

# **Participatory Approaches: A facilitator's guide**



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# INTRODUCTION

## ***Q: Who sets the development agenda?***

Participatory approaches demand that we redefine the relationship between donors, development workers, partners and beneficiaries. VSO is pressing the case for participation and partnership in development. This publication has therefore been developed to provide a guide to understanding and developing that relationship. The guide is primarily designed for VSO volunteers, partner organisations and staff, based as it is on our existing experience in promoting participation in our partnerships. However, it is hoped that it will also prove useful to the wider development community, wherever people are committed to facilitating more participation, inclusion and empowerment in the development process.

Participation means many things to many people. It carries potential benefits, but only if all those involved have a common understanding and set of expectations. VSO volunteers and staff generally agree that participation is essential for sustainable and successful development, but often don't know where to begin. Many are convinced that participation is necessary, but there is little information available to them on how to facilitate it. The sort of questions they are faced with include:

## ***Q: What level of participation is appropriate?***

## ***Q: What are the pitfalls?***

## ***Q: What is the best way of facilitating participation?***

## ***Q: What tools can we use to encourage participation?***

This book provides a set of guidelines for people who will be involved in participatory processes to seek their own answers to the above questions. It provides a framework for

common understanding, some advice on good facilitation, and a set of tools and activities that may help to facilitate dialogue, identify blocks and reveal appropriate development initiatives.

## ***How to use this guide***

The guide is organised into three parts: Principles, Methods and Tools.

## **Part I: Principles**

In this context, **principles are basic elements and assumptions for good practice.**

**Section 1** compares participatory approaches with top-down approaches, and examines how participation fits into VSO's approach to development. The range of different participatory approaches is discussed. The role of participation in VSO's approach to development is presented, together with feedback from over 20 country programme offices on the benefits and challenges of taking a participatory approach.

**Section 2** discusses how to facilitate participatory processes with multiple stakeholders. A framework is presented to help plan and organise work at different levels of participation throughout successive phases of a development process or project. Some signposts to useful tools are included for each level.

**Section 3** examines the key facilitation skills needed to support participatory activities.

## **Part II: Methods**

In this context, **methods are combinations of tools and strategies, designed to achieve a certain purpose or goal.** Here, the guide collates a range of participatory methods that

## WARNING

### Tools do not guarantee success

Methods, tools and techniques do not guarantee participation. Our attitude and behaviour as facilitators of tools, of empowerment and of development, is of prime importance. Our role is not to create solutions, but to learn to ask questions, be open, and 'unlearn' our own assumptions. At the same time, local people and VSO partners must come to appreciate and value their own knowledge and skills.

To facilitate participation successfully, all involved must recognise its usefulness and potential. One of the common arguments against participation is that it is costly and time-consuming. However, feedback from VSO's country programmes and the wider development community shows that it is cost-effective. The returns justify the investment in terms of sustainability and effectiveness. No-one has yet attempted to calculate the cost of ineffective and unsustainable development caused by lack of participation.

We recognise the limitations of participatory approaches and the value of more extractive methods such as sample surveys and in-depth interviews. Nevertheless, if local people take ownership of all stages and levels of decision-making, development activities are more likely to build on local strengths, meet local needs and priorities, and foster self-determination and sustainability. This is the potential of participation in development.

have been used successfully in the field by VSO and others. Methods are categorised according to their suitability for use at different stages of the development process, ie:

1. initial stages of appraisal, analysis and planning
2. reviewing and evaluating progress as plans are implemented.

Examples are also given of methods that can be used for specific purposes, such as Participatory Organisational Appraisal and Gender/Diversity Analysis.

### Part III: Toolkit

In this context, **tools are participatory exercises**. This section gives some tips on how to choose the most appropriate tool and on how to organise participatory workshops and small group activity. It also systematically records a range of tools used by development workers all over the world, including VSO. A matrix of all the tools provides an at-a-glance reference of which tools are appropriate for which stage of the development process, the level of participation for which they are most suitable and the dominant communication type used (visual, oral or written).

A profile of each tool includes guidelines on its purpose, potential applications and variations, as well as possible pitfalls. Illustrative case studies taken from real experiences of development workers in the field are also included.

The variations and applications of each tool are limited only by your own creativity – the guide offers suggestions rather than

prescriptions. Not every tool will work in every situation or culture, certainly not without adaptation. The only way to improve your facilitation of participatory approaches is to have the courage to try things, and to learn from your mistakes.

A blank worksheet is also included in Appendix III This template can be copied and used to add your own tools and adaptations to create a personalised guide from your own experience in the field.

# I-1 PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATION

## Introduction

This section looks at the principles that underlie participatory approaches and attempts to answer the following questions:

***Q. What are the origins of participatory approaches to development?***

***Q. What are the key principles of facilitating participation for empowerment?***

***Q. What is VSO's experience with promoting participation?***

### **I-1.1 Participatory approaches to development**

Participatory approaches are based on shared ownership of decision-making. This

approach is a response to 'top-down' approaches to development, in which power and decision-making is largely in the hands of external development professionals.

The top-down approach used to be the conventional style of development. However, this had many flaws and was not effective. It also raised questions about whether 'outsiders' had the right or the knowledge to set the development agenda of local people. In the 1980s, development workers began to seek more participatory alternatives that avoided some of these problems. They drew on alternative methods of learning and action that, at the time, represented a radical change. In general, this change has been embraced as a positive shift in development practice. Table 1 compares some of the differences between the two approaches.



VSO/Sue O'Farrell

**Table 1:** A comparison of top-down and participatory approaches to development

	<b>TOP-DOWN APPROACHES</b>	<b>PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES</b>
<b>PLAYERS</b>	External development agents work for local beneficiaries	Partners/participants/stakeholders
<b>PROCESS</b>	Development agents develop their own solutions to local problems	Development agents facilitate a process of empowerment, learning and action
<b>CONTROL</b>	In the hands of external development agents	Control shared between stakeholders
<b>METHODS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaire surveys</li> <li>• Questions planned in advance</li> <li>• Rapid visits</li> <li>• Key informant interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual diagramming tools</li> <li>• Semi-structured interviews</li> <li>• Long-term action research</li> <li>• Group discussion</li> </ul>
<b>LEARNING</b>	Extractive	Mutual learning
<b>ROLE OF THE DEVELOPMENT WORKER</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject expert</li> <li>• Teacher</li> <li>• Leader</li> <li>• Controller</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process expert</li> <li>• Learner</li> <li>• Facilitator</li> <li>• Catalyst</li> </ul>
<b>ASSUMPTIONS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development workers are experts who can solve the problems of local people, even if they are unfamiliar with local issues, culture and ecology</li> <li>• The beneficiaries of development are, at best, helpless victims; or at worst, the architects of their own poverty</li> <li>• Interviewers do not influence the process</li> <li>• Interviewees give accurate data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainable development will be most effective when the skills, experience and objectivity of development workers are combined with the skills, experience and greater contextual understanding of local people</li> <li>• People will be able to participate</li> <li>• Visual and interactive methods will provide better quality data</li> </ul>
<b>BENEFITS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapid</li> <li>• Lends itself to statistical analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Represents the views of local people</li> <li>• Richness and quality of data</li> </ul>
<b>PITFALLS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviewees prompted with answers</li> <li>• Surveys designed without understanding local context</li> <li>• Focus is on the task not the process</li> <li>• Projects fail to reach the most needy due to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roadside bias (focus on accessible people)</li> <li>• Time bias (focus on 'easy' times of year and day)</li> <li>• People bias (focus on leaders and the articulate)</li> <li>• Project bias (development impacts are falsely exaggerated). Projects do not target the most disadvantaged people and may reinforce existing systems that keep poor people poor</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation interpreted in different ways by different people</li> <li>• Projects presented as 'participatory' are still dominated by top-down methods – no real sharing of power or decisions</li> <li>• Participatory tools used in an extractive rather than an empowering way</li> <li>• Time constraints rush the process</li> <li>• Local elites sabotage participation</li> </ul>
<b>MEASURE OF EFFECTIVENESS</b>	Development worker meets their objectives and measures an improvement in local conditions according to their own criteria	Partners and participants monitor and evaluate participation, empowerment, and progress towards joint goals

### **I-1.2 A scale of participatory approaches**

A gradual accumulation of good practice in participation has been documented in various 'systems' with different, names, aims and characteristics. Some of these are explored in more depth in Part II: Methods. A list of common acronyms is included in Appendix I. For the sake of clarity, we will use Robert Chambers' (1997) suggested term 'Participatory

Approaches' and the abbreviation 'PA' in this guide as an umbrella term for any participatory system or method.

Systems using PA have been successfully used to investigate livelihoods and natural resource management; health and disability issues; education and learning; gender and development; building organisational capacity; community mobilisation; involvement in governance

and advocacy; and to tackle HIV and AIDS awareness-raising and behaviour change. PA has proved effective and it is here to stay.

