

# Community Participation

## *What Has Happened to It?*

---

---

### Introduction

A former colleague called me just to say hello and catch up after a long time—twenty years, to be exact. He had been my boss on a construction project in Bangladesh in the late 1990s. As the project officer, he stayed at the company’s head office in Canada and visited the construction site twice a year, while I was the on-site project manager. We were working for an international engineering and construction firm: he was a civil engineer, while I was the community participation specialist. This was the first time that particular company had hired a non-engineer to head a construction project, but the Government of Bangladesh and the donor agency had stipulated this was to be an experiment: would having a social expert as the head of a construction project instead of an engineer make a difference to the sustainability of a new flood control embankment?

After the twenty years, my former boss wanted to know what I was up to. Since our Bangladesh days, he had gone on to higher executive work, which had put him out of touch with what was happening in construction at the community level. When I told him I was writing a book about community participation and construction, he was surprised. “You’re writing a whole book about that? Is that kind of thing still needed? Community participation has been around forever: even long before the Bangladesh project. Back then, even the biggest international aid donors and financial institutions like the World Bank required it. Surely, participation must be everywhere by now!” See anecdote, page 104.

Yes, I replied, probably all aid donors have had that policy for decades, and yes, there probably is not a project or project report in any sector in the whole world that doesn’t claim community participation was involved. But there is a big difference between words and action, theory and practice. The rhetoric is everywhere, but having actual, meaningful participation has never been the norm. I told him that community participation, and the ineffective ways in which it is implemented, are heavily criticized

in the literature on international development. It has become a much watered-down idea.

My former boss had seen what a difference community participation made on our project in Bangladesh, so he was curious to know what this book would say about community participation in earthquake reconstruction in Pakistan. I told him that, in fact, one of the chapters in the book would bring him up to date on this very question: so what has happened to community participation?

This chapter explores the concepts of participation and community, reviewing the background and critical perspective of both. Included here are six anecdotes from various countries, which show how participation and community mean many different things to different people for different reasons.

## **Background: Emergence of “Community Participation”**

In the international development field, the concept of community participation has at least a fifty-year history. It first grew out of dissatisfaction with the way international aid was being handled in developing countries. Following World War II, United Nations and early international aid programs began emerging on all continents: “By the nineteen-sixties, virtually all the nations of the Western industrialized world and Japan had joined in efforts to assist the developing countries both through their own bilateral programs, and support for a variety of multinational programs” (Herbert and Strong 1980: 121). When the United Nations designated the 1960s and 1970s as the First and Second Development Decades, public interest and awareness in international development—and the number of NGOs and aid programs involved in it—grew exponentially.

Thus began the gargantuan growth of so-called “developed” countries providing assistance to the “Third World” in the form of transfers of technology, skills, person power, ideas, and goods. While there were some successes, it did not take long to see the faults in such a top-down approach: bulldozers that were provided to build roads sat idle when there was no supply of spare parts; schools were built in regions with no teachers; modern bakery ovens were supplied to places that had no fuel; “improved” seeds were introduced to farmers who had no money to buy the inputs required to make them grow; water wells were drilled where there is environmental contamination—the list of failures goes on and on.

By the 1970s, analysts—especially from NGOs within recipient countries and aid workers returning home to Western countries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America—questioned why so many of the aid programs were

weak or failed. Why was it that so much money, care, and interest was being poured into helping the poor, yet hardly anything improved? What was happening, many realized, was that well-intentioned people in Western aid agencies only transferred what they thought was needed by the poor—ideas and material things. Worse, some observed that this kind of aid was creating dependency. As Barbara Harrell-Bond put it at the time, “Given the body of literature which evaluates the impact of aid, few practitioners in the development field (who think about such matters) still retain unquestioned confidence that their interventions are always beneficial to the recipients” (1986: xii). In many ways, aid had simply failed.

Until the 1970s, aid was largely a top-down enterprise. What was missing were the views of the people themselves. There had been little to no effort to understand the intended beneficiaries—not their cultures and contexts, not their views on their problems and needs, and certainly not their preferences and priorities. Various types of “help” had simply been chosen and handed out.

From this understanding emerged a paradigm shift. Aid agencies began realizing the importance of community participation and began making changes in their field: from raising awareness about community participation to developing methodologies and tools that could more effectively engage local people and successfully include them in the analytical and decision-making processes. The new thinking was this: how a decision was made could be just as important, if not more important, than the decision itself.

As the participatory approaches took off on a wide scale, so too did a new style and new policies and vehicles for aid delivery. Until that time, aid programs acted as service providers, dispersing their help across a population, or in some cases, to highly targeted sub-groups: the poorest of the poor, women, people with disabilities, people from minority groups, and other marginalized populations. Recipients were treated as aid receivers; they were not involved in decision-making, little or nothing was expected of them, and the underlying causes of poverty were not addressed.

The change toward participatory development meant mobilizing communities or initiating group formation so that members, especially the poor and marginalized, could become more proactive. In Asia, this grew out of the 1960s cooperative movement in Bangladesh; and it grew into success stories, such as the 1970s community forestry program in Nepal and the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. From that model followed the rapid expansion of microcredit around the world.

The idea of community mobilization was to draw together people who had been isolated by the factors that perpetuated their poverty. While causes of their poverty could very well have come from the community,

the community could also some provide ways to help alleviate the poverty. In any case, the targeted groups were inextricable from the community context. Instead of isolating them to help them, it was more effective to encourage people to organize and work together; to be proactive while identifying problems, needs, priorities, goals, and ideas; and to make, implement, and monitor plans. The idea was, as participants developed skills and resources, they would be better prepared to deal with livelihood development in the mainstream: for example, they would be able to cut out middlemen and loan sharks and learn to how to use microcredit, and they would be able to deal with banks, credit, and savings. Such programs also typically became more holistic, dealing with education, healthcare, and other capacity development, whether in agriculture, forestry, water management, environment, sanitation, fisheries, or crafts and trades. Similar proactive problem-solving attitudes were promoted, with the community or group becoming the vehicle for change and aid delivery.

