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The Participation Forum*

May 18, 1995

Topic: Do We Need to Practice What We Preach?

Long-time participation practitioners at USAID argue that to be able to engage host-country people in development processes that affect them, we need to build participation more into the internal workings of the Agency. The thirteenth session of the Participation Forum tries to get a handle on this reasonable sounding proposition by examining the linkages between “internal” and “external” participation.

Such linkages do appear to exist for people implementing development activities on the front lines. In Forum twelve, Judith Tandler discussed her findings about “good” public sector programs in northeast Brazil. She found that when workers felt empowered and were given some latitude by their own agencies, they were able to develop relationships of trust and mutual accountability with their clients.

But do these linkages hold true for USAID? Forum participants tackled the question experientially through an exercise in active listening led by Camille Cates Barnett of Research Triangle Institute, who, as city manager of Austin, Texas, led that city through a customer-oriented reinvention. The forum session was closed by Frank Almaguer, DAA/M for Human Resources. A wealth of additional insights about “practicing what we preach” have come in by E-mail.—Diane La Voy, Senior Policy Advisor for Participatory Development

OPENING PRESENTATION: What Has Become Clear about Participation

Camille Cates Barnett

I would like to share with you my experience with government organizations that walk their talk on participation—that say they believe in participation and teamwork and practice what they preach. Things work differently in these organizations. They have more fun. Politicians like them better. They work better, cost less, and are better for the people who work for them.

The Participation Forum is a series of monthly noontime meetings for USAID personnel to explore how to put into practice the Administrator's mandate to “build opportunities for participation into the development processes in which we are involved” (“Statement of Principles on Participatory Development,” November 16, 1993). Guest speakers from in and outside of USAID describe their experiences and enter into a general discussion of the theme of the session. A summary of the meeting is disseminated within USAID by E-mail, and readers are encouraged to engage in an E-mail dialogue. E-mail should be directed to Diane La Voy, using either the USAID directory or INTERNET, as DLAVOY@USAID.GOV. Printed copies of the Forum summaries will be distributed to participants and attendees from outside of USAID and others interested in participatory development.

Having watched the change process take place in many settings over the years reminds me of something Ralph Waldo Emerson used to say. When he'd meet friends he hadn't seen in a while, he wouldn't greet them the way you or I would: "How are you?" "How's it going?" or these days, "You still here?" Emerson would greet them with this question: "What has become clear to you since we last met?"

1. What has become clear to me is that **participation is a value, not just a skill.**

- Working to build values is different from working to build skills. Enhancing participation must be approached as a culture change, not a training program.
- Values are shared. Not everyone shares the values. Practicing skills can encourage changes in values.
- Values are transmitted. People watch what you do, not just what you say. Renaming a "committee" a "team" doesn't make it one. Jargon doesn't build credibility; action does.
- Values are powerful. Complex organizations are run by systems of values. Employee relations are a mirror image of customer relations. How we treat workers is how they treat customers. People who experience participation can better promote participation to others.

2. What has become clear to me is that **participation needs a purpose.**

- Is participation an end or a means? If participation is a value, is it always a good? Should we have participation for participation's sake? Is there supposed to be only one right way to do our work—by endlessly participating? What's the role of leadership if everyone is participating?
- One of the most important and effective ways to use participation is to clarify your participation mode, the purpose of participation. Frustration occurs when participants are in different modes. For example, here are some shorthand labels for different modes of participation: **tell, sell, test, consult, join**. The "tell" mode is giving information or giving direction. The "sell" mode is giving information and wanting the participant to agree with it. The "test" mode is being fairly certain you know what direction to go in or which decision to make, but you want to test ideas with the participants to see if something is missing. The "consult" mode is where you are not sure of the definition or solution and you want the participants' ideas on what they would do. The "join" mode is where you delegate tasks to participants or forge partnerships with the participants to solve problems.

