conflict and how to respond when it occurs. A useful initial step when convening a group for the first time is to develop with the help of all members the ground rules for working together, including how to process differences of opinion and approaches. Disagreements need to be recognized from the start as a normal occurrence in group participatory efforts. It should also be agreed that everyone will work on such differences in an unemotional way. At the same time, it is useful to introduce Friere's concept of "praxis" which values group efforts at solving disagreements and that talking and working through a disagreement is a process of strengthening the community. Give quality time to solving all disagreements and problems. A good device to establish right from the beginning is a section of the wall where the group meets as an "issue park." When the group meets an impasse, summarize the issue on a card or a piece of paper, and post it on the wall, and invite everyone to help find a solution by posting their ideas for the solution on cards under the issue parked. Then move on to other issues, and give members time to reflect and form ideas about how to resolve the parked issue. The facilitator should use her/his good judgment to chat about the issue informally with the members most affected by the parked issue and explore acceptable solutions. Consult members informally for their readiness to return to the parked issue before facilitating another group discussion about it.

When a commonly accepted solution is found, implement it carefully following the way the group has worked out the solution. After the solution has been implemented and its efficacy proven (or not), give the group time to appraise the results; make sure everyone has their emotions in check before the group is invited to reflect on the issue. Recognize the achievement of the group in resolving the disagreement and developing a solution for it. Celebrate the advancement of the group if members choose to do so. Acknowledge the contributions and graces of members who made it possible.

Opt to leave deeply divisive issues in “long-term parking mode” if members of the community and the facilitator sense the group is not ready to tackle them productively. Work on other practical issues first.

Listen for Silences and Watch Body Language

Most facilitators find a silent group one of the hardest to work with. This is common in newly formed groups where members need time to get comfortable with each other and unfamiliar processes introduced by the facilitator. Starting with practical issues and working on “simple” problems that don’t involve tricky power considerations will help members develop confidence in processes and each other.

More challenging silences will occur when the group progresses to issues that touch on strategic considerations. One of the reasons may be cultural. Keeping quiet, not responding or reacting, is often considered the polite thing to do when confronted with a delicate issue that one does not wish to deal with as it may provoke or embarrass others. There are deep meanings in silences. A facilitator has to be culturally sensitive to decipher such meanings.

A facilitator may also read what the silent participants are saying via their body language. This “includes facial expressions, eye contact, voice modulation, posture and gestures, attire, appearance, handshake, space, timing, behavior and smile” (Sharma 2011). Body language is complex and requires a comprehensive understanding of the cultural norms of the “speaker.” For example, in many Asian communities, maintaining constant eye contact is impolite and under some circumstances may be decoded as being hostile, while in most Western cultures, avoiding eye contact may be considered impolite or suggest the telling of a lie or hiding a truth.

Understanding body or nonverbal language can help facilitators and practitioners better appreciate the emotional elements of what is being said. This enables the facilitator to determine the emotional subtext being transmitted along with the spoken words.

Practitioners to Learn and Share with Community Lessons Learned

Facilitators usually adopt quick self-tabulating methods of evaluation which routinely wraps up an activity. This maybe a simple “mood-meter” where participants paste colored sticky dots under emoji symbols sketched on a piece of flip-chart paper. The paper is usually hung on a board that faces away from the group so that participants can paste their dots anonymously. Once everyone has pasted their dots, the board is turned around, and the mood of the group is immediately apparent from this self-visualizing straw poll.

The facilitator and practitioners present may then do a quick reflection of what she/he has learned from the group during the activity that just concluded. The members of the group may then share their reflections and at the same time suggest how future activities may be tweaked to make them better. The process can be alternated with members of the group taking the lead in reflection before the facilitator and practitioners. This will be in line with the action-reflection process promoted by Friere.

Plan for Gradual Withdrawal of the Outsiders and Handover to the Community

Members of the group and community should be encouraged to play an increasingly central role in planning and facilitating activities. Correspondingly, outside facilitators and practitioners should scale back their roles but remain present at activities. When the time is right – which may be weeks or years – depending on the people, the issues, and the location, the outside team could ask the community for help in planning for the withdrawal of the outsiders and the handover of project management to the community. This may be a gradual process with a long-term agreement that the people can contact the outsiders for “tech support” especially in projects that involve new technologies or outside government and development agencies whenever that is required.

The outside project team may also offer to stay in touch with the communities via social media spaces set up for the project or even via remote participation such as a Skype hookup if the community has affordable Internet access.

Community Sharing Experiences with Other Communities and Developing Ways of Upscaling

An element of the above withdrawal and handover plan may include participation of members of the community with the outside team in similar projects involving other communities. A significant limitation of participatory communication initiatives has always been the difficulties of “scaling up” approaches which have been found to work. Part of this limitation stems from the people-embodied nature of participatory methods and approaches which require the training of members of the community as well as the project team itself. Given the usually limited number of practitioners of participatory communication teams, they can reach only a limited number of communities during their deployment in the field.

The ultimate solution may reside in the pure spirit of participation and empowerment where people in the community expand and extend processes among themselves. In this way they will make the processes better match goals they want to achieve and nurture cultures and values they appreciate intimately.

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