

The Participatory Approach: Illustrations from Experience

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[Editor's note: Douglas Fraiser is one of the plenary speakers at this year's ECHO Asia Agriculture and Community Development Conference held in Chiang Mai from 1-4 of October. Dr. Fraiser is a Senior Anthropology Consultant for SIL International. He lives in Thailand, where he serves as Anthropology Coordinator for SIL's Mainland Southeast Asia Group and teaches Cultural Anthropology at Payap University. He has previously worked in SIL's Malaysia Branch and Philippines Branch. Doug holds a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Ecology (concentration: Anthropology) from the University of Florida, an MS in Agronomy from the University of Florida, and a BS in Agronomy from Texas A&M University.]

Introduction

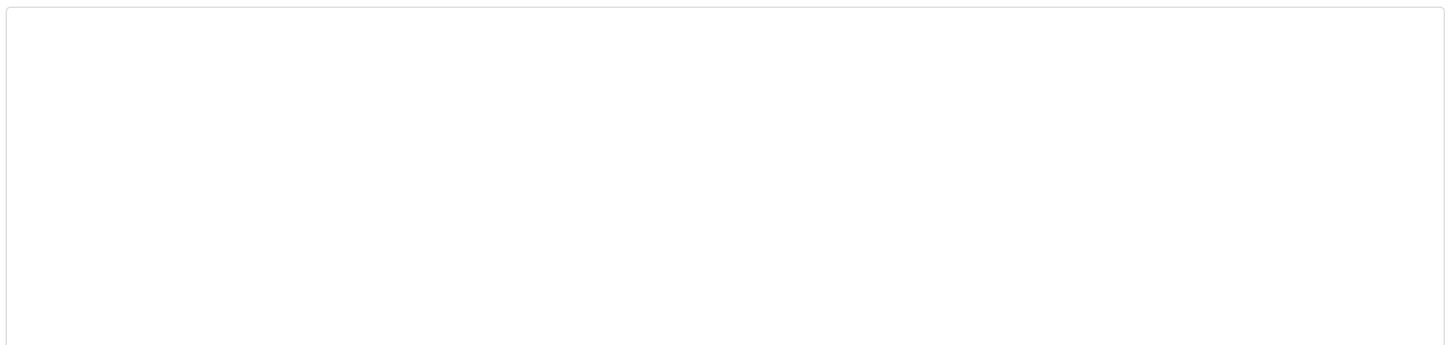
"Participatory methods" in community development initially emerged in the 1970s, and interest in their use has continued to increase among practitioners, especially in recent years.¹ Many practitioners agree that this growing acceptance is a good thing, as it has made us pay attention to the ways we engage with the communities we want to help. However, I would invite us to look beyond the methods to consider what I will call the "participatory approach" – the philosophy, goals, and assumptions that enable us to work in genuine participation with communities.

The participatory approach is not so much a matter of methods as a mindset: listening to and respecting the people of the community; encouraging them in attaining their goals; providing training, mentoring, and help, but not taking over the process. PRA, PLA, ABCD, GRAAP, AI,² and a host of other abbreviations are methods for following the participatory approach – but, they are merely tools. Consider a sculptor or woodcarver. He needs command of his tools, but he is much more than a technician. An artist of any type must work with the characteristics of his medium, rather than against them. A woodcarver looks at the grain and shape of the raw piece of wood he'll use. He considers how easily it cuts and splits, whether it's a soft or hard wood, and whether it should be oiled or waxed or varnished or left unfinished. That's what an artist does when working with an inanimate medium – it's even more complicated when he works with something that is alive! The maker of a bonsai has to consider how the tree he chooses grows. And the trainer of a thoroughbred race horse has to understand how a given horse runs – and even more, how it thinks. When we in the area of community development work with people, and with groups of people, we face an even greater level of complexity! A change agent cannot go in with a fixed plan of what he wants the community to become. He must work with the community, acknowledging that they are the ones who will live with the consequences of whatever changes occur, and that they are therefore the rightful owners of the community.

At the same time, a change agent can have a legitimate role in helping a community achieve positive change. While members of the community know a tremendous amount about themselves and their situation that outsiders do not, outsiders may have knowledge and skills that the community wants to acquire or use for their own betterment. The "trick" is to develop a relationship of mutual respect. Consider teachers. A teacher can ignore a student's interests, natural abilities, and natural inclinations in learning style, convinced that he knows what is best for the student. Or a teacher can work with students, helping them learn according to their interests and natural bents while accepting that he knows things that they want to know and be able to do. Like the artist and the teacher, a successful change agent works with the community.

