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Empowerment and Participation:
How could the wide range of social effects
of participatory approaches be better
elicited and compared?

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FIRST PART: BIBLIOGRAPHIC SYNTHESIS

I. Participatory approaches, questions as yet unanswered.

1. The importance of the stakeholders' involvement.

The relations between science and society have become more tricky, especially at the field level, between technical advisors and stakeholders, as well as the international level, between experts and civil and political leaders, because the stakes set to science grow in complexity and uncertainty. Scientists are faced with developmental, environmental or social questions that depend on the cultural context and the logics and behaviors of stakeholders. On the theoretical level, this evolution leads to considerable changes in scientific (Functowicz 1994) and politics (Rawls 1999, Habermas 2001, Sen 1999) thinking. On a practical level, it reasserts the call for better methods to involve societal stakeholders in the ongoing dialogue of their future.

Consequently, community and participatory approaches are still an important way to ensure the involvement of stakeholders and citizens. We mean participation to include any process that helps individuals influence the decision-making that affects them and plays a role in these decisions (World Bank 1996), from the construction of public policy to the selection of an adapted technology. The main methodological goal is a then wider sharing of representations and goals among the various actors involved, but depending on the approach, the respective weight of the viewpoints of local actors and intervening people may vary:

- (i) for some people, participation means an exchange of viewpoints, with the main objective being the transfer of one's own analysis (*awareness-raising*) to the targeted actors;
- (j) for others, participation means going beyond this exchange of view points to build a common vision, which requires that each one agree to modify his initial analysis (*participatory appraisal*);
- (j) the participation time limit is also used by approaches intended to share the different tasks and responsibilities involved in the management of a resource, area or chain of production with the targeted actors,... (*collaborative management*);
- (k) finally, participation can also define a shared pre-management decision making process concerned with prioritizing values and goals to be dealt with subsequently (*participative democracy*). Thus, an integrated management approach means cooperatively managing an animal reserve, whereas a participatory decision process means making a joint decision as to whether or not the priority is to plan reserves and, if so, where to locate them.

Nevertheless, these approaches are still faced with questions about their effectiveness and relevance despite the fact that they have been tested over the past quarter century and have led to compelling changes in the design, implementation, and policies of development programs (Scoones et Thompson 1993, Bhasin 1998, Nguingiri 1998, Michener 1998, Lamerlink et Wolffers 1998, Alff et Bauer 1999, Cleaver 1999, Innes et Booher 1999, Lazarev et Arab 2002,

Kumar et Kapoor 2003, Neef 2005, Froger et al 2005). Thus, although numerous evaluations and comparative analyses have been carried out (Arnstein 1969, Boiral et al 1985, Nelson et Wright 1995, Agrawal et Gibson 1999, Cleaver 1999, Innes et Booher 1999, Lavigne-Delville et al 2000, Carr et Halvorsen 2001, Gaventa 2002, Conley et Moote 2003, Kumar et Kapoor 2003, Mansuri et Rao 2004, World Bank, 2005,...), it remains difficult to define a non partisan way to set objectives and limits of the different ways to consider participation. Consequently, it has been difficult to prove the efficiency of these approaches, therefore improving their spreading but also limiting general use of these innovations and experiences.

That is why it is important to develop a common framework for participatory approaches, taking into account their different understandings of stakeholders, objectives, forms and limits. This will lead to a more rigorous and pragmatic way to propose to development policies as well as research action proponents some clear and practical positioning of participation, face to the critical questionings.