Each of the modes involves a different level of participation and each is appropriate to different situations. Problems arise when there is confusion about what mode you are in. For example, if I'm in the "tell" mode and you're in the "consult" mode, we are both going to be frustrated. I'll think you are overstepping your bounds and you'll tell me I'm not walking the talk.

My department director and I used this shorthand on modes of participation to be sure we were communicating well. At department head meetings, for example, I would say, "Here's the issue. Here's what I think we should do about it. What do you think?" This sounds like either the test or consult mode. As the participants gave me their ideas, if I did not accept them, they would say, "Are you really in the consult mode or have you already decided what to do? Are you in the sell mode?" This helped me realize that indeed sometimes I was closer to a decision than I realized.

3. What has become clear to me is that **participation is both fast and slow.**
 - Participation takes time. Cultural change takes years. A lot of participation focuses on incremental change, a steady series of improvements. It also never really stops.
 - Participation can also be fast. To use the language of learning organizations, it can be a leverage point for lasting systemic change. Participation can produce breakthrough change.
4. What has become clear to me is that **participation changes power.**
 - Expect resistance. Some people don't want to give up their power.
 - Expect disconnects. The questions you are raising now and the inconsistencies you are seeing now are typical. Discouraging, yes, but typical.
 - You can't change an organization without changing yourself. It is not “their” fault. I first realized the importance of my role-modeling in changing an organization when I worked in Dallas. That is where I got the nickname “Dragon Lady.” I realized that I had to behave in a more open and participatory way if I was going to encourage those values in the organization.

What has also become clear to me is that talking about participation is not the way to make the point about participation.

VIDEO PRESENTATION: Participation Empowers Austin Government Employees

A segment of the video “Hidden Assets: Empowering America's Workers,” made for television by Gannett Broadcasting, was shown. The video focused on fundamental changes in large organizations that happened through participation, or empowerment. The segment shown was on the Austin case, the only public-sector example in the video. Barnett noted that her four principles of participation were evident in the way the change process worked in Austin city government—a billion-dollar-a-year organization with 10,000 employees who, before the reforms, suffered from an image of incompetence and obstructionism. The reforms, she added, took place in the context of a politically charged atmosphere, in the midst of hostile budget cutting. The segment looked at the participation process from the perspective of four types of Austin municipal employees: janitors, telephone operators, truck mechanics, and building inspectors. The following excerpts from the sound track provide some insight on how Austin turned itself around.

Janitors. In the midst of millions of passengers and million-dollar airplanes, there is a team of three people here who don't make very much money, who don't have much education, who work through the night when most of us are home. They are janitors, and they are remarkable. They work without supervision. They schedule their own breaks, their own lunch hour, and with one, one-day exception, they haven't missed a day of work in the last six months. Their job isn't exciting or sophisticated, but it's theirs.

They do great work, but why? Is it the money, \$6.50 an hour? Or is it that when they're assigned to a room, they decide how to do it and when, and when it's clean enough, they—not a supervisor—decide when to move on. And in that responsibility there is pride.

Telephone Operators. The service has improved at the water and light company owned by the City of Austin. A year ago, 70 percent of callers used to get a busy signal. Today, every call is answered. A year ago, the average hold time was five and a half minutes; today, the average is 11 seconds. And the operators have been trained to handle almost any call, business or residence: turning power on or off, a late bill, an incorrect bill. They don't shuffle you from one department to another any more. They make decisions on the phone, even on questions involving money. The reason is that the operators have a lot more power and authority now.

Truck Mechanics. Service Center One is a maintenance garage for 550 trucks owned by the city. Two years ago, there were five supervisors here. Now there are two. On any given day, 44 trucks were parked outside waiting for repair. In the last year, that number has been cut in half. There are a lot of reasons why this shop is more efficient today. One of them is that these mechanics now have more authority over the work they do.

If you make them a part of it, they're proud. A janitor, a telephone operator, a truck mechanic. At any level and at any pay rate, when employees are allowed to make decisions about their jobs, they work harder, better, faster. And that can translate into millions.