An Example from Experience

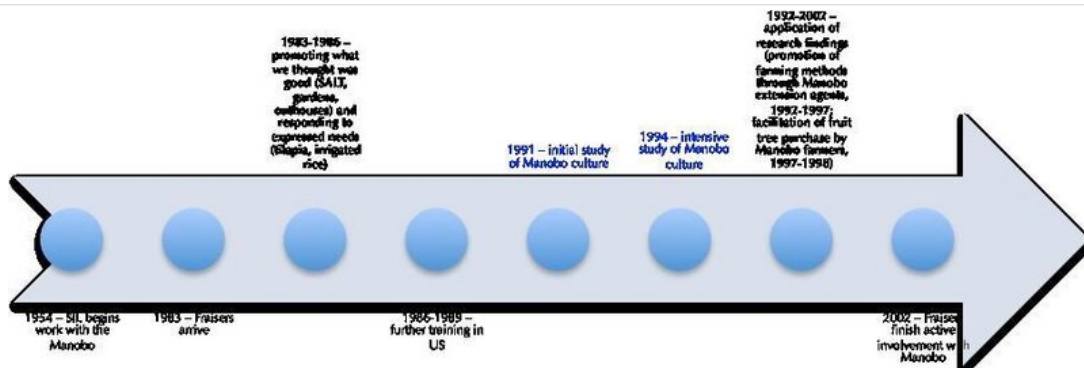
So how does the participatory approach work when dealing with groups – with communities? I'd like to illustrate this from my experience in working for over 19 years with the Cotabato Manobo³ people of the P h i l i p p i n e s (Figure 1).





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Figure 1. Manobo's location in the Philippines



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Figure 2. Timeline of the Fraisers' work in the Philippines

Phase 1: Following Our Own Best Ideas

SIL began work with the Manobo in 1954, focusing primarily on linguistics, translation, and literacy. By the time my wife, Meg, and I began working with the Manobo in 1983, their long involvement with translation and literacy had resulted in a growing embrace of Christianity and a significant population of adult readers. Our focus was on “community development” – i.e., helping communities work together for mutual benefit in all areas of life: spiritual, economic, physical, and political (and in other areas overlooked in this definition). We began our work among the Manobo by teaching techniques

others had said were helpful in meeting the needs we'd observed. We knew that the Manobo practiced swidden agriculture, a sustainable and ecologically responsible way of farming (Sanchez 1976:379), but were facing increasing pressure to take up sedentary agriculture to keep from losing their land to settlers from other parts of the Philippines. As a result, they needed to develop new methods of farming suitable for the steep hills where they lived, and new health practices suitable for permanent communities. So, we taught methods that dealt with their new needs. One of those was Sloping Agricultural Land Technology (SALT), a

method of farming in which nitrogen-fixing trees⁴ are planted in tight rows along the contours, allowing space between the rows to plant short-term crops such as maize, beans, cassava, and peanuts.⁵ The tree leaves are used as fertilizer, while the tight rows of trees prevent soil erosion. The approach had been proven productive on steep land elsewhere in the Philippines. Another technique was gardening, to supplement the vegetables they previously gathered from their swidden plots, but which were now increasingly far away from their homes as more settlers took over the land near their villages. Lastly, Meg, along with Leonida Guil-an Apang and Melita Bawaan from the Translators Association of the Philippines, also promoted the construction and use of outhouses to prevent diseases spread by contact with human excrement. (Transmission of such diseases was an increasing problem, as people were now living in villages rather than in isolated households.) All of these techniques met needs which were evident to both the Manobo and to us outsiders, but in retrospect, they were not the most urgent needs. Yet, while our efforts did not “scratch where the people really itched,” they did help to establish our competency and our concern for the Manobo. This is a legitimate – and usually necessary – phase in a change agent’s work in a community. People need to see that you care about them and that you are capable in some area they are interested in, or they will not think it is worth talking with you about their concerns. In our case, our investment in areas that were genuine needs but not top priorities laid the foundation for moving on to the next stage of involvement.

Phase 2: Responding to Expressed Needs

After working with the Manobo for several months, one Manobo came to ask for help learning how to raise tilapia.⁶ There was no training in tilapia production available in the area, and all of the available literature was written in English, which the Manobo had not had the opportunity to learn. So, we gathered information on growing tilapia, chose a method that was suitable to the Manobo’s situation,⁷ and taught the method to those who were interested. Several months later, people from that same man’s village asked for help in starting production of irrigated rice.⁸



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(/resources/0b14dde4-ee2f-4445-a68b-9aab498314ad)



(/resources/87c4356a-f361-413d-b8d5-a3598e23d6c4)From top to bottom: (1) Households were once isolated, and villages small, (2) Low population density made shifting cultivation practical and sustainable, (3) The influx of settlers has forced the Manobo to adopt sedentary farming.