2. Criticism relevant to participation

First of all, regardless of their site of intervention, participatory approaches must always be dealt with in a context of social hierarchy, involving disadvantaged groups whose points of view and needs are not always recognized by the local community and then could be neglected during local workshops (Nelson et Wright 1995, Agrawal et Gibson 1999, Schneider 1999, Lavigne-Delville et al 2000, Edmunds et Wollenberg 2002, Abraham et Platteau 2004). Furthermore, the decision processes are never limited to the public eye alone, with a significant part taking place *behind the scenes* (Goffmann 1979), depending on the varying modes of different societies. Lastly, collective discussion is the ideal place for social monitoring to occur, from setting the stage to affirmation of power, with choices being more dependent on mediation of power struggles than on mutual, rational cooperation (Lavigne Delville et Mathieu 2000, Mansuri et Rao 2004, Faysse 2006). Complexity of the social and political context dependent on social relations and positions of power between members of the community, underlying social and cultural stakes of each stakeholder and group involved, attitude of the existing powers and other social groups, nature of conventional and cultural forms behind social and political practices,... (Bierschenk 1988, Olivier de Sardan 1992, Jacob et Lavigne Delville 1994, De Carlo 1999, Borrini-Feyerabend *et al* 2004). This is the whole issue of the integration, adaptation, and dissemination of an innovation within a community, and these are always very dependent on the social context and the status of individuals involved (Boiral et al 1985, Olivier de Sardan et Pacquot 1991, Olivier de Sardan 1992). Failure to acknowledge this social reality opens up an area for recovery that certain people, in particular the local better off, backed up by the steps, can get a hold of in order to strengthen their control over the groups (Narayan et Ebbe 1997, Ribot 1998, Cleaver 1999, Agrawal 2003, World Bank 2004, World Bank 2005b). Practitioners might think they are changing modes of cooperation or social institutions, when they really have only aided in the recasting in a new context of the existing roles and statuses, whether it be among technicians and civil society or among local leaders and inhabitants. Furthermore, regardless of the method, it can be manipulated based on the goals of the facilitator or local better-off (Gibson et Marks 1995, Desai 1996, van der Linden 1997, Ribot 1998 et 2001, Dahl-Ostergaard et al 2003, Mansuri et Rao 2004), which are linked to his social position, his professional expertise, his personal goals and his political ideals (Rosenau 1990, 33).

All of this entails a series of questions vis-à-vis participatory steps: How can an intervention obtain the level of knowledge of the social milieu required to bring about sustainable changes without long and uncertain sociological studies? How can we insure that the chosen target populations are appropriate to achieve social evolutions? But what are these resulting social outcomes being sought for the local society, given that the intervention will be more or less effective based on the status of the target population under consideration and that the roles and responsibilities of the various actors in a society, or in other words, the representative groups to be targeted, are actually difficult to discover¹ (Kumar et Kapoor 2003, World Bank 2005a)? Do we allow the leaders to express themselves, thus reproducing social differentiations² or intervene on behalf of a socially excluded group, thus acting against the social organization of the community, running the risk of eradicating the sustainable change being sought in the local setting? How can we avoid facilitators of these approaches going off course? Participation implies a major change in the way public decision-making, development and research are carried out. Support services and external partners lack the qualifications and expertise necessary for this change. Rather than trying to apply a standardized methodology, what is needed is a skill and a "posture" that are difficult to formalize, select, and disseminate (Lavigne Delville et Mathieu 2000, Borrini-Feyerabend et al 2004). Finally, how can achieve the dissemination of social and political outcomes beyond local scale when it is dependent on so many factors: social relations and the positions of power of the participants towards the other members of the community, the underlying social and cultural stakes of each stakeholder and group involved, the attitude of the existing powers and other social groups, the institutional background and the local development policies,...(Kumar 2003)? What strategy can be proposed to set in motion sustainable change within this entire context³, and not just for the workshop participants? How can public institutions and support services take interest in approaches that transfer part of their expertise to other stakeholders? Finally, how can better link local approaches, in direct touch with stakeholders, and macro policies of governance (Holmes et Scoones 2001, Pimbert 2004, Pozzoni et Kapoor 2005, Malena et al 2005) ?

The theoretical and practice construction of participation remains to be pursued, by way of better associating the long and rich experimental knowledge with a scattered but growing theoretical literature. More precautions need to be taken as regards ethics, values, and intentionality, because participatory methods can be used as much for instrumental purposes as for real empowerment of citizens. But it is also necessary to improve methods and tools in order to strengthen the bonds between "bottom up" participatory dynamics and the more institutional "top-down" methods of deliberation and decision-making (Nelson et Wright 1995, Webler 1999, Pimbert et Wakeford 2001, Neef 2005).