A goal of working with such groups was the empowerment of individuals and of communities and their constituent parts. Empowerment is a result of participation in decision-making. “An empowered person is one who can take initiative, exert leadership, display confidence, solve new problems, mobilize resources and undertake new actions” (Saxena 2011: 32). At its heart, the idea of community participation and empowerment is the reduction of vulnerabilities. However, those may be identified and prioritized by the people themselves, who may set goals such as making more income, being able to grow enough food, having better health care, escaping exploitation by the landowner, making it easier for children to go to school, settling disputes over land, or preventing the farmland from washing away in floods. Participating in decision-making and working together to reach common goals, with any amount of success, can be empowering.

As the NGOs led the way in implementing participatory approaches, governments and international donor agencies started to incorporate them in their programs. Participation then became a condition for the financing of projects. In the 1990s, participation no longer represented a threat, and it acquired its place in the then-dominant institutional practices and discourses—in other words, it became mainstream (Sliwinski 2010: 179). The United Nations and other donor agencies, governments, and NGOs took on more lateral strategies, including participation in their own policies and programming.

Over the same decades, community participation has become a wide field of study for academics and practitioners. It is now a worldwide discipline in countless university departments and among researchers, field workers, and NGOs on the ground. There are masters and doctoral pro-

grams; organizations, workshops, and conferences; and countless books, journals, and online resources solely on the subject of participation and its uses and applications in all sectors. However, there is no standardized blueprint for a community participation program. It needs to be specific to every place, time, and circumstance.

While there still is no blueprint for or standardized definition of “community participation,” many ideas have been put forward. Cernea has described community participation as “empowering people to mobilize their own capacities, be social actors rather than be passive subjects, manage the resources, make decisions, and control the activities that affect their lives” (1985: 10). Another early source suggested that community “participation is a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them” (World Bank 1996b: xi). As Cohen and Uphoff have pointed out, “Participation is not just an end in itself, but it is more than a means” (1980: 213–35). It is, at least, the process of developing local people’s voices and engaging in joint analysis, decision-making, and action.

In postdisaster situations, community participation is possibly even more important, as it also functions as part of the social recovery.

Experience is increasingly demonstrating that an emergency is the time to expand, rather than reduce, participation, even if there is no formal policy framework for participation in place. By including properly structured community participation mechanisms, physical outcomes and the quality of oversight can actually be improved, especially when large sums of money are involved (Jha et al. 2010: 184).

Well-organized participation achieves several important things at once. It is not only about social justice, humanitarianism, and altruism; as Peter Oakley observes, “Greater participation is important to increase project efficiency and effectiveness, to encourage self-reliance among participants and to increase the numbers of people who potentially can benefit from development” (1991: 115).

## Influencers

### *Influential Thinkers*

Since the 1960s, change in development approaches has been influenced by innumerable experts on all continents. But two key thinkers in the community participation field stand out.

The first is the late Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator specializing in adult learning and motivation. His philosophy of education and teaching was based on the concept of *conscientização* (“conscientization”), the process

of raising people's awareness of power through participatory analysis of their problems and subsequent problem-solving. This transformative process treats the learner as a cocreator of the knowledge; "hence participation is both a means and an end" and a transfer of power, becoming an empowering process (Okui 2004: 3). Internationally, Freire still has significant influence on the theory of adult learning, development, and participation, with his 1970 book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, continuing to be regarded as one of pedagogy's foundational texts. Freireian ideas underlie the whole participatory movement.

The second key thinker is Robert Chambers, professor and research associate in the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, and still one of the most widely published and well-known participation experts. Chambers's early publications *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (1983) and *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (1997) were revolutionary, prodding scientists and other professionals to improve their own understanding and areas of expertise by listening first to farmers and other local people, then handing the pointer stick over to them, devolving their own power. From Chambers came the term participatory rural appraisal (PRA), a "family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act" (Chambers 1974: 953). From PRA came numerous other tools and approaches with similar purposes, including Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), popular theater, action reflection, and appreciative inquiry. Chambers has been described as "development's best friend" (Cornwall and Scoones 2011: 13).

### ***Influential Case Studies***

Pakistan has produced at least two models of community participation that are held in high esteem and replicated around the world: the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) and the Camilla Cooperative Movement. The AKRSP was pioneered in 1982 in the Northern Areas (now Gilgit-Baltistan) by Shoab Khan. Khan credited the AKRSP approach to the German Raiffeisen model for cooperatives, which had begun in the early 1800s in response to crop failure and famine. The AKRSP used the same principles—namely "establishing a partnership, making collaboration and assistance dependent on villagers, first fulfilling obligations and their entering into a series of dialogues through village organizations to identify their needs" (Khan 1990: 2). In this way, the AKRSP established a partnership in which both partners had demanding roles and responsibilities. The AKRSP went on to establish over two thousand village organizations in the Hindu Kush, Karakorum, and Himalayan mountain ranges. As

partners, villagers improved their agriculture, health, education, and livelihood development. Khan explained: “While building an irrigation channel, road or reclaiming land, etc., the villagers are also building their own local institution” (Murphy Thomas 1994: 4).

In the 1960s, Shoaib Sultan Khan’s mentor, the late Ahktar Hameed Khan (no relation), founded the Camilla Cooperative Movement among the poor in what was then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. After the separation of East Pakistan, Khan returned to Pakistan and, in 1980, founded the Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) in a Karachi slum. The OPP went on to become a model for urban slum and unplanned settlement development around the world.

In *Personal Reminiscences of Change*, Khan explained how he started his work: “I first wandered around in the Orangi slums, educating myself. Gradually, I learnt what sort of people were living there, their problems, what they thought of these problems, what was being done about them, and what they were doing for themselves” (Murphy Thomas 1995: 71). Through participatory processes, the OPP mobilized Orangi’s one million residents to solve their own problems. The OPP introduced self-financed, self-built sanitation facilities, low-cost housing, basic health services, women’s work centers, family enterprise, and credit. Years later, it was observed by an OPP proponent that “this transformation has happened because we believed there is tremendous potential within the poor” (AHKRC 2010: 207).