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We were now responding to felt needs, but the adoption rates were disappointingly low. We followed the well-proven community development doctrine that “projects should be owned and operated by the community.” However, every community-owned project ended up with one or two people doing all the work while everyone else enjoyed the benefits. A few people adopted the practices and used them in small ways on their own farms, but it seemed as though our efforts had little impact. We realized that even though we valued working with the people and wanted to work with their “cultural grain,”⁹ we lacked the ability to see what that grain was.



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Phase 3: Working with the Grain

We left the Manobo for three years (1986- 1989) for further education. During that time, we started the process of learning how to “see the cultural grain” by taking a course in cultural anthropology. Upon returning to the Philippines, the Manobo church association asked us to help the Manobo throughout their territory learn new agricultural techniques. This time, before launching a new effort, we took a year to investigate the culture.¹⁰ We found that although the Manobo frequently work together, ownership – which includes exercising control over what people plant or build or buy – is highly individualistic. There was no sustained centralization anywhere in the culture.¹¹ We realized that any effort to teach new agricultural techniques would have to take that into account.



At my request, the association’s leaders chose several men whom I trained as extension agents; they also identified fish ponds and irrigated rice as the most important techniques to promote. Working together, the extension agents and I produced training materials written in Manobo, which they then used to teach the new techniques to others in their villages. We decided to use a decentralized approach, with no supervisory hierarchy and no local or outside funding.¹² This time, by working with the “cultural grain,” irrigated rice production spread to eight villages within four years, while fishponds spread to 15 villages within seven years.

Phase 4: Investigating Together

(/resources/acf7712f-2a6b-4991-aaf1-

bcc6da67ccbe)From top to bottom: (1) Farms were now far from the village, and wild greens harder to find, so Meg, Nida, and Mel taught gardening to a group of women. (2) Upland rice was the Manobo's traditional staple, (3) The Manobo are adopting irrigated rice

While we were happy to see that the Manobo were benefitting from some helpful techniques, we were disappointed that the techniques were still being used by a relatively small portion of the population, despite the fact that these were techniques for which the Manobo had explicitly asked help in learning. Discussions with the Manobo extension agents showed us that overly hilly topography made fishponds and irrigated rice impractical in many places. SALT substantially cut erosion and boosted yields, but the cost of tree seed was prohibitive on the Manobo's income. It became apparent that other approaches were needed. So, along with the extension agents, I visited the villages where they lived and worked to ask the communities what

activities they thought were both promising and realistic. We found that, in each village, people were interested in growing fruit trees. I was initially skeptical – while fruit is profitable in the Philippines, most of the Manobo lived far from roads, and the roads were frequently impassable. However, the farmers were certain they could transport their fruit to the road (and, if need be, all the way to market) using animals, or on their own backs. The extension agents and I looked for an economical source of fruit tree seedlings, and eventually found we could obtain them at a reasonable price through the municipal agriculture offices. The purchase was done as a group, but each farmer bought and paid for what he decided he wanted on his own land. The first year, 15 farmers from eight villages bought 210 trees.¹³ The second year, 184 farmers in 18 villages bought 1,499 trees.¹⁴ Many of the trees died due to a severe drought, but some survived. When I last visited the Manobo in 2006, several farmers were deriving income from their fruit trees. They expressed that they were encouraged that they had been able to move into a more financially productive form of agriculture. Had I followed my own perceptions, rather than allowing the community to decide what they wanted to put their efforts into, the fruit trees would never have been planted.

Summing Up History

Throughout the process of working with the Manobo, we kept seeking ways for them to be more fully involved in shaping their community for the better. At the beginning, we could only teach what seemed of use to us. This did relatively little to “scratch where they itched,” but it established our competency and concern, and led to the Manobo asking for help in learning new techniques they were genuinely interested in. That led to a second stage of work – pursuing goals that some of the people considered to be significant, but that were limited in how widely they could be used. The final phase was encouraging communities to identify, together, what they believed would provide a high return for their investment (of both labor and capital). Throughout, the process was based on respecting them, and on respecting ourselves, by constantly working toward filling the roles of resource and mentor without taking control.

Conclusion

While “participatory methods” are a suite of relevant tools for practitioners,¹⁵ the term “participatory approach” captures the attitude that undergirds this work. It is the priority of working with people and their communities: encouraging them to care about each other and to work toward common goals, and being a resource and mentor while striving to leave control with the community. Being a resource may mean providing access to information in another language. It may mean helping people learn how to obtain that information themselves, through some other route than published literature. It may mean leading them in techniques that help them see information about their own communities that they have overlooked¹⁶ and to deal with the implications of that information.¹⁷ But foundational to all of tools is the attitude that it is the people themselves who must ultimately be the pilots, and that we are simply partners.

References

Fraiser, Douglas M. 2007. *Loggers, Settlers, and Tribesmen in the Mountain Forests of the Philippines: the Evolution of Indigenous Social Organization in Response to Environmental Invasions*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida

Sanchez, Pedro A. 1976. *Properties and Management of Soils in the Tropics*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Recommended Reading

Lingenfelter, Sherwood G. 1992. *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. – This very readable book covers the grid-group theory, which is helpful in understanding how different societies think and work.