Building Inspectors. Motorola is in a race against the Japanese. Austin is trying to help with an idea that most cities haven't even thought about yet: on-site inspection, on-site decisions. The city employees who enforce the building codes have their own trailer at the construction site. That means instead of endless phone calls and meetings and trips downtown to study every change, every new drawing, these inspectors can make decisions on the spot in minutes. The days of second-guessing and red tape, of inspectors having to call their boss, who had to check with his boss, who had to call somebody else, are over. On code interpretations and modifications, they've given the inspector the ability to go ahead and make some decisions and judgments himself. But he is accountable for the decisions that he makes.

Announcer. But why bother? The City of Austin is a monopoly. It doesn't have to compete in the marketplace. There's only one airport. Why does it matter if it's not perfectly clean? Travelers have no choice. There's only one way to get power or water or sewer service: the city utility. For Motorola to get its building permits, by law they have to go to the city inspection department. So why get more efficient or faster when you don't really have to?

But there is a marketplace. Austin is competing with Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and every other city over what firms come to do business and which ones don't. If Austin doesn't create an effective climate for businesses, they'll leave.

Another reason is that government is too important. Government services touch every corner of our lives: justice, education, housing, commerce, the environment, health, safety, on and on. If government doesn't work and work well, we're all in trouble. Society can't function without government; the whole fabric of our society depends on us doing our job well.

It's not an alternative to raise taxes forever. It's not an alternative to keep increasing the size of government. We can't do that. We have to get better and smarter with the people that we've got.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION: A Participatory Approach to Analyzing USAID's Participation Initiative

Barnett involved the 54 attendees in a two-part exercise, aimed at eliciting their views on the Agency's renewed emphasis on participation and also at involving them in a new kind of participatory dialogue that would enable them to reflect on how their own analytic processes could be sharpened by teamwork.

The first part of the exercise consisted of participants' offering their views on the successes and failures of USAID's participation effort by answering three key questions in writing on 4x6 index cards.

The second part involved discussions by pairs of participants in which one identified his or her view of USAID's one major weakness in participation and the other probed the proposition by asking "Why?" five times. The pair then reversed roles, with the questioner making the problem statement and the partner digging into the assertion with a series of "Whys?"

Forum participants were subsequently provided a summary of the responses. It has also been presented to senior USAID management. Below is an abbreviated version of that summary.

Part 1: Summary of the Answers to Three Key Questions

1. What three things are going well in USAID's renewed emphasis on participation?

The participants gave high marks for the initiative's success in increasing awareness throughout the Agency of effective ways to improve participation in USAID programs. The administrator and some other senior management staff were applauded in particular for strong leadership. Employees throughout the Agency, including foreign service nationals, have been widely and consistently involved in dialogue on the subject. More outside organizations (nongovernmental organizations, small businesses, etc.) are taking part in program decisions. The net result has been a growth in individual esteem, pride in work, and staff enthusiasm.

2. What three things are not going well in USAID's renewed emphasis on participation?

Participants were critical of senior management who were perceived as not practicing what they preached—of clinging to control and centralization rather than seeking to empower employees. USAID processes and practices were also viewed as remaining too bureaucratic, quashing initiative and experimentation. In addition, some participants noted confusion about the participation initiative: the need for it, the relationship between internal and external participation, its relationship to macroeconomic policy, its benefits. Some believed that the initiative is just a new buzzword for an old approach; others dismissed it as a luxury during a time of straitened circumstances.

3. If, with the stroke of a pen, you could change one thing about USAID's renewed emphasis on participation, what would it be?

Many participants proposed greater commitment to participation on the part of some senior management. Specific suggestions included the following: Senior management should operate in a more participatory fashion, for example by meeting regularly with rank-and-file employees; they should understand and be committed to empowerment and teamwork; they should give credit to staff for being participatory and reduce liabilities associated with speaking out. Other proposals included having staff at all levels actively embrace participation and share information better; ensuring more client (grassroot-level) feedback; decentralizing authority over budgets, programs, and staffing; and expanding agency training on participation.