### ***Influential Books***

Two ground-breaking and oft-cited books set off two related movements, but extended and applied their ideas in different contexts—one to disaster situations, and the other to situations with conflict:

*Rising From the Ashes: Development Strategies in Times of Disaster* (1989), by Mary B. Anderson and Peter J. Woodrow, shows how to gain a balanced understanding of locations, situations, and communities in all contexts, with or without a disaster. Anderson and Woodrow present a framework for identifying capacities—skills, attitudes, and resources that can be put to use when designing or evaluating projects. Anderson and Woodrow also urge aid agencies to gain knowledge of the local people’s vulnerabilities, problems, and weaknesses, so that capacities can be used to reduce these vulnerabilities: “Development is the process by which vulnerabilities are reduced and capacities increased” (1989: 12).

*Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace or War* (1999), also by Mary B. Anderson, transfers and applies main ideas from *Rising from the Ashes*. In *Do No Harm*, Anderson encourages aid agencies to see both the “dividers”

that separate people and the “connectors” that bring them together. As her title suggests, Anderson argues that assistance can maintain or strengthen existing unity. But she also warns that, if handled inappropriately, aid can spark or add to frictions, disputes, hostilities, or open conflict: “Aid workers should try to identify local capacities for peace and connectors and design their aid programs to support and reinforce them” (146). Adopted from the field of medical ethics, “do no harm” can be applied in poverty alleviation or for disaster assistance in any sector. As we found in PERRP, the principle works equally well in disaster reconstruction. For example, despite being heterogeneous and conflict-prone, communities almost always had strong capacities or connectors, and they had local elders or other influential people with reputations for conflict prevention and resolution.

In short, it is recognized that community participation in a structured, well-organized program creates better decisions that get better results: “Local people are all too familiar with their community needs and problems. They have the greatest stake in what happens” (Murphy Thomas 2013a: 1). Participating in projects can build skills and create opportunities, and both the involved agencies and beneficiaries can gain knowledge and understanding.

## Participation Issues

Almost as soon as participation caught on in the development field, criticism about its use started. As early as 1974, Chambers was already writing about “the gap between rhetoric and reality” that needed to be narrowed (85). The word “participation” was being used to mean just about any sort of activity and was losing its original intent. By the mid-1980s, “participation ascended to the pantheon of development buzzwords, catchphrases, [and] . . . euphemisms” (Leal 2011: 70). Others suggest that “community participation” has become a contaminated term (Stiefel and Wolfe 2011: 29).

Now, more than fifty years after it entered the development lexicon, it could be virtually impossible to find a policy, program, plan, proposal, report, or project that does not claim to include participation, regardless of sector. And while participation is still widely promoted, so too is the literature criticizing its use and misuse.

Along the way, it has been recognized that there are different types and degrees of participation. Different sources (Shapan 1992; Pretty et al. 1995; Satterthwaite 1995; Murphy Thomas 2012a) have presented typologies of participation, which identify ways that participation occurs, the effects



these can have, and to what degree. There are instances where groups mobilize and undertake their own initiatives or are mobilized by others to make decisions and act together. However, there are many other examples where communities are said to have participated, but it is in name only. These include situations when only representatives talk with each other; when local people are only listening or present when something is announced; or when local people are only asked to give information, time, labor, or other resources, but they are otherwise not involved in analysis or decision-making.

### **Use and Misuse of the Phrase “Community Participation”**

To illustrate some of the ways in which the term “community participation” is used and misused, I include below examples from general earthquake reconstruction in Pakistan. These examples show how “participation” is sometimes used as a colloquial or generic label, even when the community did not participate at all.

A donor agency having earthquake-destroyed schools rebuilt by contractors stated that these schools were being constructed with “community participation.” Upon inquiry in some of those project villages, it was found that villagers knew very little about the school that was being built, had no knowledge about who the donor and construction contractor were, and had no community group to help it happen. If a problem arose, a contractor’s representative would go to somebody living nearby—an influential person or Department of Education official—but local individuals or officials often could not solve the problem for many reasons. In most of the reconstruction, this was the extent of participation, and often resulted in unresolved problems that led to conflict, stalled construction, or produced court cases. As PERRP went on to show, many of the stoppages were unnecessary: a structured program of community participation could have prevented many potential problems.

There are times when the word “participation” is considered simply fashionable, or when the value of community participation is known but is still scorned. One government agency official in earthquake reconstruction facetiously claimed to have community participation in his programming. He remarked, “Whenever we have any problems with those [community] people, we just send in the police.” Unfortunately, this was true. This approach invariably involved violence and coercion, causing many more problems and losses for the local people. The official then mocked PERRP’s community participation, adding, “Why are you bothering with all

these community meetings and talking with villagers? It's such a waste of time."

Some sources use the word "participation" to validate what they have already decided. One NGO planned to provide communities with livestock to replace those lost or killed in the earthquake. They claimed to have reached their recommendations based on what they called "community participation"—but what they actually did was take their own questionnaire into the project area and have individuals answer the questions. They then took the answers away, analyzed the data themselves, and presented the results to donors and others as if they had come from the community.

In some participation efforts, individuals may benefit, but not the community. For the first years following the earthquake, countless projects gave away a cow, a shelter, a water tank, a small grant, seeds and fertilizer, or fruit trees, with nothing expected of the community. Since a community leader might have called a meeting or helped identify recipients, and people in the vicinity accepted these gifts, some called this "community participation." At best, the gifts may have had good results for individuals, but nothing was improved for the community as a whole.

Sometimes the idea was just to give away donor money and hope for the best. One donor agency's idea of community participation was to grant a block of money to people in a village and, giving them few criteria, let them figure out how to spend it. Elite capture was practically the norm, with enthusiastic participation mistaken as community-building. Decision-making was based on the most persuasive people's ideas, and sometimes these people had the block grant money spent on their favorite projects. In one place, a powerful man had a road built to his house. In another, a water storage tank was built on private property, limiting water access for others. In a few cases, the money was disbursed among the people, but there was nothing to show for it.