However, there is not just a black or white choice between top-down or participatory approaches to development. PA is (a) extremely diverse; and (b) a work in progress, changing all the time. The simple term 'participatory approaches' disguises a range of approaches, created by an increasingly innovative development community. These systems and methods are all designed to achieve different aims. So, when considering any system, it is vital to consider its basic principles, its potential uses, and most importantly, how 'participatory' it really is.

In reality, a range of approaches exist that lie along a scale from the more 'extractive' to the more 'empowering' (Figure 1). Extractive tools, or tools used in an extractive way, retain power in the hands of the development worker. Empowering tools, or tools facilitated in an empowering way, hand power over to the participants. It is not that one end of the scale is better than the other, simply that they achieve different things. We must be clear about our purpose, select the right approach for the job, and not encourage participants to have expectations of empowerment if our methods and attitude do not permit any meaningful transfer of decision-making control.

### PA for empowerment: key principles

At the core of good practice in PA is self-critical awareness, personal behaviour and

attitudes, and commitment to positive action. The essence of this philosophy has been called 'handing over the stick' – a symbolic transfer of power from the development worker to local partners. If we are serious about PA and serious about helping local people to pursue their own development agenda, we must decide whether we are prepared to hand over power in this way.

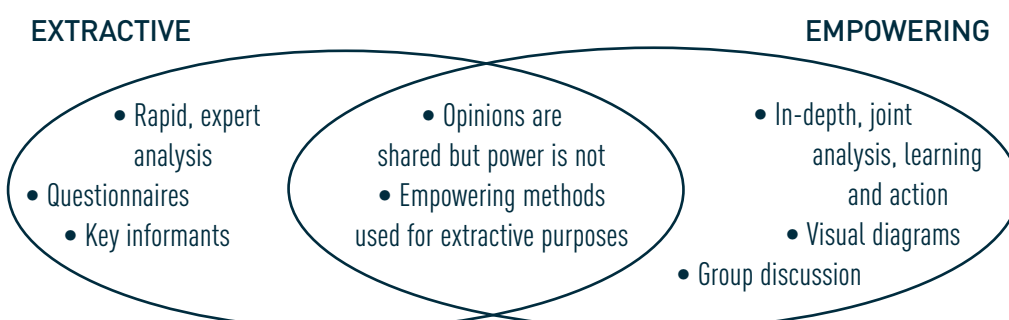
Some practitioners believe that all systems and methods using PA have certain key principles in common. However, if we accept the scale shown in Figure 1 below, it would be more accurate to say that the following (adapted from Pretty, 1994) is a set of aspirational aims for good practice:

- defined methodology and system of learning and interaction
- emphasis on the validity of participants' different opinions and perspectives
- group learning processes, involving interaction of development workers with local people, and interaction of different disciplines and sectors
- flexible approaches adapted to each set of conditions and participants
- development workers facilitate the agenda and priorities of local stakeholders

## WARNING

Tools are only as effective as the skill (and in this case, the attitude) of the craftsman. Similarly, the use of PA does not guarantee participation or empowerment. There are many pitfalls and no honest short cuts. PA done badly can be damaging if the opinion of participants is influenced or presented inaccurately. Bad practice is commonly due to time pressures or poor facilitation. However, PA has also been hijacked for political reasons, to 'tick the participation box' in funding proposals. If the tools are misused to support the agenda of outsiders rather than the opinions and experience of local people, projects will almost inevitably fail as a result.

**Figure 1:** A scale of participatory approaches, from extractive to empowering





- debate and analysis of change leads to agreed, sustainable action
- building the capacity of local stakeholders to initiate self-mobilised action.

### **I-1.3 VSO's approach to participation**

VSO's vision is for our everyday practice to be participatory at all levels of the organisation. In our context, **participation is a process of collective analysis, learning and action.** VSO's role in the process is to facilitate and/or be involved alongside other stakeholders.

This process aims to:

- change the balance of power so that everyone's rights and aspirations are respected, acknowledged and used as a basis for dialogue
- generate shared understanding of problems, priorities and possibilities
- agree achievable and sustainable change and action
- build the capacity of local stakeholders to initiate self-mobilised action
- celebrate achievements develop strengths and generate shared learning.

By facilitating and participating in this process, VSO and its partners aim to build their organisational capacity and effectiveness. Good participatory practice will result in more sustainable relationships built on trust and respect. Activities and achievements will be jointly owned and better evaluated, leading to greater development impact and better satisfied partners and volunteers.

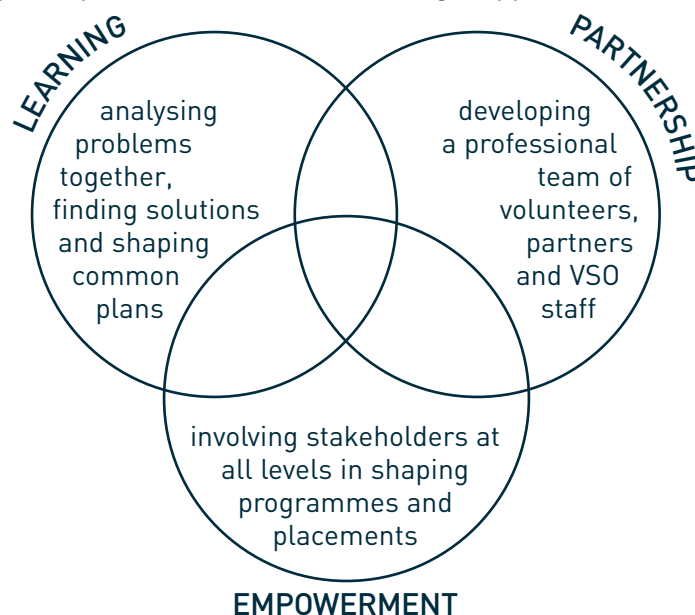
To set out a serious, strategic commitment to this vision, participation has been included as a key element of VSO's three organisational approaches (VSO, 2002). These are: commitment to learning; partnership; and empowerment (Figure 2).

A **commitment to learning** requires us to involve local people, who have a greater understanding of local conditions in the identification of development priorities, analysis of skills and resources, and implementation of sustainable change.

**Partnership** moves beyond a donor – beneficiary relationship to a more equal sharing of skills, power and ideas.

By mobilising institutions and disadvantaged people in a process of **empowerment**, local people can gain greater control over their own futures and their own development agenda.

**Figure 2:** Aspects of participation in VSO's three strategic approaches



In practice, the approach described above means encouraging both volunteers and VSO staff to experiment with methods that increase local involvement at all stages of projects. Their experience has been used to illustrate the methods and tools outlined in this guide.

On the ground, effective analysis, learning and action can only take place when the skills, experience and objectivity of volunteers are combined with the skills, experience and greater contextual understanding of the stakeholders they work with. Volunteers are also encouraged to share skills and experiences with each other to increase their individual impact. Their placements are often clustered together by theme or location to help this process

As a minimum requirement, VSO's country programme offices have committed to a participatory process of assessing new partners and preparing, monitoring and evaluating volunteers' placements. In some cases, stakeholders are involved in shaping overall country programmes through the forum of country advisory boards, for example. Increasing local involvement through stronger relationships has potential benefits for all concerned. Nevertheless, it takes significant commitment and investment

to generate these benefits. Some lessons learned are presented below.

### Feedback from VSO country programmes worldwide

VSO's programme offices have been motivated to incorporate PA into their work due to frustrations at the shortcomings of existing methods. This included the challenges of grappling with hierarchical organisations that dictated a top-down approach. This approach was at odds with the staff of these organisations and severely constrained skill-sharing. A more open dialogue was needed to gain honest information about placements – their purpose and challenges. Employers felt little ownership over the placement and frequently did not understand VSO's development strategy. Furthermore, many programmes were reactive rather than proactive in identifying needs and working with potential partners to meet these needs.

The following feedback comes from 21 VSO programme offices across Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe that have experimented with PA for assessing new volunteer placements. These programme offices recognised several **key benefits and challenges** of using PA:

## BENEFITS

"An opportunity to build rapport and 'get behind the public façade' of an organisation."

"Transferable principles for other methods."

"Gives a voice to a wider range of stakeholders."

"The process of PA is even more useful than the outcome."

"Facilitates communication and mutual understanding."

"Opportunities to gain insights into gender, hierarchy, collaboration, consensus issues."

"Emphasis more on active, experiential learning."

## CHALLENGES

"PA challenges accepted cultural norms, eg giving people lower in an organisation the same voice as senior management. Senior staff may continue to represent their own views as those of the whole organisation."

"PA consumes time and resources and creates paperwork."

"Coordinators need culturally specific facilitation skills. Common language skills are also essential."

"Location/meals/travel costs may limit the participation of some stakeholders."

"Some participants know how to behave, what to say and what we want to hear!"

"After the effort of the process, stakeholders may expect some guaranteed results and benefits! Expectations need to be prioritised and managed by explicitly stating what VSO can and cannot do to meet the partner's needs."