¹ Within an institution such as the World Bank, one will notice very different options with regard to target populations when going from one project to another, with no justification being given for these differences (World Bank 2005a).

² All the more so since to achieve success in organizing and mobilizing local actors, the pilot program must be one that is *deemed locally legitimate*, which will depend not only on the local social context, but also on the subject matter taken up and the reference scale: whether the same request will be validated will depend on whether one is dealing with the installation of some infrastructure in a village or the agreement among farmers and hunters in a region.

³ Cf. Institution building.

3. A change in stated objectives.

From sociopolitical changes to the development of cognitive capacities, the objectives and theoretical reference of participatory approaches have become progressively broader, in part to justify them vis-à-vis these criticisms. But this has not been enough to remove their ambiguities and prove their relevance and effectiveness once and for all (Sellamna 2000). Thus, a participatory approach immediately sets forth three different objectives which are emphasized to a greater or lesser degree depending on the approach: a modification in the distribution of power in a social group, improved decision making techniques for complex situations, and finally, development of skills in target populations.

The origins of participation are first and foremost in intervention with a social and political objective. It seeks to make relationships between individuals and social groups evolve to promote better actions and decisions (Freire 1970 et 1973, Sennett 1970). Then participatory methods are also used to help social groups to take charge of complex issues, from firm organization (Friedberg 1993) to sustainable development (de Montgolfier et Natali 1987, Mermet 1992, Weber 1992, Funtowicz et Ravetz 1994, Röling and de Jong 1998). Participatory processes are here useful for building a common perception in situations of change in rules and resource allocation where there are always potentially conflicting points of view at the outset. This kind of participatory methods refers to advances in applied social sciences⁴, particularly about group dynamics, in order to promote social and iterative construction of knowledge, which is achieved through the development collective capacities of adaptive management⁵ (Daniels et Walker 1996, Röling 1996, Ashby *et al.* 2000, Johnson et al. 2000, Carpenter et Gunderson 2001, Hagmann et al. 2002, Lynam et al 2002, Borrini-Feyerabend *et al* 2004, Gonsalves *et al.*, 2005).

However, it is difficult to envision a direct impact in these approaches on the natural and economic environment, since it is so difficult to link this kind of actions to changes in the state of environment (Conley et Moote 2003). Consequently, objectives of these approaches have been progressively targeted towards improvements in accommodation processes rather than measurable changes in the state of the environment, supported by a high assumption: a participatory approach is more effective than a directive from above in terms of finally achieving improved management of the economic and environmental situation, because the main obstacle to a better natural resources management is the lack of communication and quality information (Putnam 1993, Röling and Wagemakers 1998, Rao 2001, Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2004). But that implies the progress in dealing with complexity noted by workshop participants can then be expressed and disseminated on a long-term basis throughout the entire community in question. The effective of participation thus also depends here on the social, political and cultural contexts

⁴ Pedagogy, organizational development, and community development, as participatory action research, experimental learning, systems thinking, chaos theory, and self-organization, to form the foundation for a growing family of approaches and methods geared toward collective action.

⁵ Cf. the "management centred" paradigm: concerned with transforming the way the forest is managed and seeks to achieve this through a transfer of responsibility with authority to the forest-local communities, in contrast with a benefit-centered paradigm. This is a power sharing rather than a product sharing process (Alden Wily and Mbaya 2001)

(Edmunds et Wollenberg 2001), which, for most approaches, are considered external factors and social prerequisites upon which they can have no effect.