Some organizations have it the wrong way around. If participation doesn't happen at the beginning, it is highly unlikely to happen at the end. One organization, without knowing any community priorities or consulting with any local people, decided they could contribute by building a short link road to a certain community. The project hired and paid local people to do the labor, which the agency called "community participation." However, the organization made all the decisions, and no local group was consulted or included. After construction was complete, the agency asked the people to form a committee to maintain the road. To comply, influential people in the community just put a few names—their own family members—on paper, but did no maintenance at all.

## What Went Wrong and Why?

The main controversies and issues regarding “participation” can be grouped into a few causes: simple lack of awareness, lack of know-how and support, lack of clarity and specificity, and deliberate obstacles.

- **Lack of awareness:** In many cases, it simply is not known that participation is an actual field of study and practice, a movement with a history, expectations, attitudes, and many accompanying tools. There is just no awareness of this as a discipline in itself; the word “participation” is only used in a generic or colloquial manner of speaking.
- **Lack of know-how and support:** In other cases, people may have a little knowledge about what should or could be done to facilitate community participation, but they either do not know how to go about it or are in a situation where there is little or no support for it. It is quite common for projects to be designed without the insights and input of local people, and the resulting plans, schedules, budgets, and processes don’t leave room for participation, so it doesn’t happen. Decision makers may see no reason for incorporating participation, and they might fail to see the benefits of doing so.
- **Lack of clarity and specificity:** Some participation efforts suffer from what scholars called “lack of specificity”: that is, while participation is implemented, the specifics are missing (Cohen and Uphoff 1980: 213). It is not clear who is participating or what they are doing, what approaches or activities are involved, where and when participation is happening, what leadership or facilitation is involved, or what its purposes are. Too often, the expression is used in vague and generalized ways.
- **Deliberate obstacles:** The reality, Somesh Kumar states, is that “people’s participation takes place in a socio-political context. A host of factors have been identified as obstacles to participation.” Some of the obstacles may come from administrative systems that rigidly maintain their top-down, blueprint-style processes, while others may come from within a social structure in which marginalization is the norm. Kumar adds: “Most of participatory development fails to take into account the large obstacles and hence the impact is hardly sustainable and pervasive” (2002: 29).

People’s participation does not happen only due to lack of know-how: it is not uncommon for community participation to face opposition, especially by those who are more powerful. The opposers can either be subtle or forthright in refusing participation. Depending on their own area of expertise, their refusal is rationalized by statements such as “those [poor,

uneducated] people don't know anything about [health, science, education, engineering, building design, economics, management, etc.]; only we professionals have the education and skill needed." Such an attitude can come from a lack of sensitization through their own education, limited exposure to actual participation, or earlier exposure to something called "participation" that they considered a failure or threat. After so many decades of at least the rhetoric of participation, a growing number of officials or other decision makers have already experienced earlier participatory projects that they perceive as failed—although the "failure" may have been a case of organized communities using newly gained voices and a sense of power that threatened the same decision makers' authority. As these decision makers see it, now it is participation that has been imposed on them top-down, and they reject it. In PERRP, this was the case with the Department of Health, which refused to allow a full community participation program to go along with the reconstruction of health facilities (see the anecdote "No to Community Participation!").

Sometimes, it is the donor and implementing agencies themselves who fail to seek out participation; they have a misplaced notion that people won't or can't participate—that they have no time, skills, or interest in participating. Harvey, Baghri, and Reed discuss this mistreatment: "Agencies sometimes even create disincentives for participation, simply by their treatment of community members. If people are treated as being helpless they are more likely to act as if they are" (2005: 178).

Opposition to people's participation can come from different kinds of reasoning. In some cases, it is a matter of power—and refusal to relinquish or share it. Some reasons include: "We don't want them [community people] because they will just interfere and tell us what to do." "You don't need to ask the people. I know everything you need to know." "Don't bother trying, the powerful will just dominate anyway." "It will just raise people's expectations and they will start demanding everything from us." Other opposition comes from the mistaken belief that participation costs extra time and money: "It will take too much time and bother, and will just slow us down. We just want to get on with the job, to get construction done!" "Getting the people involved will just open cans of worms, a Pandora's box of problems." All such concerns and complaints were made by a few people at the beginning of PERRP.

However, as the PERRP social component demonstrated, these critiques were countered through structured, systematic, clear, and inclusive participation. Our work demonstrated how, if appropriately planned and implemented, community participation can save time, prevent situations that can slow or stop reconstruction projects, and also save local people from a lot of trouble that happens on construction sites. With the project

completed in six years, community participation in PERRP took no extra time and was only a small fraction of total project costs.

As stated above, sociopolitical contexts can create obstacles for participation. In parts of the world, participation is akin to revolution. At times, participation is seen as inciting people and is a threat to the status quo (see the anecdote Myanmar—“What is This?!”).

Still, there is criticism of participation from different angles. A book by Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari called *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (2001) spawned a wave of such criticism. As suggested by the title, a few have questioned if participation has become just another form of tyranny: local people may be involved, but who controls the methodologies, agenda, and decision-making? And do these methodologies, agendas, and decisions reinforce existing divisions and inequalities, so that the better-off still benefit more than others?

In response to Cooke and Kothari, Samuel Hickey and Giles Mohan wrote an essay called “Towards Participation as Transformation: Critical Themes and Challenges” (2004). This text too made waves in the literature. Sarah C. White states: “The idea of participation as empowerment is that the practical experience of being involved in considering options, making decisions, and taking collective action . . . is itself transformative” (2011: 60). Despite doubts expressed by some, there are many others who are witness to the changes that occur when community participation is in practice. They are optimistic and argue that the transformation process is still happening—even maturing: “the evidence so far in the new millennium suggests that participation has actually deepened and extended its role in development, with a new range of approaches to participation emerging across theory, policy and practice (however, although characterized as tyrannical, this mainstreaming and spread are highly uneven)” (Hickey Mohan 2004: 3).