They suggested the following **ways to limit the challenges and achieve the benefits**:

- ✓ “Keep it simple – do what you can with whom you can.”
- ✓ “Use neutral people with native language skills as facilitators.”
- ✓ “Provide the organisation with a skeleton timetable in advance – this will allow them to prepare but not to predict your every move. This is helpful if some participants have been through a similar process before.”
- ✓ “Put the partner’s feedback first – their opinion and progress is more important than yours. Try and alternate the order in which individuals feed back. If the director always feeds back first this will influence less senior participants.”
- ✓ “If participants have an idea or a way forward – especially to deal with a block – let them. Hand over the stick. Manage time by delegating more to the participants. Plan enough time into your schedule to ensure that you do not feel under pressure or compromise the process.”
- ✓ “Translate information into plans for change. Turn objectives into time-bound actions, assigned to different participants. This puts the theory of PA into practice by directly involving people in decisions and actions.”
- ✓ “Build confidence in PA by starting with a simple task or a receptive group. Learning any new approach takes time but it gets easier with practice. You should prioritise good PA over other uses of time. The investment of time pays off by reducing later problems, generating good quality data, agreement, common understanding, commitment and rapport.”
- ✓ “Innovate. Make the process and its exercises look attractive. Methods and paperwork should be adapted to the local context and made as simple as possible.”
- ✓ “Lead by example – use public transport and stay in appropriate accommodation. Write reports in local language first, and then translate it into English for VSO.”

## REAL EXPERIENCE

### VSO programmes

“PA is more powerful than interviewing if you are aiming for responsibility and commitment. Despite our fears, the process does not actually take more time in the field.”

“Participants learn more about themselves and VSO learns more ways in which volunteers can contribute to their efforts.”

## REAL EXPERIENCE

### VSO programmes

“Serving volunteers are a valuable part of the assessment team, to gauge whether the expectations and objectives of new organisations are realistic.”

“By taking on board the principles of participation, we decided that ‘placement assessment’ wasn’t appropriate. We renamed the process ‘partnership development’ and use it to examine long-term development needs rather than individual volunteer placements.”

## SECTION SUMMARY – KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Participatory or bottom-up approaches are a response to top-down approaches to development which failed to generate appropriate or sustainable benefits.
- Participatory approaches (PA) encompass a range of different methods, tools and attitudes, which range from the more extractive to the more empowering.
- VSO understands participation to be a process of collective analysis, learning and action.
- Participation means progressively handing over power and control to local stakeholders so that they can set their own development agenda.
- Participation is not quick, easy or simple. However, people in the field generally agree that the benefits make the initial investment well worth the effort.

## NEXT STEPS

VSO’s experience with PA in the countries where we work reveals the importance of having guidelines for how to facilitate participation. Using lessons learned within and outside VSO, the following section outlines a framework that will help you to manage participation in a systematic way. It is not a blueprint for success, but may act as a useful checklist and set of guidelines.

## I-2 THE PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

### Introduction

The shift from top-down to 'bottom-up' or participatory development shown in Section 1 (Table 1) is not simple or easy to achieve in practice. Some fundamental questions include:

**Q. How is it done?**

**Q. Does everyone participate all of the time?**

**Q. At what point can we say a meaningful level of participation has been achieved?**

This section aims to answer some of these questions by taking an overview of the participatory process using a simple framework. This provides a reference for planning new projects, or for reviewing existing ones. The framework helps us to approach participation in a structured and consistent way; to establish common understanding and realistic

expectations in all participants. This should make the path of participation smoother.

### I-2.1 An analytical framework

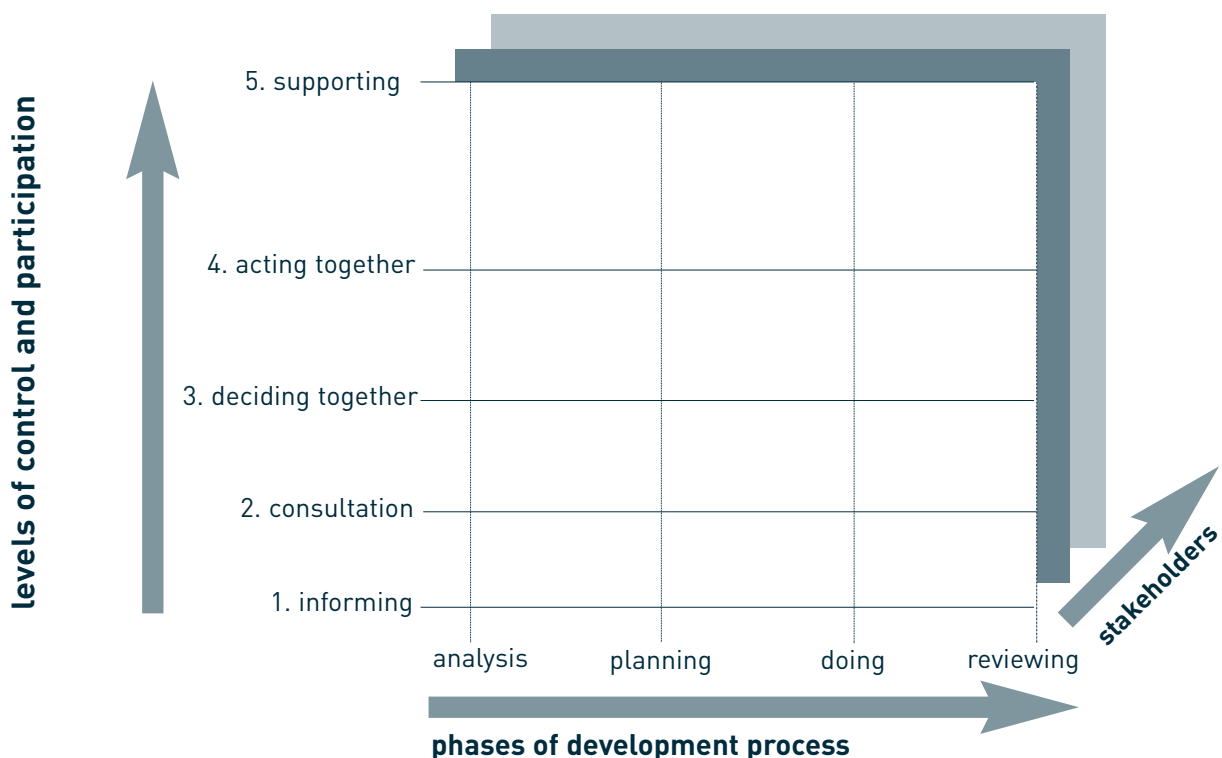
The framework (Figure 3) is based on three key principles:

1. Different **stakeholders** are involved, each with different aims and capabilities.
2. Stakeholders participate at different **levels**, from passive involvement to active empowerment.
3. The level of participation of each stakeholder may change at different **phases** of a development process (analysis, planning, doing and reviewing).

Development tends to work best when all stakeholders can participate to their desired level throughout the development process. To facilitate such participation is VSO's aim and challenge.

**Figure 3:** The participatory development process: an analytical framework

*(Adapted from Wilcox, 1994)*



## Clarifying the level of participation

In Figure 3, the gap between each level becomes wider as participation of stakeholders increases. This shows that the lower levels are much easier to achieve than the higher ones. Without a full view of all five levels, it is common for well-meaning organisations or volunteers to rush into the lower levels, thinking that they have 'achieved' participation. However, a shift to full self-mobilisation involves a long-term process of change.

From the perspective of the development worker, the different levels of participation and control shown in the framework can be described as follows:

**Level 1. Informing:** Telling people about the development projects that are planned and what the benefits will be. Most commonly done through community meetings or information pamphlets. Clear communication is a minimum requirement for development workers, but participation is passive rather than active, with no empowerment of local people or ownership of the planned activities.

**Level 2. Consultation:** Offering a number of options and listening to the feedback you get. Most commonly done through focus groups or interviews. This is an initial step to involving people and benefiting from their greater knowledge of local conditions and opinions. However, you are still retaining power and control.

**Level 3. Deciding together:** Encouraging others to provide their own ideas and join in deciding the best way forward. This is done through project committees or through community initiatives using participatory activities to encourage joint analysis, planning and decision-making. A range of stakeholders have the opportunity to empower themselves and take ownership of the process.

**Level 4. Acting together:** Not only do different interests decide together what is best, but they form a partnership to carry it out. Local people are involved at all stages of the process and there is an equal sharing

of power. Development workers are acting much more as partners and facilitators.

### Level 5. Supporting independent initiatives:

Helping others do what they want – perhaps within a framework of grants, advice and support. Power and control rests with local people: they are self-mobilised. Development workers play a consultation or facilitation role as requested.

The five levels show how 'participation' means many different things, but only a few represent meaningful sharing of power and ideas. It is important to clarify the level of participation that is intended or achievable. Otherwise there can be a clash of expectations if stakeholders believe they have an opportunity to influence decisions when in reality they are only being consulted.

VSO aims to develop partnerships that operate at levels 3–5, since this is where participation becomes meaningful and development becomes sustainable. However, any facilitator (despite the best intentions) remains in a strong position to influence the actual level of participation. Section 3 underlines the need for facilitators to be self-aware and constantly think about the part they are playing.