Part 2: Assessment of the “Why” Exercise

*The “problems” discussed by the pairs of participants were based on the recommendations made in question 3. To pinpoint the major problem with USAID's renewed emphasis on participation, participants were instructed to turn their recommendations into “problem statements.” The line of “why” questioning pushed participants into a deeper analysis of their initial points. For example, in one case, the point was made that “**management is still in control.**” The series of “whys” led to the following expansion of the point: 1) management is old style, not up to date on current management approaches; 2) people are afraid to let go of power; 3) they don't know any better; 4) it's ignorance, attitude, and fear of change; 5) core values must change if participation is to work. Or again, “**management shows an inability to share power**” because 1) people have hidden agendas; 2) people think they have all the answers; and 3) there are insufficient individual incentives or sanctions that would lead to change. Following these two activities, Barnett asked for audience reaction.*

Barnett: How many of you found that you and your partner had a similar issue? [*Lots of hands.*] That tells you that some common themes are going to come out when all the cards are typed up. And it also shows you that you may have a way to process these, because you've got some concurrence.

Were you ever surprised by the answer? A surprise is when we have an assumption challenged. Surprises are very important in terms of discovering new places for inquiry. If nothing surprised you, you might want to ask the question “why” five more times.

How many times did you find yourself making assumptions versus having a data-driven decision? How many times could you think of data to support your answer versus your impression or your feeling? It's important to distinguish between information that is perception and information that is fact. If you have only perceptions and no data, it's very unlikely that you're going to convince anybody else, particularly higher-up people, that something needs to be changed.

Also, did you ever reach the point at which the answer was a genuine “I-don't-know”? If you did, you have stumbled across a gem. That tells you where you need more information. That means you have the opportunity to collect more information.

What did you find out about participation? How did it feel to have somebody really listen to you? How did it feel to really listen to somebody else? What are some of your process comments and observations?

Audience: It takes work. It's an effort. It is not simple to actively listen to someone else.

Audience: It really helped to clarify the issues; they're restated constantly until you're satisfied.

Barnett: Having somebody listening to you helps you get clear yourself. It also shows you the difference between a root cause and maybe a symptom.

Audience: There's a little frustration in not being able to affirm. You want to be able to say, “I agree,” or “I disagree” or “Let's explore that further.”

Barnett: Why is it important not to affirm or deny?

Audience: You just want to listen. You're there to be an active listener.

Barnett: That's right, because you don't want to take somebody on your track. You want to find out where their track leads to.

Audience: I noticed a strong tendency not just to actively listen, but to clarify in the process. This became an exchange in the repeating back, whether it was supposed to or not, and in fact, we got much deeper in our thoughts through this process.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Frank Almaguer

USAID's clear objective is sustainable development, which requires the participation of the beneficiaries. Many of us would argue, probably correctly, that we've always taken the beneficiaries' point of view. But we have tried by ourselves to determine what the beneficiaries wanted, rather than asking them.

In the personnel business, I must also think about what my customers want and need so that they can do their work. My customers are the employees of this Agency, and they need to be satisfied with the services I provide. The Office of Human Resources recently sent out the first-ever worldwide electronic questionnaire. Twenty-nine percent of Agency employees answered. We sent back the responses we received even though they were not glowing. They gave us some ideas on how to be more responsive to the needs of USAID employees, so that they can do their work on behalf of sustainable development.

We want to ensure that the almost 9,000 people in USAID, both here and around the world, are ready for the changes that they will be exposed to between this spring and October 1. These will be fundamental changes, not only in systems and processes, which will in many cases be radically different, but also in the values that are embodied in those changes, including teamwork, which cannot succeed without participation. Core values will be stressed as extensively as the systems and processes themselves.