This is why most approaches now focus on an intermediate objective, the capacity building for workshop participants (Ashby 1991, Chambers 1994b, Reijntjes *et al.* 1995, Conroy et al 1999, Hagmaan et al, 2002, Probst et al 2003, Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2004). The objective is thus reduced to people directly touched by the approach⁶, rather than to all stakeholders and factors of a decision process, which, admittedly, cannot be controlled. The first weakness in these approaches is not having today a clear idea of their learning objectives, namely a specific description of target skills and setting up monitoring procedures for these learning processes... Nevertheless, this will not be enough to characterize the added value these approaches can have, in practice and in the long term, in disseminating an innovation, mobilizing users or technicians, putting new managers in place, and improving social and economic equity. For even if a learning process proves itself effective among participants, they still have to show their skills in the social, cultural and political game of the group or the society in question (Agrawal et Gibson 1999, Schneider 1999, Lavigne-Delville et al 2000, World Bank 2005a). The issue of effectiveness of these approaches again goes back to the social context, which it is believed the majority of them cannot or should not affect (Pena et Cuhna 1997, Cleaver 1999, d'Estree and Colby 2000, Kumar 2003, Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2004, Gonsalves et al 2005).

4 Conclusion: two possible positions

Thus, regardless of the objective set forth, evaluators and most practitioners assess that the quality of the outcomes depends mainly on the social and political context as well as the human capacities of the facilitator and local leaders (Aronoff et Gunter 1994, Thompson 1995, Shepherd 1998, Krishna 2001, Kumar et Kapoor 2003, World Bank 2005a). So there are nowadays two options possible for people-centered approaches. The first is to give up setting forth the objective of effecting change on society, since that is dependent on too many uncontrollable social factors, and restrict the usefulness of participation to an improvement in knowledge of complex situations, arguing that complex systems can be effectively explored only through action coming from within the system⁷ (Crozier et Friedberg 1977, Hagmaan et al 2002). Using this perspective, participation is thus restricted more specifically to *a method for producing knowledge of a complex situation that associates actors in the system in question with the production of that knowledge*, without including social goals, since some social factors are seen as unattainable. This methodological way will be able to prove its efficiency for complex analysis, because people-centred analyses are often more cumbersome, and for some people more subjective, than more standard enquiry methods (Lavigne Delville et Mathieu 2000, Moiti-Maizi 2000, Mansuri et Rao 2004).

The alternative is to preserve the objectives concerning the cooperative process or the democratization of society and therefore consider social, cultural, and political factors as the very targets of the approach rather than external elements or prerequisites. In that case, the only way

⁶ From informing people to change their behaviours to facilitating exchanges between various stakeholders: complexity appraising, managing diverging interests, adapting to uncertainty, organizational innovation...

⁷ Since only the system's reactions to changes can reveal its innermost characteristics. This knowledge is also highly useful in better understanding the perspective of the populations that are an integral part of this system

to respond to the criticism requires better defining a methodological approach which takes into account in a better explicit manner these social factors (Sellamna 1999, Conley et Moote 2003, Agrawal 2003, Probst et al. 2003, Neef 2005). Without this clearer positioning, participatory methods have not realistic objectives (as regards the local reality), neither means to achieve them (without a strategy enough strong in favor of such or such objective) and then that could remain an instrument with pernicious effects that each could use to his own ends.

This is why some practitioners and experts are getting together to exchange and build a more precise picture of the different possible empowerment and participation stakes, and of the different methodological avenues possible to reach these different stakes. This collective construction pursues three main objectives:

- it enables an improvement in rigor and effectiveness when implementing a given approach, by helping its designer to better formalize the goals of his approach⁸ and thus help its practitioners, as well as the assessment, to focus on them⁹;
- it makes it possible to pinpoint, among the various approaches and contexts, which pragmatic response elements each approach may use to confront the various criticisms (see *supra*) and which limitations have been set, so as to better target which approach is best adapted to a given intervention, based on the specific contextual goals;
- finally, it helps to clarify the specificities and possible complementary features among the approaches.

II. The challenge: positioning the social goals, effects and their limitations in a more explicit manner.

About their position as regards the social context, participatory methods are faced with two pitfalls: on one hand, they could drift within a militancy defending what it seems the only true participatory goals possible; on the other hand, they could remain in a technician's position by ignoring social aspects, thus reducing participation to a more efficient technique for communication, regardless of the social context. But even if the intervention is limited to an unique or thematic objective (technological innovation, support for a socially excluded group, restructuring of a support service, dealing with a conflict, common management of a specific resource,...), the social issue of participation, in the sense of a comprehensive view of the goals to which one hopes to contribute and the manner in which one hopes to influence them, cannot remain a fuzzy, shallow component (Chambers 1994b, Sellamna 1999, Pimbert *et al.* 2000).