Research shows that projects **do** become more sustainable, appropriate and effective as the level of local participation increases (Narayan, 1993). People are unlikely to commit to projects that are not relevant to them or that they cannot control. Nevertheless, it is worth considering the view that different levels may be appropriate at different times to meet the expectations of different interests (Wilcox, 1994).

### REALITY CHECK

Organisations or communities will often need the will and support to radically restructure themselves if they are to be truly self-mobilised. This requires wider cultural and institutional change – a rare phenomenon in developed or developing countries!

### Clarifying the timescale and who is involved

'Local people', 'stakeholders' and 'partners' include people with different strengths, needs and capabilities, who may wish to participate at different levels and at different points in the development process. As a VSO volunteer, or other development worker, you are also a stakeholder in the development process. What is *your* agenda?

In Figure 3, on page 13, analysis, planning, doing and reviewing are illustrated as stages in a linear development process. In practice, they are actually **phases of an iterative cycle**, which mirrors the adult learning cycle and which may be repeated numerous times during a particular project or programme of activities (Figure 4).

The first phases consist of orienting yourself, establishing your credentials

**Figure 4:** Development as a cyclical learning process



and building rapport, so that you can facilitate analysis of problems and opportunities. Some questions you may need to ask yourself and others include:

***Q. What is happening at the moment?***

***Q. Who are the main players?***

***Q. What are the problems?***

***Q. How have these changed over time?***

***Q. What lessons can be learned from past experience?***

VSO recommends that volunteers spend the first 25% of their placement engaging in this phase rather than plunging into ill-advised action.

Initial analysis leads to identification of actions that will make a positive change. This **planning** phase is not just a case of asking 'what can we do?' and 'how can we do it?' It must also include planning for participation. Some questions that are likely to arise include:

**Q. Who has a stake in this issue?**

**Q. How would they like to be involved?**

**Q. Who will carry out the planned activities?**

**Q. How will we measure change?**

Debate and analysis must lead to action. In the '**doing**' phase, action needs to be agreed and well-informed. This overlaps with the '**review**' phase, since actions should be monitored by participants. Reviews are also used to agree future actions, maintain benefits, evaluate participation and sustainability, or respond to problems and blocks.

VSO's SPARK (Sharing and Promotion of Awareness and Regional Knowledge) project in south-east Asia adds an important fifth stage to this cycle: Celebrate! ie take time to

appreciate what has been achieved before continuing with analysing the new situation and planning future action.

### REALITY CHECK

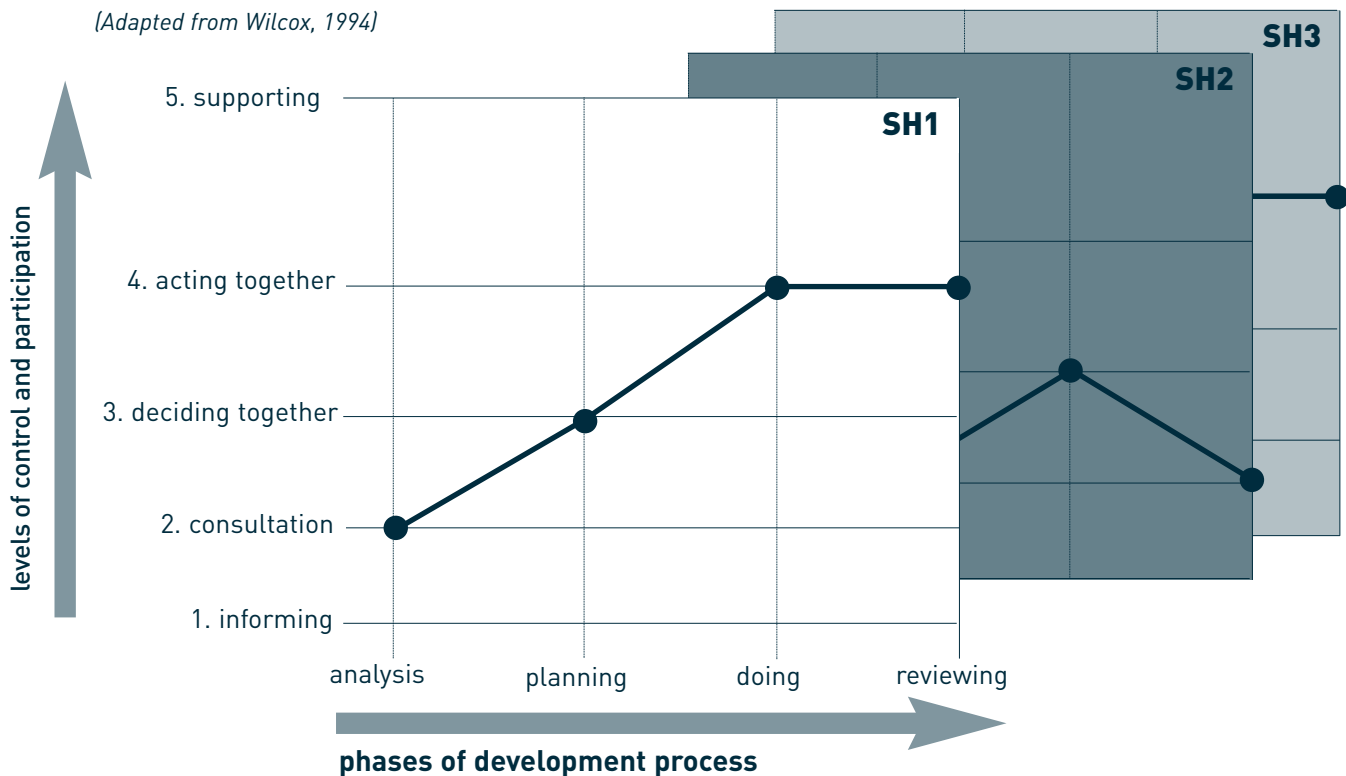
Life is never as tidy as a project plan. We often try to do things without enough planning. However, it is often difficult to see what to do before trying something out, and then reflecting on what happens. This is sometimes the only way to identify the real problem.

### Putting it all together

An example of putting the framework into action is shown Figure 5. Those with less of a stake in what happens may be happy to be informed or consulted. Others will want and need to be involved in decisions and actions. The facilitator of the process will have the difficult task of identifying these stakeholders, helping them to work out what they want from the process and how this might be achieved.

**Figure 5:** An example framework showing different levels of participation by multiple stakeholders (SH1, SH2, SH3) throughout the phases of a development process

(Adapted from Wilcox, 1994)



## **I-2.2 The framework in practice**

Now we are aware of different stakeholders seeking different levels of participation at different times, the idea of participation may seem much more complicated! Some questions which may arise include:

***Q. When is each level 'appropriate'?***

***Q. What tools can I use to help me at each level?***

***Q. What problems am I likely to come across, and how do I deal with them?***

This section will provide some guidelines to help you put the framework into practice. This includes signposts to useful tools that may assist at each level of participation.



### **Some initial questions**

If you are planning to start facilitating a participatory process, it is important to reflect first on your own role. Some of the biggest pitfalls with participation often arise because the people initiating participation aren't clear about what they want to achieve. Consider the following questions:

***Q. What is the aim of taking a participatory approach?***

- To develop plans that meet people's needs?
- To give disadvantaged people a say in the plans?
- To give a cross-section of stakeholders joint control over the solutions?

***Q. What is your role?***

- How much control and influence do you have over decisions and resources?
- What is your professional expertise or knowledge?
- How do local people see you?

***Q. Who will have the final say over decisions?***

- You? Your organisation?
- Those who will be affected by the proposed work?
- Existing local elites or political institutions?

***Q. Are local people and organisations ready to work in a participatory way?***

- Do they have the desire?
- Do they have the skills?
- Do they have the authority?

Your role will affect the level of participation of other stakeholders. For example, if you are controlling resources you may be very clear and firm about how much say you are prepared to offer others. However, if you are acting as a neutral facilitator you may be helping different interests negotiate appropriate levels. You will also have significant control over who benefits. Have you targeted disadvantaged people? Or maintained the status quo?

The following guidelines will help you and your stakeholders clarify your roles. They may also help you to troubleshoot or appraise existing projects. Particular attention is paid to level 4: acting together in partnership, since this is the level that VSO tends to aim for.

### **When to work at level 1: INFORMING**

Informing is essentially a top-down, 'take it or leave it' development approach. The methods and tools that you use will therefore focus on one-way communication rather than two-way dialogue, and as such they lie outside the purpose of this guide. It is important to remember that even one-way informing can be done using visual and creative methods, which are more inclusive and powerful than the written word<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> If you have limited resources and even less artistic confidence, refer to Nicola Harford and Nicola Baird's *How to Make and Use Visual Aids* (1997). But remember to be aware of people with visual disabilities who might be excluded by the use of wholly visual methods.