## Why Does Participation Matter?

“As most donors support local-level work with the most vulnerable and poorest people, ‘community’ has become the badge of honor that enables the organizations which receive the funds to claim that they are doing the right thing” (Cannon, Titz, and Kruger 2014: 93). Agency projects with community participation also imply a certain level of authenticity or quality—their results can be trusted because the people have had their say.

However, when community participation is claimed but is not actually implemented, or is implemented to such a small extent it hardly counts, there are two significant consequences: one, huge opportunities are

missed for actual participation; two, it may simply be misleading to those who want actual participation to happen. It is like claiming to have made an investment in something when, in fact, no such investment was made. Perhaps more critical is that, without broader participation by community members, the most vocal members—who often belong to the majority group—tend to get their say, perpetuating the hierarchies and power arrangements that contribute to poverty. Participation at least allows a broader representation of the community, which is the first step in making those fundamental changes.

## Critical Perspectives on Community and Participation

In discussing community participation, one of the most essential questions is: what does “community” mean? Ironically, this question may be one of the least-considered parts of the participation movement, yet communities are the reason for this practice. At the same time, in sociology, “community” has been a long-debated subject—one that is still not settled.

This section looks at the background, definitions, and ideas of community, then tackles recent challenges and critical perspectives, as well as what these suggest for community participation. So, what does “community” mean? A fundamental concept in sociology, the English word “community” emerges out of the Latin *communitas*—the notion of something being common or things having some things in common. The concept of community was central to the work of sociologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Ferdinand Tönnies, Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, and Talcott Parsons: they emphasized collectivity, belonging, and the grouping of people who have traits or factors in common. Over time, dictionary definitions have reflected the idea of community as a form of unity. For instance, Merriam-Webster defines “community” as a “unified body of individuals” (n.d.), while the Cambridge Dictionary defines it as “the people living in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit” (n.d.). Community, of course, can refer both to people with a common location or to people with interests in common: for example, the Muslim community, the apple growers’ community, the online community, or the academic community. However, “social scientists have actually never agreed on a definition of the concept of community” (Mulligan 2015: 342). As for me, I will simply quote from Oliver-Smith: “I have no intention here to become entangled in the long complex debate regarding the definition of community. For my purposes, the word community designates a group of interacting people who have something in common with one another, sharing similar understandings,

values, life practices, histories and identities, within a certain framework of variation” (2005: 53).

Some literature on development, participation, and disaster risk reduction is bringing new challenges to the dictionary definition of community: “The first criticism of the idea of community is that it falsely implies unity, collaboration, cooperation and sharing” (Cannon et al. 2014: 101). As argued by Oliver-Smith, community “does not connote homogeneity and certainly does admit differences within and among communities. More than anything else, community is an outcome, a result of a shared past of varying lengths” (2014: 98). The most experienced organizations and individuals working with communities on the ground are well aware of the complexities.

In a definition that is much closer to reality in many parts of the world, especially in relation to development, disaster reconstruction, and recovery, communities are far more complex and variable:

“Community” can be described as a group of people that recognizes itself or is recognized by outsiders as sharing common cultural, religious or other social features, backgrounds and interests, and that forms a collective identity with shared goals. However, what is externally perceived as a community might in fact be an entity with many sub-groups or communities. It might be divided into clans or castes or by social class, language or religion. A community might be inclusive and protective of its members; but it might also be socially controlling, making it difficult for sub-groups, particularly minorities and marginalized groups, to express their opinions and claim their rights. (UNHCR 2008: 14)

The concept of a community comprising many subgroups describes many parts of the world, including the PERRP project area. It implies the need for agencies and projects to recognize not just communities but their subgroups, the arrangements of power, and the actors involved so that options and strategies can be chosen.

### ***Definitions, Meaning, Language***

What needs to be emphasized here is that this is a debate about one word in the English language. What does “community” mean to other cultures in other languages, as opposed to what sociologists interpret it to mean? One must also ask if understanding of the term is biased by the English language. For example, there is no one word in the Urdu language that directly translates as community in English. However, the Urdu vocabulary does contain similar concepts. There are words for the traits and factors that people have in common, including geographic location, and for the groups or networks that people belong to, such as castes, tribes, clans,

religions, religious denominations, political affiliations, or *biradari* (“unity group”). The Urdu word *loge* (meaning “the people”) then is attached to these words: meaning, for example, the people of the Raja caste, or the people of Swati tribe, or the Abbasi *biradari*. In any case, the English word community has crept into Urdu, perhaps due to its frequent use by donors, governments, and NGOs. In written Urdu material such as reports and newspaper articles, the word “community” is sometimes spelled out phonetically using the Urdu alphabet. It is still understood as an English word.

However, even without a translatable word, and even with the known divisions, differences, and conflicts in these communities, the local people involved with PERRP still showed strong characteristics of what is known in English as “community.” They shared cultural norms, collectivist norms, religion, a sense of social and geographical belonging, and common values, goals, and priorities.

In this case, all groups also shared a strong desire to rebuild their health facilities or schools—a condition for their children to continue their schooling and for health services to be available in a safe environment. Even adversaries could find ways to come together for this purpose. In the project, there were several critical instances where community members who were long-standing rivals or enemies had to come together to settle related disputes, especially around land issues, before the project would proceed with design or construction. In such cases, when rivals risked losing the one thing they both wanted, ways were found to cooperate, revealing the few but strong—or strong enough—goals they had in common.

### ***Critical Perspective: “Community Is a Myth”***

Although debate about community has existed for a long time, in recent years, a limited but influential literature has taken a more radical look at the concept. Cannon et al., who argued that the word “community” falsely implies unity, collaboration, cooperation, and sharing, also posit that community is so widely misunderstood, misapplied, and misused that “much about the concept is a myth” (2014: 100).