Lingenfelter, Sherwood G. 1996. *Agents of Transformation: A Guide for Effective Cross-Cultural Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. – This book expands on *Transforming Culture* with numerous applications. It also provides research questions to guide you in investigating each aspect of culture.

Myers, Bryant L. 2006. *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. – This is probably the best book on community development I have seen. It is rooted in the “participatory approach.” It takes the reader through the history of development approaches, showing the strengths and weaknesses of each, and gives a good introduction to several useful methods.

Notes

1. Participatory methods are procedures used to achieve the participation of community members in each step of the development process. Examples are participatory mapping, to gather information; cause-and-effect diagramming, to analyze the factors underlying the community's current situation; matrix scoring, to weigh the relative costs and benefits of alternative courses of action; and dream mapping and appreciative inquiry, to decide on community goals.
2. Participatory Rural Appraisal, Participatory Learning and Action, Asset-Based Community Development, *Groupe de Recherche et d'Appui pour l'Auto-Promotion Paysanne*, and Appreciative Inquiry, respectively.
3. The Cotabato Manobo (ISO 639-3:mta) are also known as the Dulangan Manobo. I refer to them in the rest of this paper simply as “Manobo.” They live in the highlands of Sultan Kudarat Province on the island of Mindanao.

4. Species used by the Manobo include *Acacia villosa*, *Calliandra calothyrsus*, *Desmodium rensonii*, *Flemingia macrophylla* (also known as *F. congesta*), and *Leucaena leucocephala*.
5. *Zea mays*, *Phaseolus vulgaris*, *Manihot utilissima* (*esculenta*) Pohl., and *Arachis hypogaea*, respectively
6. *Oreochromis* spp., a kind of fish well suited to production in freshwater ponds
7. The Manobo lived in an area far from markets and had a very low cash income, both of which made the use of fish feed or commercial fertilizer (to promote the growth of algae for the fish to eat) unfeasible.
8. The Manobo had grown upland (dryland) rice for as long as they could remember. However, the production of irrigated rice was a new technology. Some of them had worked in irrigated rice fields among settlers in the lowlands, and they wanted to adopt the same technology. Rice yields typically double from irrigation without any other inputs, due to the suppression of weeds (most plants cannot grow in waterlogged soil) and the avoidance of drought stress.
9. That is, we wanted to work with, and not against the Manobo's cultural practices and assumptions, but lacked the ability to see them, and did not understand how to work with them.
10. Doug will explain how to do this in a workshop at the October 2013 ECHO Asia Agriculture & Community Development Conference. It is titled "Working within the Culture: A Method for Learning How," and is scheduled for 1:30-2:30 PM on Thursday, 3 October.
11. The Manobo had very limited contact with other societies prior to World War II. Traditionally, they relied on swidden farming (shifting cultivation), supplemented by hunting and gathering. For heavy tasks such as clearing fields or harvesting crops, individuals enlisted additional labor through kinship ties. However, there were no true clans. Individuals reckoned kinship through both their mother's and father's side, with the result that each person's kin group is different. Because of that, kinship did not provide the society with large, cohesive units, so there was little centralization above the household level. Furthermore, the Manobo's reliance on swidden farming meant that their population density was low. Villages, when they existed, had only a few households. Consequently, power was decentralized. The Manobo's traditional leaders, called datu, had considerable influence but exercised little actual control. Their primary function was to settle disputes, in order to prevent revenge killings.
12. See Fraiser (2007:144-146) for details, including the anthropological basis.
13. durian (*Durio zibethinus* L.), mangosteen (*Garcinia mangostana* L.), rambutan (*Nephelium lappaceum* L.), mango (*Mangifera indica* L.), and lanzones (*Lansium domesticum*)
14. "Citrus" (possibly *Citrus reticulata*) and "limoncito" (possibly the calamondin or kalamansi, *X Citrofortunella microcarpa*) were additional choices the second year.
15. For more resources, see EDN 69 (<http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.echocommunity.org/resource/collection/CAFC0D87-129B-4DDA-B363-9B9733AAB8F1/edn69.pdf>) and ECHO's Technical Note on Participatory Mapping (http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.echocommunity.org/resource/collection/E66CDFDB-0A0D-4DDE-8AB1-74D-9D8C3EDD4/Participatory_Mapping.pdf). Somesh Kumar's *Methods for Community Participation: A Complete Guide for Practitioners* (published 2002) is a succinct and practical guide to a large number of participatory methods.
16. e.g., through mapping, seasonal labor analysis, and network diagrams
17. e.g., using SWOT analysis or force field analysis

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