Volunteers may experience this 'informing' approach to development even if they do not agree with it. In this case, one of the objectives of their placement might be to challenge this norm constructively to enable disadvantaged people to become more involved.

Informing on its own **may** be appropriate when:

- there is no scope for alternative forms of action, eg legal boundaries
- you are reporting a course of action that doesn't affect others
- at the start of a process, with the promise of more opportunity to participate later.

Informing on its own is **not** appropriate when:

- you are seeking to empower community interests. Information is necessary for empowerment, but seldom enough on its own (aim instead for levels 3, 4 or 5)
- there are alternatives in which people have a legitimate interest (aim for levels 3 or 4)
- you have not oriented yourself, built rapport or established your credentials.

If people want more active involvement, consider their case. Who is setting the rules? Take comments seriously. It is easier to change the level of participation and your stance early on. Later it may become an uncomfortable U-turn.

### REALITY CHECK

Before taking up an information-giving approach, consider:

- **Q. Have you identified your stakeholders?**  
*Will they be satisfied with information only?*
- **Q. Can you present your proposals in a way people will understand and relate to?**
- **Q. Have you tailored your communication methods to the participants and available time?**
- **Q. Are you prepared to change your approach if people want more than information?**

### When to work at level 2: CONSULTATION

Consultation is appropriate when you can offer people some choices on what you are going to do, but when there is little or no opportunity for them to develop their own ideas or help put plans into action.

Consultation **may** be appropriate when:

- you want to improve an existing service
- you have clear plans for a project, and there appear to be a limited range of options
- local interests can understand and relate to these options
- you are able to use feedback to choose between or modify options.

Consultation is **not** appropriate when:

- you aren't going to take any notice of what people say
- you are seeking to empower community interests (aim for levels 3, 4 or 5)
- you are not clear what you wish to do and are seeking ideas (aim for levels 3 or 4)
- you don't have the resources or skills to carry out the proposal (choose level 4 or 5).

The following **tools** can be used for consultation:

- **Ranking, Rating, Sorting, Matrices**
- **24-Hour Analysis** and **Social Norms** to appraise affected groups
- **Maps** and **Timelines** to see when and where things happen
- Discussion Starter, Picture Sequences, **Drawing and Discussion**
- **SWOT** (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) **Analysis, Flow Diagrams**
- **Focus Group Discussions**

Other methods that can be used include: surveys and market research; consultative committees; simulations where the options and constraints are clear.

### Common problems:

**You have a restricted budget.** You can try using basic information-giving methods plus meetings hosted by local organisations and then facilitate an open meeting at the end of the process.

**Other colleagues want to take over.** This is an excellent opportunity for you to practise your facilitation and negotiation skills. Try to ensure your colleagues consider some key elements:

- that people understand the options
- that options should be realistic
- that they know how they will respond to feedback from stakeholders.

**You don't have enough time.** Be honest about the deadlines, and use the time-pressure to your advantage.

**You get more – or less – response than expected.** You may need to consider whether consultation was the appropriate approach. Did you think it through from the participants' point of view? Why might they have responded in the way they did?

### REALITY CHECK

Before taking up a consultation approach, consider:

- **Q. Who are the stakeholders/consultants, how do you reach them, and will they be satisfied with consultation? Are you just seeking support for your own agenda?**
- **Q. Can you present options for consultation in a way people will understand?**
- **Q. Have you tailored your consultation methods to the participants and the time available?**
- **Q. Can you handle the feedback, and (how) do you plan to report back to those consulted?**
- **Q. Are you prepared to change your approach if people want more than consultation?**

### When to work at level 3: DECIDING TOGETHER

Deciding together means generating options together, choosing between them and agreeing ways forward. It is a difficult approach because it can mean giving people the power to choose without the responsibility of carrying out the resulting actions. It is a longer, more complex process, and people need more confidence to get involved.

Deciding together **may** be appropriate when:

- it is important that other people 'own' the development process
- you need to tap into local people's greater understanding of their situation
- there is enough time.

Deciding together is **not** appropriate when:

- you have little room for manoeuvre (choose levels 1 or 2)
- you can't implement decisions yourself (aim for levels 4 or 5).

This approach is moving into more meaningful participation, which opens up scope to apply many more participatory **tools**:

- information-giving methods to start the process: most tools can be used in this less participatory mode, but this attitude of controlling the process may set a precedent.
- **Stakeholder Analysis/Venn Diagrams** to identify who should be involved
- **24-Hour Analysis** to identify activities and time constraints of stakeholders
- **SWOT Analysis, Forcefield Analysis, Problem Trees, Flow Diagrams, Community Records or Accounts** to understand more about the situation/context and make informed choices
- **Guided Visualisation, Bridge Model**, and different **Drawing** or development theatre

techniques for establishing aspirations, future goals and how to work towards them

- **Mapping** and **Transects** to bring out territorial/resource/social/spatial issues
- **Thought Shower** to develop some options
- **development theatre** for evaluating opinions and testing possible solutions.

In addition, simulations can be used as powerful overall techniques, and action planning tools to decide what to do next.

#### Common problems:

**You don't have enough time.** There are no short cuts to meaningful participation. Consider the limitations of levels 1 and 2.

**You are not sure if your colleagues will back up any decisions.** Involve them in the process. You may want to organise internal participatory workshops or meetings before involving others.

**Apathy.** Why do people not want to join in? Maybe your project isn't relevant to local needs, priorities and capabilities. In which case, why are you doing it? Invest time in orientation and analysis phases.

**The tools look too complicated.** Try some of the easier ones with a small group that you know. Bring in an external trainer or facilitator. Practice, be prepared to make mistakes and learn from experience.

**The process is resisted by local norms.** Keep local decision-makers informed of your intentions. Consider running separate workshops for different groups (eg by status or gender) if this will overcome hierarchical or cultural constraints to participation.

### REALITY CHECK

Before taking up a deciding together approach, consider:

**Q. Are you prepared to accept other people's ideas?**

**Q. Have you targeted appropriate stakeholders, including disadvantaged people, who need to be part of the process?**

**Q. Are your aims clear, and have you identified constraints and acceptable boundaries?**

**Q. Do you have the skills to use the methods, and the authority to implement agreed actions?**

**Q. Have you managed to access people of traditionally lower status, while maintaining good relations with existing elites?**

### When to work at level 4: ACTING TOGETHER

Deciding and acting together in partnership involves trust as well as a common vision. VSO increasingly tries to set up longer-term partnerships rather than one-off volunteer placements in order to generate greater and more sustainable development impacts.

In preparing a partnership agreement, it is important to consider the mix of your desired goals, and whether they are realistic. The most common goals are:

- increasing the development impact of activities or projects
- building the capacity of the participants
- building working relationships of benefit for the future
- increasing local ownership of the process.

Acting together **may** be appropriate when:

- one party cannot achieve what they want on their own
- the various interests involved all get some extra benefit from acting together

- there is commitment to the time and effort needed to develop a partnership.

Acting together is **not** appropriate when:

- one party holds all the power and resources and uses this to impose its own solutions. At best, other parties can only be involved at levels 1 or 2
- the commitment to partnership is only superficial
- people want to have a say in making decisions, but not a long-term stake in carrying out solutions (move to level 3).

All of the methods and **tools** in this guide can potentially help you if you have the right attitude to facilitate rather than lead or direct, and have worked through the process of selecting the right tool for the job. You may like to consider:

- tools for deciding together to create a shared vision
- team-building exercises
- programme planning and design activities.

In addition, you could use interim structures like working parties and steering groups as a focus for decision-making and accountability, and longer-term structures through which you can work together.

### Common problems:

#### Wish lists of unachievable goals.

'Handing over the stick' does not mean giving stakeholders a free voucher redeemable in a VSO store of development solutions. Instead it means helping stakeholders to identify and prioritise specific challenges they face, plans for long-term action, and assignment of responsibility to each action. This needs to be accompanied by a clear discussion of what you can and cannot do to support the identified activities.

#### Formal partnerships are created too early.

The final structure should come last – after it has been agreed what you are going to do, how to get the resources, what skills will be needed, and how power and responsibility will be shared. At this stage, it may be a good idea to run open workshops, or set up interim structures like a steering group with clear terms of reference.

**Conflicts arise in meetings.** You may need to spend more time in workshop sessions and informal meetings to develop a shared vision and mutual understanding.

**Some interests feel excluded.** Further clarification of who the stakeholders are, and what their legitimate interests are, may be needed. You might want to consider organising workshops using an independent facilitator.

### REALITY CHECK

Before taking up an acting together approach, consider:

**Q. Do you have clear goals, and how flexible are you in pursuing them?**

**Q. Have you identified potential partners, and is there any evidence that they share similar goals and are interested in a partnership with you to achieve it?**

**Q. Do you trust each other and are you prepared to share power?**

**Q. Do you have the time and commitment necessary to form a partnership?**

### When to work at level 5: SUPPORTING INDEPENDENT INITIATIVES

Supporting independent organisational or community-based initiatives means helping others develop and carry out their own plans. Even at this high level of participation, you are still exercising power by placing limits and conditions on what you will support.