According to Cannon, aid programs are too often stuck in the romanticized, idealized, dictionary-type definitions of community. He argues that “we must ditch the idea that it [community] is fluffy, warm and cuddly and can cure all ills” (2014: 1). But then this argument is taken much further: not only is the romanticized, idealized, warm-and-fluffy dictionary definition to be ditched, the word “community” should also be discarded. As some would argue, this is throwing the baby out with the bathwater.



The “community as myth” literature discusses community in the general development scene, as well as in climate change and disaster reconstruction and recovery. While Titz, Cannon, and Kruger do state at one point that “we are not entirely against ‘community’ concepts as such” (2018: 3), the attention-getting titles of such publications do not reflect that opinion. Some sections in the World Disasters Report 2014 are titled “The Myth of Community?” and “What Is Wrong with Using ‘Community?’” (Cannon et al. 2014: 93, 99), while the title of another paper is “Why Do We Pretend There Is ‘Community?’” (Cannon 2014).

The community-is-a-myth argument is based on a few main points. The first point has already been discussed: that the warm-and-fluffy dictionary definitions of community are only idealized, romanticized notions. The second point is that, in reality, communities are hierarchical, with arrangements of power based on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, caste, or age. These arrangements place some people in highly advantageous positions, while others have no power at all. And this power, or lack thereof, is related to underlying causes of poverty and vulnerability. In these ways, the elite continue to dominate, often capturing benefits for themselves and their own social groups, while the vulnerable are left out. And where communities are divided by such factors, “conflict, friction, intra-community exploitation and sub-groups are the norm,” perpetuating the cycle (Cannon et al. 2014: 103).

The same scholars argue that these realities too often are not considered in the design or execution of projects. As Cannon et al. put it, “a great deal of ‘community-based’ activity (by NGOs, supported by donors, international development banks, etc.) fails to take into account the power relations that lead to division and conflict within the communities, and are often precisely the cause of the problems that the outside organization is trying to address” (1). They also argue that the terms “community” and “community-based” have become entrenched in local, national, and international aid planning and programming. Researchers, donors, NGOs, and others all claim to be working with communities or in a way that is community based. The authors point out that aid programs assume that these labels somehow legitimize whatever actions or activities are involved.

The trouble, they claim, is that the label “community” distracts from understanding the actual causes of problems: “A significant part of why some people are poor and vulnerable are the processes of exploitation and oppression that are going on in the so-called community. In other words, using the terminology itself is in danger of diverting attention from the causes of the very problems being addressed, and instead substituting a framing of problems that avoids looking at their causation” (Titz, Cannon, and Kruger 2018: 3).

In essence, the message is that the hierarchical power structure is so entrenched that it overwhelms the possibility of “community,” at least in the idealized, warm-and-fluffy sense.

Not surprisingly, the validity of “community participation” is also questioned. Who in the community will participate? Cannon et al. state that “because of internal divisions and power relations, participation is almost likely to be distorted” (100). The importance of careful targeting is also emphasized: “If clarifying whom one is working with is a prerequisite of any serious participatory approach, then why not use a more precise vocabulary, be specific about the group one is working with and skip the term ‘community’ entirely” (Titz, Cannon, and Kruger 2018: 21).

### ***Critical Perspective: Communities Are Real but Highly Complex***

As someone with decades of community-based work in different countries, and as head of the community participation program in PERRP, I want to respond to the community-is-myth argument. To proceed, it is highly relevant to restate that all communities in the case of PERRP were in some of the most challenging conditions that exist anywhere: they were conservative, complex, heterogenous, conflict-prone, hierarchical communities with layers of power, wealth, and poverty. They were also squeezed in between neighboring countries with a long history of war, in a location with a long history of war and security and political tensions. Even so, as the rest of this book indicates, it was still possible for a project to facilitate unprecedented, representative participation to meet project goals and build local capacities for further development. I do not claim that PERRP broke up the layers of power, but for a few years at least, communities got experience in how power can be shifted and shared. As discussed in chapter 2, the PERRP social team first worked on understanding the social structure in each location, then it identified the blocs of power (see table 4.1) and how the project could feasibly influence power sharing, at least on a temporary basis. The experience of PERRP is suggestive of the potential impact that such power sharing could have if temporary projects were to be supported with long-term follow-through. PERRP was an example of how communities are not myths: they are real, just very complex.

However, it needs to be emphasized that the community-is-myth argument does raise many vital points for understanding the realities and complexities of communities. That content is of high value and is a long-overdue addition to the literature in development and disaster reconstruction and recovery, and it is frequently referenced herein. Examples include Cannon’s appeal to “make [a] clear distinction between economic and social groups and not pretend that they do not exist” (2014:

2). Cannon et al. point out the importance of identifying and analyzing a community and its differences, conflicts, and power structures and how these could be “bridged whenever they constitute barriers to vulnerability reduction and disaster relief efforts” (2014: 113). At the heart of the issue is this: “Unless the inherent and integral power relations involved in the ‘community’ are actively understood and incorporated into the required process of transformation, then it is highly unlikely that . . . activities will have any significant impact” (Cannon, Titz, and Kruger 2014: 112).

The trouble is that, while these scholars provide detailed and accurate analyses of the problems, the solutions they provide are counterproductive. These scholars focus only on what is wrong with the word “community” and what to do about it, when the same soapbox could be used for a strong appeal for improved education, training, and understanding of the realities of communities, as this subject matter is so well presented in the same writing. The appeal could extend to improving policies, research, funding, practice, and everything else it takes to help the vulnerable. Instead, the main focus is simply on the term community and why it is wrong or misleading to use it.

In response, I contend that arguing for the dismissal of community as a concept is not at all warranted. The perception of communities being only harmonious, homogenous, and “warm and fluffy” may very well be a myth, but communities, as highly complex entities, are real. My perspective aligns with that of Faas and Marino: “Abandoning community altogether would not only create a gaping and nearly untraversable chasm in the idiomatic vernacular but also we fear too strong a language in opposition to the community concept metaphor telegraphs a hostility, however inadvertently, toward those who use it to mobilize scarce social, political and material resources to confront power and contest structural violence. As we see it, ‘community’ can be a beacon signaling pathways to the good and uncharted routes to the otherwise” (2020: 483).