At the same time, we have to realize that this is a new Agency, one with a big heart but a very, very small and perhaps shrinking pocketbook. In this new Agency, we must maintain a learning capability. We have to use every training experience and instrument available to us, both formal and informal, including technology like CD-ROM. All employees can and should avail themselves of these experiences and be able to grow and mature as professionals without being totally focused on classroom opportunities. This is quite a challenge.

During a meeting yesterday, in which USAID employees discussed the state of play on the Hill, one speaker was a former congressman who is heading a coalition of forces in support of the foreign affairs account, the 150 account. His rather pointed advice was that we continue to believe in what we do. We are not about to move away from the reengineered systems, from the core values of the Agency, from the start-up date of October 1, and from ensuring that the Agency truly believes in what it does, and that participation is a central part of it. As a long-term career employee, I think I see a bright future for USAID.

Communications from the E-mail Bag

Making the Connection

The following E-mail was received in response to Diane La Voy's questions: "*What is the connection between the way we work together—our ability to work effectively in teams and to be empowered and accountable within USAID—and our ability as an Agency to build opportunities for our customers to participate in decisions and processes that affect them? Is there really a connection between the way we work together and our ability to engender customer participation? If so, where do you see the connection? Why might it matter?*"

Karl Schwartz: "There is a natural and good tendency within USAID to see the socially and economically deprived as clients, beneficiaries of our largesse, rather than as decision-makers. This is reinforced by an organizational structure in which decisions tend to be made at the top of the management unit so that those who interact most with our clients do not see themselves as decision-makers either.

"Empowered and accountable teams flatten out the internal decision-making structure, thereby making it easier for us to see others as decision-makers, as people who make choices. But we have to strengthen this perception of our customers among ourselves. This is the bottom line of what is coming out of our customer-needs detection work. The staff who have participated have all come back from the field impressed with how much our 'clients' know about these topics and with a new respect for them as choice-makers and customers.

"Hence, while I can trace a connection between the way we might be organized and participation, the more fundamental question is related to whether we perceive the socially and economically deprived and ourselves (to a lesser extent) as decision-makers. If we organize in ways which make us decision-makers, then, probably, it will be easier for us to recognize the poor as decision-makers and, hence, as customers whose participation in our planning and judging is important."

Anne Sweetser: "Two factors predispose to difficulty in treating the recipients of aid as decision-makers or customers, rather than clients. First, there is a tremendous conviction that we have The Knowledge. We have such faith in our rationalism and the science which is based in it that we have great difficulty seeing and responding to others' 'myths or beliefs' as knowledge also. We overlook, or deny, the fact that our knowledge is one among many systems of culturally constructed symbolic meaning. Second, it requires a special sort of courage to give up the prerogative of being the one who makes the decisions."

John Grayzel: "Perhaps the single most troublesome aspect of practicing what we preach is that we as USAID employees cannot commit ourselves to our partners to any extent greater than the Agency can commit itself to us. One of the first things a child learns is to manipulate the concept of 'promise.' Keeping one's word is fundamental to working together. On a much more sophisticated level is the judicial doctrine of 'stare decisis' ('to stand by decided matters') whereby once a matter has been reasonably determined, it rests unless there are truly compelling

reasons for reconsideration. The capricious way USAID constantly changes decisions makes it almost impossible for us to make any commitment to our partners (though we increasingly ask them to commit themselves to us).”

Jose Garzon: “My sentiment is that we are not yet practicing what we preach. Budget reductions and a generally hostile environment are driving people to be more protectionist of their turf, more centralist in their management style, and sometimes more cynical in their outlook. There is also a disturbing tendency to create programmatic ‘boxes’ to protect the integrity of one’s program. Different technical offices push for separate Strategic Objectives to protect their areas of interest. To fail to do so in today’s climate can prove disastrous. Deferring to other colleagues who are better equipped to solve a problem; listening to the field, subordinates, and customers; risk taking; innovation—these are the behaviors which suffer under the current climate.