This is the most empowering approach – provided people **do** want to do things for themselves. They may, quite properly, choose a lower level of participation. The process has to be owned by, and move at the pace of, those who are going to run the initiative – although donors and others may set deadlines.

Supporting independent action **may** be appropriate when:

- there is a commitment to empower individuals or groups within the community or organisation
- people are interested in starting and running an initiative
- supporting conditions (culture, hierarchy, time) will permit this approach to work.

It is **not** appropriate when:

- independent action is seen as ‘a good thing’ or the current trend in development, and is pushed on people from the top down (consider levels 1–3 instead)
- there is no commitment to breaking down hierarchies or passing decision-making power over to disadvantaged people
- there are insufficient resources or capabilities to sustain development programmes.

Any method or **tool** in this guide could be of potential use. The challenge is to think through what the purpose of the group is, and what role they would like you to play. You might like to consider:

- development trusts, grants, advice and support – perhaps conditional on some commitment being made by the other interests involved
- workshops for helping groups create a shared vision, plan actions and mobilise resources. Several tools can be linked together to create a coherent workshop

- team-building exercises
- cross-visits to similar projects; seminars for community or project leaders
- interim structures like working parties and steering groups
- longer-term structures controlled by community interests.

#### Common problems:

**Community interests find it difficult to get organised.** Provide support and, if necessary, training. Arranging visits to similar projects or organising workshops with local facilitators may help.

**The steering group or other body cannot make decisions.** You may like to try organising workshop sessions outside formal committees.

**Little happens between meetings.** Try to ensure each meeting concludes with an action planning session, with clear allocation of responsibility for implementing and monitoring actions. Keeping in contact through a regular newsletter is one way of maintaining interest and motivation.

**People become committed to action, but resource-holders can't deliver.** Internal sessions could gain commitment within the supporting organisations or you could try using the media as leverage.

#### REALITY CHECK

Before taking up a supporting independent initiatives approach, consider:

**Q. Do you understand the different interests in the community and their needs?**

**Q. Have you contacted existing community-based organisations?**

**Q. Will your colleagues support the approach?**

**Q. Are you clear about your role, and do you have the necessary skills and resources?**

**SECTION SUMMARY – KEY LEARNING POINTS**

- There are different levels of participation appropriate for different situations.
- There are many stakeholders to consider, and their participation may vary over time.
- It is important to agree what level of participation is desired and achievable with all stakeholders.

**NEXT STEPS**

Sections 1 and 2 highlight good facilitation as the key to empowering processes. If you are more familiar with the role of teacher, leader or problem-solver, facilitation requires a significant shift in attitude. The following section examines the art of facilitation in a different culture.

## I-3 THE ART OF FACILITATION

### Introduction

Sections 1 and 2 point to **facilitation** as the key role of development workers supporting meaningful levels of participation. Before considering the methods and tools used by facilitators, it is important to establish some basic principles of facilitation:

*Q. What attitudes and behaviour do we need to adopt to facilitate participation?*

*Q. What effects do different cultural norms have on participation?*

*Q. What kinds of questions should I ask when facilitating?*

*Q. How can the use of visual aids help?*

This section discusses the relationship between participation, facilitation and the facilitator to help you examine your own role in the participatory process. Basic principles of facilitation are identified together with a summary of key facilitation skills. These skills can also act as a basis for facilitating processes of organisational capacity-building.

### I-3.1 Principles of facilitation

Most practitioners of PA agree that the best starting point is with your own attitude. You cannot magically create participation and empowerment from a recipe book of tools. Attitude and behaviour that support PA can be shown through the relationship between participation, facilitation and the facilitator, as explored below (Figure 6).

**Figure 6:** Participation, facilitation and the facilitator



The role of VSO, acting through its staff and volunteers as facilitators, is to mobilise, encourage, support and involve local people in participatory processes. This strengthens their capacity to take control over their own futures.

We have already discussed how, despite best intentions, facilitators are in a position to control the outcome of participatory activities and development processes. For this reason, you will need to decide when **you** should facilitate, and when a local person is more appropriate in this role. A cross-section of VSO programme offices<sup>1</sup> had the following to say about the role of volunteers in facilitating participatory processes:

- ✓ “It is not appropriate for the volunteer to facilitate if there are other options **because the facilitator holds the power.**”
- ✓ “Participation works best with local language-speakers as facilitators (to manage the process) and volunteers as observers (to act as sources of information).”
- ✓ “Facilitators need culturally specific facilitation skills – local people have a head start on volunteers in this respect. It is also more sustainable and empowering to have a local person in the spotlight, rather than a volunteer.”

This is not to say that volunteers (or other ‘outsider’ development workers) should never facilitate. They should merely ensure that they have thought through the options rather than automatically taking a facilitation role. The following **good practice points** can be used as a checklist for yourself or for local facilitators:

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### **Focusing on the process and the environment**

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A good facilitator and PA practitioner focuses on the process of group dynamics, rather than the task or outcome. This is to ensure that participation is ‘active’ rather than ‘passive’. It is not sufficient for participants just to show up. They must be actively involved. Otherwise, what

may be intended as participation at level 3 or 4 of our framework (deciding/acting together) may result in a lower level activity like consulting, or even informing.

People cannot ‘be empowered’ by others.

**People can only empower themselves.** The facilitator’s role is to create an environment in which this can take place. This process may be slow and facilitators should be positive, flexible, committed and patient. In the early phases of the process, a good facilitator will focus on creating an environment of trust in which people build rapport and begin to develop shared understanding of the reality of their situation.

Investment of time and attention in this phase is essential, for it establishes the foundations on which the rest of the process will be built. Trust and rapport enable collective analysis of local conditions and the first critical steps to positive and sustainable change.

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### **Remembering every idea counts**

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Any individual, organisation or community has a unique and valid perception of any situation. As a result, everyone will assess situations differently, see different solutions and pursue different actions. This includes facilitators and promoters of participatory processes! Every view carries its own values, bias and prejudice. There are many different interpretations, many different ‘realities’.

One of the key contributions of Robert Chambers to PA was to ask ‘Whose reality counts?’ (Chambers, 1997). Essentially, all views count. This is a basic principle of all participatory processes: everyone is different and can offer important contributions to the process. Views can complement each other even when they look worthless or provocative at first sight.

Although ‘all realities count’, the realities experienced by disadvantaged people are least likely to be heard or acted on. VSO aims to redress this imbalance by

<sup>1</sup> Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Malawi, Mongolia, Mozambique, Zambia



encouraging the involvement of disadvantaged people at all stages of development projects. This is consistent with Chambers' principle of 'putting the last first': enabling the voice of disadvantaged people to be heard, their skills to be used and their needs to be met.

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### Using triangulation

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Since all views count, aim to gather **at least three perspectives** on any issue or piece of information. This practice is called 'triangulation'. Triangulation helps to verify data, minimise bias, probe deeper into an issue, and to differentiate between fact, opinion and rumour.

Triangulation can be done on different scales and through different methods, eg:

1. using teams composed of a mixture of local and external people. Team members should possess a mixture of skills/ disciplines, gender and background
2. during any participatory exercise or group discussion, asking for alternative views and checking consensus
3. using different methods, tools and activities to investigate similar subjects, eg interviewing, mapping, drawing, ranking, observing, discussing, using secondary data
4. using focused interviews or group discussions to verify key 'facts' and opinions
5. repeating participatory exercises in different communities, organisations or locations to check whether the information has specific or generic relevance
6. accounting for differences in opinion between women and men, elders and youth, different social/economic groups, different professions etc.

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### Adopting a learning attitude

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Effective participation relies on a learning attitude. This begins with the attitude of the facilitator, which should prioritise learning through the eyes of local people.

Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire (1986) commented that people are only motivated to participate in activities that are relevant to them now. VSO volunteers and other development workers, together with their colleagues, can use PA to help involve local people in designing projects according to their own ideas and priorities. It takes a significant shift in attitude for 'expert outsiders' to appreciate that local people are experts in dealing with their own situation and problems. Development workers need to facilitate a process of mutual discovery, in which all participants develop a common understanding of problems and their causes, in order to take joint action.

As shown in Section 2, active learning takes place when we **analyse, plan, do** and **review** activities in ongoing cycles. The activities described in this guide may help at each stage of this learning cycle. Although volunteers may repeat this cycle every day, the learning cycle also applies to the overall structure of a VSO placement.

VSO advises volunteers to approach the first quarter of their placement as a period of orientation. This means that volunteers and partners alike have to manage their expectations and not expect overnight results. Learning can be a frustrating experience, and volunteers need to foster an unassuming attitude, with patience and commitment to learn local people's priorities. It is also important to monitor on a continuous basis in order to assess progress and change. Reviewing and evaluation will take on increasing importance towards the end of an activity or placement, but reviews can be used at various points to respond to change, check the level of participation, learn from good practice, maximise our impact and make effective use of limited resources.