Discussed in more detail below are the main reasons for my stance. The other authors’ definitions of “community” and “power” are too limited, and the few alternatives suggested are weak and subject to the same power structures. If the word community were to be thrown out, it would be a setback in decades of efforts to reverse the top-down trends; talk of discarding community may already be creating a vacuum, or even intimidation, in the field of community work.

### ***Power and Capacity***

In the community-is-myth literature, only the negative side of “community” is considered, and power is discussed only as something oppressive,

exploitive, and destructive. In reality, there are many types and degrees of power, and that power is dynamic. This oversight presents a distorted or partial view of a community. It makes no allowance for local ideas of community or people's understanding of their own community, and it speaks as if communities are not already very aware of—and dealing with—their own complex power structures. Perhaps many agencies do not even imagine that communities have their own informal peacekeepers or power moderators. And certainly far more effort is needed to understand power: the types and degrees of power, the variety of power structures, and how even the latter can work to alleviate some of the problems they cause.

The extremely important view missing is that within communities—even in some of the most highly stratified, conflict-ridden communities such as in PERRP—there are capacities and potential for cooperation. One especially valuable resource are the local people who are known and respected for their moderating influence. These are the people who are not only well aware of the community's power structure but are able to use their own power and know-how to work within those structures, and even to bring a balance of power into conflict resolution. They use their skills in negotiation, mediation, and conflict prevention to call on history, customs, beliefs, or other arguments to influence others; they also act as an important role model for others. In PERRP there were countless examples of these respected moderators. See ethnographies, pages 33, 76, 172, 248.

Projects planning to work with communities need to recognize these moderators and encourage their leadership and influence in such roles, with the project providing support and a neutral platform, at least on a temporary basis. From this platform, local mediators and community members can work together to solve problems and achieve something new. In providing the neutral platform, the project can provide structure and a transparent process, and it can prompt participants to make and agree to the “rules of the game.” While they may also pick up new skills from the project, such moderators will remain long after the project has been finished. After playing this leadership role on a more public platform than normal, not only may their prominence as influencers have grown, but others may have learned from their example as well.

In PERRP's six-year time frame, local power structures could not be changed and the underlying causes of vulnerability could not be wholly alleviated—but presenting new possibilities and strengthening new skills and resources in the community could prompt other changes. The likelihood of lasting change also depended on long-term follow-through with a supporting group—an NGO, government agency, or umbrella group—that could continue to provide a neutral facilitating platform, which did not happen in the case of PERRP, as explained in chapter 4.

As the community-is-myth argument points out, and as discussed in chapter 4, elite capture is a fact of life in many kinds of projects. Elite capture can be especially prevalent in disaster reconstruction, as such projects involve large amounts of money and valuable construction materials, equipment, jobs, and services. In these situations, the better-off can try to divert advantages to themselves or their own social groups. Projects can control this by looking ahead and preparing appropriately.

In PERRP, forms of attempted elite capture included instances in which head teachers insisted only they—without community members—be the decision makers in the construction of their new school; times when local “big men” demanded the construction contractor divert project resources for repairs or construction on their private property; and occasions in which local people made organized efforts to demand jobs. But analyses conducted by the social and technical teams at the beginning of the project helped foresee such problems (see the “What Could Go Wrong?” analysis in chapter 4). With this information, we built in measures to prevent or manage such problems. Other measures to prevent elite capture were implemented in communication protocols, in the responsibilities assigned to local committees, and in the field with social team presence in the communities and on construction sites.

### ***Arguments about Semantics Don’t Change Power Structures***

While a few scholars make the case for dropping the word community, they suggest very few alternatives, and those that are offered lack specificity and would therefore add confusion. It is difficult to imagine how the sorts of alternative words suggested would improve understanding of the subject. A main source states, “It would be more honest and more helpful to speak of ‘people-centered’ rather than ‘community-based’ approaches or better still, to state exactly with whom and where one works. Examples given are ‘why not target individuals or groups with specific characteristics rather than ‘community,’ such as ‘school children and their parents when implementing a school feeding program’; ‘all women in a given village,’ or ‘all immediate neighbors in a block of streets?’” (Titz, Cannon, and Kruger 2018: 22–23).

Why not target such groups? This approach would not improve the situation as any such sub-groups would still be subject to the same power structures that exist in the community. As demonstrated in PERRP, even a single school can be divided into blocs of power: all the women in a given village may be just as representative of blocs of power as the men, or neighbors in close proximity may still be divided. When choosing sub-groups, how could one avoid selecting people or places based on race,

ethnicity, kinship, or any other factors that divide communities and reinforce the hierarchy? This reality highlights the priority need to understand the power structure and develop strategies to have it shifted and shared. Effective community participation still depends on understanding and dealing with these arrangements of power.

Dropping the word community—and, in effect, going back to referring to targeted groups—would take us back decades, back to when targeting was the *modus operandi* in aid work. Back then, it was thought that the best way to help was to strictly target women, the landless, the poorest of the poor, people with disabilities, and so on. But the results such targeted efforts achieved were less than desired, which was one of the main reasons for shifting to a community emphasis. Many learned that you cannot effectively help people by separating them into target groups, or isolating them from contexts, as many causes of and solutions to their problems may lie in that same community. Such targeting also overlooks the many opportunities and resources there can be in any community and would go back to the top-down approach.

Given that so much of the local and international donor aid policy, planning, and programming is directed at the community level—at least in rhetoric—and that there is an influential call to drop the word community without providing realistic alternatives, there could be counterproductive results—namely, a vacuum. Many, including communities and the governments and NGOs that work at the community level, would be left to ask, “What now?” Getting rid of community could already be tying decision makers’ hands, causing hesitation or even intimidation as they wonder: “If we keep using the words community and community-based and some such vocabulary, will we be misunderstood as being uninformed, or out of touch? What will we do?”