“What is needed to create a customer-oriented agency with a global vision is not simply a change in structures and procedures, but a thorough change in organizational culture. It will not, repeat will NOT, come about through training courses. A change in organizational culture will come about when the Agency rewards the right kinds of behavior and punishes the wrong kinds of behavior. We seem to be on the right track with the new employee evaluation procedures, but all the same budgets and other rewards are more likely to go to the most aggressive, not the best team players or the most service-oriented.

“The process of organizational change will take years. All we can do now is to begin, not only with new systems, but with a conscious effort to reward the right kind of behaviors and people—and separate out those who cannot mend their ways.”

Vic Duarte: “USAID cannot get the participatory approach to work outside before it shows its belief in the approach, and learns its strengths and limitations, by trying it internally. The absence of a supportive environment for a participatory approach can lead to the isolation of those who do not share the views of the leadership at the starting line. In such instances, decisions are made without a reasonable amount of information or scrutiny, while staff members who object are ostracized. The absence of a culture of participation means that some staff just go along with the power structure, and give the power structure a false sense of the correctness of its decisions. Those who would present a different view that might lead to better decisions are marginalized.”

Dayton Maxwell: “The private sector has developed analysis techniques for providing objective results of customer surveys on employee performance. Xerox, widely recognized as the industry leader in reengineering, IS ROUTINELY USING this tool as one element in evaluating employee performance. Thus, in addition to customer surveys on program satisfaction, customer surveys on USAID employee performance are possible.

“These employee performance customer surveys include FSNs and partners, who carry out most of the work for us in the field. The effectiveness of our FSNs and partners depends both on how effectively we acquaint them with reengineering behaviors and methods and on how effectively we work with them in a participative manner to achieve customer goals once teamwork practices are understood and applied. The importance of U.S. and indigenous NGOs,

universities, and other partners is growing, thus the importance of how well we as employees can work effectively with them is growing. Direct feedback on our performance has a way of attracting our attention and making 'the connection' very clear.”

Frank Pavich: “The proliferation of teams forming around themes and tasks reminds me of the “choose-up” basketball games in the school yard. Everyone is picking the same (best players) to be on their team. While I think the move toward reinvention and reengineering is an absolute must, I can't help remembering Terry Brown's words when he visited Cairo, 'The greatest challenge will be to integrate the new tools for doing business with the best of the old, and not throw out the baby with the bath water.' ”

Leroy Jackson: “In today's private sector, old adages like 'Know your customer' still are being used. My sense is some USAID people may be confused about a focus on participation and customer focus. I hear things like 'it's like the Holy Grail.' Perhaps we need a 'hook' or more succinct message to our people rooted in how a dynamic and successful private sector functions. I suggest an emphasis on the critical need to 1) know more directly the people we want to help and 2) have them tell us what it is they will 'buy,' i.e., identify as their own priorities, and what they will gladly perpetuate once USAID has come and gone.”

S.O. Teams—Empowerment within the Hierarchy

Michael Farbman (excerpt from USAID/Morocco response to the Administrator's request for comments on reforms): “In November 1994, USAID/Morocco restructured its program management around a concept of strategic objective teams, each composed of officers from throughout the mission, and possessing a mandate to oversee performance in the S.O. area, liaison with outside stakeholders in the S.O. area, and cooperation with the Global Bureau and PPC counterparts. Design, performance monitoring, quality control, and similar responsibilities all were delegated to the teams.

“Notwithstanding mission-wide commitment to the principles and benefits of this type of participation, the question was raised whether mission executive management could, or ought to, delegate to S.O. teams the right of ultimate approval, *without executive review*, of such actions as work plan review, strategy or performance indicator revisions that affect the mission's contract with the AID/W Bureau, waivers, etc., concerning which the S.O. teams are charged with primary oversight.

“The question here was whether, even under the most liberal interpretations of reengineering, the minimum hierarchical requirements and responsibilities which cannot be redelegated by mission directors does not *ipso facto* make a mockery of the empowerment principle that lay at the heart of what mission management was trying to achieve through its restructuring. Not surprisingly, we were unable to come up with a concrete resolution to this issue.”