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## Being transparent

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Effective partnerships require an atmosphere of mutual trust. Trust generally has to be built and earned. Mistrust by different stakeholders may be the product of bad experiences with development programmes in the past. A transparent approach – being open about our agenda and communicating information clearly – will help to build trust and cooperation.

Participatory decision-making requires readiness to reach a compromise from all sides. Transparency will help to avoid suspicion and to prevent different parties from protecting their own interests, rather than seeking compromise and mutual benefits.

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## Being flexible

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Being open to the ideas and opinions of others is often the most difficult aspect of participatory processes. Facilitators and participants may find each other's views difficult to understand, contradictory, or incompatible with their own ideas and beliefs. Accepting this reality requires a high degree of flexibility and empathy. As with the learning attitude, seek first to understand before being understood. Be neutral.

There is no single best way to facilitate participatory processes. The same methods and tools will not work in every organisation, community or project. Do not choose or use methods mechanically. Follow the process, being ready to rethink and replan at any stage. Good practice is 'adapt, not adopt'. Methods, tools, setting and facilitation style need to be appropriate to the issue under discussion, and to the characteristics of the group the facilitator is working with. Fit the group to the process, and the methods to the group.

PA does not aim or claim to achieve absolute accuracy. Be satisfied with an appropriate level of precision. To decide what is 'appropriate', ask yourself and your participants:

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***Q. What is the purpose of the process?***

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***Q. What kind of information is required?***

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***Q. How much information will people need for their analysis?***

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## Managing conflict

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Differences of opinion will inevitably arise in any participatory forum where everyone can share their views. If these differences are perceived as being incompatible, there is conflict.

PA may unsettle the balance of power, and be seen as a threat by elite members of hierarchical communities and organisations. Facilitators need to anticipate resistance from elite groups who wish to maintain their control over resources and decisions.

Facilitators will struggle if they are uncomfortable with conflict, and see it as a negative process. They may allow dominant participants to control the decisions of the group, or alternatively, may try to 'bury' the problem by forcing a quick resolution. Neither response is participatory or sustainable. Short-term conflict resolution prevents open discussion of problems, fails to identify their causes, and may reinforce existing inequity by giving way to the most powerful. This will generally breed a latent conflict that may explode at any time.

Alternatively, conflict can be embraced and transformed into a positive force for change. This approach to conflict management was promoted over artificial and short-term conflict resolution at a VSO conference on 'Managing tensions and conflicts over natural resources' in the Philippines. Community-based partners of VSO in Indonesia also believe that conflict enriches the diversity of ideas that can be used to solve a problem.

Good facilitators view the process of sharing and debating ideas (some of which will be perceived as incompatible, ie conflicting) as a

natural step to achieving agreements and action. They develop the necessary attitudes and strategies for managing conflict. Anticipate conflict, keep a cool head, explore tensions and their causes, provide a neutral space. PA exercises like drawing also help to focus people on the issues rather than each other's personalities.

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### Understanding cultural influences

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Participation or lack of participation may be influenced by cultural factors. Common examples of this are the challenges of encouraging participation by women, or by workers lower down the organisational or social hierarchy. While it is important to respect local culture, it is also important to be aware of 'cultural smokescreens' used to protect the power of dominant groups.

This is clearly a fine balance. Facilitators must balance their 'sensitivity' to local culture against the need to 'proactively' challenge systems that cause disadvantage and violate people's rights and dignity. It may be useful to consider that culture is:

- diverse and dynamic
- formed by internal and external influences
- structured by representations and power (Jolly, 2002).

According to this understanding, cultures are products of history, place, politics and people, and change over time. Within any country or community there are many cultures. This is true for volunteers as well as their local colleagues – neither group comes from a homogenous or fixed culture. Culture and tradition can enable or obstruct, and be oppressive or liberating for different people at different times. There is nothing sacred about culture, and value judgements need to be made about which aspects of culture to hold on to, and which to let go of.

With or without the development industry, North and South are already interacting and influencing each other. Development will always have an impact on cultures. They either change things (for better or worse), or reinforce the status quo. We need to accommodate cultural difference, but also challenge unfair norms.

Facilitators may wish to work with different groups, genders, sectors of society or parts of an organisation at separate times in order to maximise participation and free-speaking. However, there are also times when it is valuable and constructive to work with mixed groups from a cross-section of a community or organisation so they can share ideas, skills and perceptions.

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### Balancing your dynamic and receptive qualities

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The above principles bring to light the need for good facilitators to be both listeners and mobilisers; sensitive and proactive. This highlights the central function of facilitation, which is the act of making participation easier. At times, the facilitator needs to be more dynamic, to enable the voices of the less powerful to be heard. At other times, the facilitator needs to step back, let go of leadership and be more receptive, 'handing over the stick' to other participants. In this sense, the art of the facilitator, and the essence of the above principles, is to balance our dynamic and receptive qualities (Figure 7) in response to group dynamics.

**Figure 7:** The yin and yang qualities of a good facilitator<sup>3</sup>

RECEPTIVE		
Aware of self and others	Empathises	Senses
Alert	Lets go of leadership	Trusting
Checks	Available	Approachable
Listens	Underview (humility)	Receives



DYNAMIC		
Aware of task	Holds boundaries	Challenges
Thinks	Overview	Hands over leadership
Playful	Takes risks	Enables voices to be heard
Interprets	Offers ideas	
Decisive and timely	Affirms	

<sup>3</sup> From David Mowat – returned volunteer from Nepal and VSO trainer

### **I-3.2 Summary of key facilitation skills<sup>4</sup>**

#### **1. Planning**

The facilitator learns about the group before the session to help develop clear goals, design an appropriate programme and select appropriate methodology.

#### **2. Listening**

The facilitator listens to the group and tries to make sense out of what is going on. They also clarify and help to organise information.

#### **3. Flexibility**

The facilitator can adapt to the needs of the group, handle multiple tasks, and has the confidence to try new things.

#### **4. Focus**

The facilitator has direction and knows where to go next.

#### **5. Encouraging participation**

The facilitator can draw out individuals, involve everyone and use humour, games or music to encourage an open, positive environment.

#### **6. Managing**

The facilitator guides the group through the programmes, sets limits, encourages ground rules, provides models and checks on progress and reactions.

#### **7. Questioning**

The facilitator knows how to ask questions that encourage thought and participation.

#### **8. Promoting ownership**

The facilitator helps the group take responsibility for their own work and helps them to reflect on necessary follow-up work.

#### **9. Building rapport**

The facilitator demonstrates responsiveness and respect for people, is sensitive to emotions, watches body language and helps to construct relationships within the group.

#### **10. Self-awareness**

The facilitator examines their own behaviour, learns from mistakes, is honest and open about the limits to their knowledge, and shows enthusiasm.

#### **11. Managing conflict**

The facilitator encourages the group to handle conflict constructively and helps the group come to agreement and consensus.

#### **12. Broadening discussion**

The facilitator encourages different points of views and uses techniques and examples to get the group to consider different frames of reference.

#### **13. Presenting information**

The facilitator uses clear and concise language, gives explicit instructions, and is confident with visual, written, graphical and oral methods.

### **I-3.3 Questions – how to ask and answer them<sup>5</sup>**

Questions are the principal tools for facilitating participatory learning. Most of the methods and tools described later in this guide are simply structures that allow meaningful questions to be explored. For new facilitators, a good tip is to make every statement a question, and acknowledge every response as a valid answer.

The best questions are usually short, simple and have a single focus. However, there are different types of questions (Table 2), which lend themselves to different purposes. Asking the right questions in the right way is an art, and it is worth considering some of our assumptions and habits. Cultural practice varies a great deal and the examples quoted below may not all apply to your area. However, they may help you to be sensitive and aware of possibilities.

**Table 2:** Types of questions for facilitators

TYPE OF QUESTION	USE	EXAMPLE
OPEN	As an invitation to talk	"Tell me about..." "How is life these days?"
CLOSED	To acquire specific information	"What work are you doing?"
REFLECTIVE	To check your understanding of what has been said	"So you went to market last Monday?"
PROBING	To seek an opinion or feeling	"What is your view about...?" "What was it like working in town?" "Tell me more about..." "Why...?"

Careful wording will help you to communicate. However, the dominant aspects of communication are **tone of voice**, **facial expression** and **body language**. People tend to mirror your own behaviour and attitude, so be open and positive.