⁸For more than ten years, research dealing with participation in the field of critical sociology has emphasized the importance of the social context and its complexity (Scoones and Thompson 1993, Sellamna 1999, Abraham and Platteau 2004, Neef 2005). But for now, knowledge of this context requires long, weighty research that few programs find feasible, and that, furthermore, needs to be repeated for each new context. In addition, these sociological analyses must be carried out with extreme rigor in order to produce data that is objective and tangible enough for creating an intervention model. Similarly, the goal of every intervention is always "subjective": it is a *choice* of values that favour goals *considered* to be fundamental, and which are then contextualized to respond to a *specific* analysis in the context of intervention.

⁹This kind of elicitation is also useful for developing the scaling up of the approach.

To gain validity requires taking a more explicit, methodological approach to this positioning by defining each intervention strategy in a more detailed and well-argued manner, so that it is *coherent, scientifically refutable and comparable*. Although significant progresses have been made in the last few years to better define outcomes (Lilja et Ashby 1999, Innes et Booher 1999, Lilja et al 2001), comparative analyses done up until now go no further than more often descriptive analyses of the various methodological variants, which have not brought forth enough data to distinguish points of view about empowerment¹⁰, yet behind the methodological constructions, and to assess their relevance as regards a given social and political context. Instead of trying to identify the panacea of participatory approaches or empowerment scale, it seems to us more useful today to precise for each method the social stakes which are perceived then aimed, for which it can be effective and evaluated, and the limitations it set, and for which it can be neither effective nor criticized.

Thus, one of the stakes today is to conceive a framework allowing people-centred approaches to elicit each own positioning as regards a given social context of intervention. This methodological framework will be as useful as conceivers as proponents who want to clarify (for partners or for themselves) their specific position towards social stakes, as well assessment experts trying to distinguish approaches and their complementarity. Face to this statement some practitioners and experts are getting together to exchange and build a more precise picture of the different possible empowerment and participation stakes, and of the different methodological avenues possible to reach these different stakes. This collective construction pursues three main objectives:

- it enables an improvement in rigor and effectiveness when implementing a given approach, by helping its designer to better formalize the goals of his approach¹¹ and thus help its practitioners, as well as the assessment, to focus on them¹²;
- it makes it possible to pinpoint, among the various approaches and contexts, which pragmatic response elements each approach may use to confront the various criticisms (see *supra*) and which limitations have been set, so as to better target which approach is best adapted to a given intervention, based on the specific contextual goals;
- finally, it helps to clarify the specificities and possible complementary features among the approaches.

¹⁰ Type de partage de la décision recherché à terme, processus sociologique choisi pour y parvenir, stratégie pour insérer les évolutions dans le contexte socio politique,...

¹¹For more than ten years, research dealing with participation in the field of critical sociology has emphasized the importance of the social context and its complexity. But for now, knowledge of this context requires long, weighty research that few programs find feasible, and that, furthermore, needs to be repeated for each new context. In addition, these sociological analyses must be carried out with extreme rigor in order to produce data that is objective and tangible enough for creating an intervention model. Similarly, the goal of every intervention is always “subjective”: it is a *choice* of values that favour goals *considered* to be fundamental, and which are then contextualized to respond to a *specific* analysis in the context of intervention.

¹²This kind of elicitation is also useful for developing the scaling up of the approach.

This emerging scientific network has planned to reach these objectives by an incremental exchange during the next three years between practitioners and experts around the world. This collective co construction is supported by regional workshops¹³ (West Africa, South East Asia, India, Oceania area, Europe, Latin America,...) and is sustained by a web site which regularly supplies bibliographical syntheses and comparative analyses of every participant's positioning about the relevant questionings towards participatory stakes and approaches, thanks to a collective using of a comparative framework to elicit and differentiate the participatory and empowerment stakes every participant pursues in his peculiar context. We also plan to present the group's works to some external experts in social sciences and development policies, for debating.

¹³ The first workshop has been held on July 2007.

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