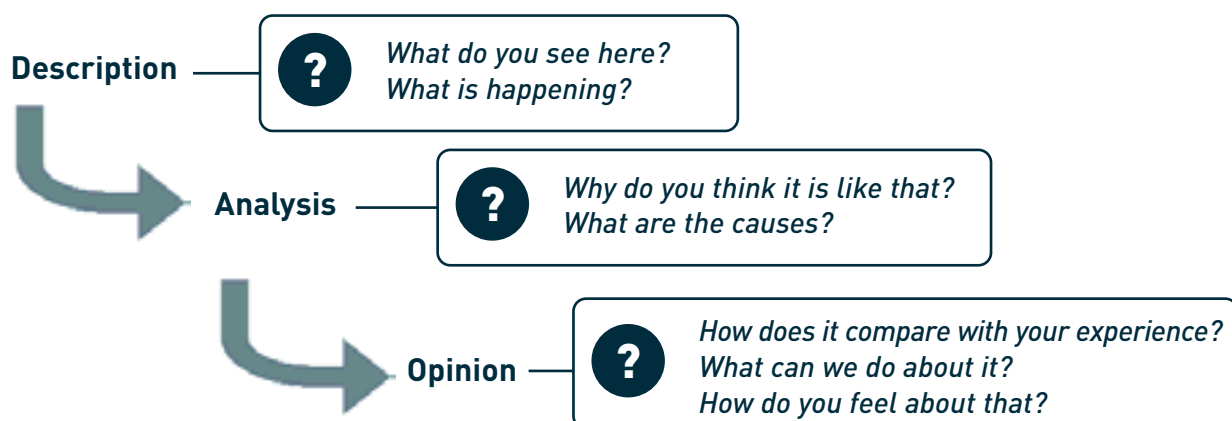
Explain your motives. Tell people why you are asking a particular question. There is a big difference between 'enquiring' and 'interrogating'. Enquiry is a style that says "I'm with you; I'm interested in what you say." When a person ventures to answer a question, they are risking something of themselves. Be gracious in accepting the gift!

### Open questions

Open, general questions are very useful in the early stages of building rapport, because they allow people to make choices about what **they** want to talk about. More direct questions restrict their choices to **your** areas of interest. It is worth remembering

that in some cultures, people are ready to talk about what they **do**, more slow to talk about what they **think** or **know**, and even more reluctant to talk about how they feel. Many people will find too many direct questions inquisitive and intimidating. On the other hand, some cultures adopt a very formal style of questioning as part of lengthy greetings.

Open questions are also vital in skill-sharing situations for encouraging thought, problem-solving and analysis of experience. If your questions are sequential you will encourage logical thought, and hence generate richer and better quality information. Many facilitators find the following sequence useful (Figure 8). This was designed by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire<sup>6</sup>, and can be used together with a visual image like a picture or drama to help people think about the subject in new ways. More personal question that deal with attitudes, feelings and values are only introduced at the end of the sequence.

**Figure 8:** A sequence of questions for facilitator and participants to explore a subject together

<sup>6</sup> For more information on Freire's approach see [www.reflect-action.org](http://www.reflect-action.org)

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## Closed questions

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Closed questions are useful for gathering information. Avoid completely closed questions that only require a 'Yes' or 'No' answer, because it is impossible to tell whether people have understood the question. If you use an interrogative word instead (What, When, Who, Why, How), the person has to think more carefully about the answer and you will gain better information.

These questions fall into the sequence described above. Allow people to make simple **descriptions** first (What, When, Who). This can be followed by **analysis** using 'Why' questions. Finally, 'How?' questions offer the chance for people to suggest examples and solutions to problems identified through earlier questions.

'Why' questions require people to justify their reasons, which can be threatening. If they don't have a reason, they may invent one! Consider other ways of asking this question: eg instead of "Why did you that...?" we can say, "That's interesting. What made you do that...?"

In some cultures, people will not find it easy to answer the closed questions of someone in authority. Sometimes, when you ask questions purely for information, the other person may wish to maintain a good relationship with you and give the answer that they think you want instead of an accurate one.

With closed questions there is always the danger that the person questioned may think there is only one correct answer. This may seem quite demanding, especially if the respondent is trying to find an answer that they think you want to hear. Facts, of course, can be perceived differently so it can help if your attitude and body language suggest that you are open to different interpretations.

Some respondents give evasive replies if they feel threatened by closed questions. It often helps if you explain why you value their

answer. In hierarchical organisations, employees may not be used to articulating or sharing their own thoughts. In these cases, it is fruitless to expect carefully considered answers to be constructed immediately, if at all. In communities where Western-style education or training is rare, people may be much less precise in their measurements of time, distance and quantity. This style of numerical accuracy may not be a priority in their lives.

Closed questions do not necessarily lead very far and usually need to be followed by opportunities to discuss the wider context. Instead of asking a closed 'fact' question, we can often make a statement and then ask more open, probing, thought-provoking questions.

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## Reflective questions and clarification

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Reflective questions are used to check meaning, which is important in unfamiliar cultures, communities and organisations where people may attach different meanings to the words they use. "So, you used two bags of fertiliser?"

You could also ask:

**Q. "Do you mean...?"**

**Q. "I am not sure that I understand."**

**Q. "Could you please explain that a little more?"**

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You are not suggesting that your failure to understand is the speaker's fault: that can easily spoil your relationship! You are admitting that **you** may have failed to grasp the speaker's full meaning. It is also good practice to check regularly people's understanding of things that **you** have said. By asking people to express your statement in their own words or to provide an example, you will be able to check whether you have communicated effectively.

### **Probing questions**

You may need to encourage the other person to explain more about something. Either ask them to tell you more, or repeat one of the key words that you heard. "Important?" "Frustrating?" "Happy?" People will usually respond to this by saying more on the issue concerned.

Facts and information need to be supported further by opinions and feelings. When you have a trusting relationship you can often use a probing question:

**Q. "What is your view about ...?"**

**Q. "How did you feel when your fields were flooded?"**

### **Breaking questions down**

Sometimes the question you ask is too big for people to give a fair and considered response. A common strategy here is to break the question down into a series of smaller questions. VSO Kazakhstan found it difficult to ask some potential partners, "What are your development needs?" The question was too big. Some organisations responded to this question by highlighting the need for money, new buildings etc, instead of achievable ways in which VSO might be able to support them. In this scenario, they found it more helpful to ask each individual to specify their individual role, what difficulties they had and what they would need to do their job better.

### **Responding to questions that people ask you**

The facilitator is not the 'source of all knowledge', and should use questions for mutual learning. When a question is put to you (as a person who is thought to be an authority) the temptation is automatically to give people the results and conclusions of your thinking. Sometimes this may be appropriate. However, this is consultancy, not facilitation. Giving an immediate answer may weaken the questioner rather than

strengthen them; and encourage dependency rather than resourcefulness.

The skill of the facilitator is to help the inquirer move in the direction of finding answers to their own question. Give participants the raw material and the tools so that they can work things out for themselves. Offer relevant information and raise further questions to enable people to sort out their experience and order their thoughts. In many cases, introducing structure into a person's thinking is all that is needed to enable them to solve their own problems.

Understanding the speaker's question and what may lie behind it is not always easy, but fundamental to successful dialogue. In the honest search for information there are no irrelevant or stupid questions. You may not immediately see the point, but it is important for you to try to understand the questioner's meaning.

Do not be nervous about handling questions – it is not your role to know everything. Participation is much more difficult if people do **not** ask questions! Local culture or organisational structure may discourage people from questioning elders, teachers or those perceived to have a higher status. The methods and tools presented in this guide may help people who have never been encouraged to ask questions to overcome these barriers.

### **I-3.4 Use of visual aids<sup>7</sup>**

Some development workers have a false impression that creative and visual tools are only used to overcome differences of literacy and language, and have no place in more 'educated' environments. This is a misconception. Creative and visual stimuli like pictures, diagrams, colours and physical activities increase the effectiveness of dialogue in any group – be they managing directors or illiterate farmers.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on using visual aids see Appendix II: Types of pictures for communications, VSO's *How to Make and Use Visuals Aids* by Nicola Harford and Nicola Baird (1997); and Bob Linney's *People, pictures and power* (1995)



This is firstly because they engage the more powerful right side of the brain, allowing the full potential of the brain to be used for perceptive analysis. However, some people may have visual impairments that prevent them participating in purely visual exercises: again, flexibility is key to ensure full participation – use of materials with different textures and sizes such as stones, seeds or sticks can help.

Secondly, visual methods tend to be more inclusive and democratic, since everybody is able to express their opinion directly. They help to express ideas that may not be easily described in words. Not only that, visual group activities help to establish common understanding, based on the principle that 'when we see or do something together we share meaning'. Finally, with creative methods, anything is possible. This allows a more open and innovative approach to analysis.

Visual methods can also be used to manage conflict. Participants can be encouraged to address their arguments to the diagram, rather than directly confronting each other. Most differences of opinion only turn into negative arguments when they become personal. By directing the attention of the debaters onto a neutral object, the facilitator can help to keep the discussion constructive.

### SECTION SUMMARY – KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Facilitation is the act of making participation easier by creating an environment in which mutual analysis and learning can take place.
- Facilitators support participatory processes by balancing their dynamic and receptive qualities.
- Some key skills of facilitation are personal awareness and organisation, openness, flexibility, familiarity with local culture, and the ability to help groups transform themselves.
- Good facilitators do not provide solutions but are highly skilled in asking the right

kind of question to stimulate reflection, learning and empowerment of all group members.

### NEXT STEPS

In Part I we have explored the basic principles of PA. These provide essential foundations before we can move on to methods and tools. In Part II, we will examine some methods that use PA to show potential ways of involving people in analysis, learning and action throughout development processes.