In any case, “community” is forever in English speakers’ minds as an everyday word, a kind of shorthand or catchall phrase to refer to groups of people, however they may be constituted. Rest assured, the word community—and its equivalent in other languages—will not go away. As a word, it is an important placeholder between individuals, families, and all outside forces, whether it refers to harmonious units or those ridden with divisions and differences.

## More Suggestions and Recommendations

For more detailed, practical direction on implementing community participation in a disaster reconstruction project, see this book’s conclusion. It combines the lessons learned from many experiences, including from

PERRP's own field-based social mobilizers, engineers, and construction managers.



### **An Embankment Alignment in Bangladesh**

Despite decades of donor agencies, government agencies, NGOs, and other groups promoting community participation and consultation with stakeholders, these processes frequently are not included at all.

In 1999, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)—acting as a donor agency—and the Government of Bangladesh's Water Development Board (BWDB) decided to construct a new twenty-mile flood control embankment. The country was already crisscrossed by flood control embankments, but they were so poorly maintained that they had to be continually replaced. With this in mind, the BWDB and CIDA had decided they did not want this to be just another embankment construction project: they wanted to do an experiment. What they wanted to find out was if a construction project took participatory approaches with the local people, could that participation lead to better maintenance of flood embankments? Through a competitive tendering process, they contracted a large Canadian engineering company, but stipulated that the work had to be headed by a social expert, not an engineer. I was hired as the project manager.

What CIDA and the engineering company did not know—and what the BWDB had ignored—was that there was a far bigger and more immediate problem than long-term maintenance: extreme opposition to the embankment alignment that had been chosen. This opposition was so serious that, upon our first visit to the project area, my deputy manager (chief engineer) and I were met with armed opposition. Traveling by boat up the Dampara River, we were met by several dozen men carrying weapons, who were waiting on shore and warning us not to land. If we stepped foot onto the land, they said, they would shoot. Standing in the boat facing the crowd onshore, it was up to me to figure out what to do next.

I was curious to know why they were so upset. What exactly was wrong? I wanted to hear from these people, but as the river current was strong, the roar of our boat motor made it difficult to hear their words. I explained over the roar that we wanted to talk and understand their opposition and determine if anything could be done about their complaints. The men relented and invited us to come ashore, where we sat down together, joined by dozens of other villagers to listen.

Over the next few hours, we heard the details about how the BWDB surveyors had arrived two years previously, surveyed the land, and decided where the embankment would go without any local consultation. They did

this even though over a hundred thousand people would be affected by the project. Few opposed a new embankment as it would stop the frequent destructive flooding. Their problem was with the alignment that the BWDB had imposed: it would go right through the middle of prime crop land, destroying it. We also heard their ideas about an alternative route for the embankment which would take it off the prime crop land and be closer to the river. Additionally, they pointed out extensive, complex land ownership issues. Land records had not been kept up to date, and with the division of land due to inheritances, earlier land boundaries no longer applied. Further discussion resulted in a long list of specific complaints, and for each complaint, we also collected their proposed solutions. Departing, I emphasized that we were making no promises but would be back to talk again.

Back at the office in Dhaka, we were immediately at loggerheads. All of the villagers' complaints and requested solutions seemed reasonable to me, but it was practically unheard of to make changes once the BWDB had made its decisions. After all, the project had already been designed to meet BWDB specifications, and BWDB, CIDA, and the engineering firm had no experience with getting villagers to participate in such decision-making. At first, the chief engineer flatly rejected all the requests. At a meeting attended by him and CIDA representatives, I pointed out there were three options. The first option would be to proceed as planned; however, due to the likelihood of violent opposition, that option was discounted. The second option would be to abandon construction completely, which would be the more likely choice for BWDB. The third option was to listen to the people and try to find alternative solutions. CIDA said, "Look at those options. Are there any feasible solutions?"

As no one wanted to walk away from the project, I then worked intensely with the engineering team to understand their refusal to accept the complaints and ideas of the villagers. They were mostly concerned that the villagers' preference would put the earthen embankment too close to the water. Due to river behavior, they said, an embankment in the villagers' proposed location would be eaten away by the current. Ceding that some compromise would be needed for the project to go ahead, the engineers then offered two criteria for a new alignment to be acceptable: 1) it would have to be certain distances from the river, as would be identified in each location by the engineers, and 2) everyone had to come to an agreement about the choice. To get this common agreement, an engineer's assessment would need to determine that the embankment was far enough from the river to avoid risk, and the area's complex land ownership issues would need to be settled in a timely manner between monsoon seasons, with the embankment being built on land with free and clear title. If villagers agreed to these two criteria, the project would go ahead.



We took this offer back to the original location, and to eight other locations along the line of the proposed embankment, to start negotiation for a new alignment based on the engineers' criteria. With the help of a retired local deputy commissioner—who was both an expert in land acquisition and a member of the community—the project was able to reduce or eliminate many of the local people's concerns by introducing several innovations.

Following the engineer's criteria and facilitated by the social mobilizers, we asked the hundreds of landowners to negotiate the alignment of the new flood embankment among themselves, as that would also determine the land that needed to be acquired. After coming to an agreement involving 322 plots with 1,200 owners and co-owners, their proposed alignment and plots of land were resurveyed by the government, and new land ownership documents were issued on the spot. An assessment of potential asset loss was conducted and villagers were compensated for these losses on the spot, before construction started—an occurrence that was unprecedented in Bangladesh.

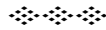
In the end, the new alignment suited everyone. The engineers deemed it technically sound. Almost no crop land was lost, no resettlement was needed, and owners received cash payment right away, before construction started. Land records were updated on the spot, saving years of costly court battles. The project facilitated both community participation and government cooperation. Over ten thousand people had their first major flood protection; the embankment saved their homesteads and crops and provided them with the first road in the area. The project was completed within the budget and within the three-year schedule.

This is an example of two sets of knowledge that could have clashed in practice. The engineers had technical knowledge and enacted top-down practices of standard operating procedures: they worked according to predetermined orders from higher levels. In contrast, the sociocultural specialists' primary concerns were bottom-up: they focused on respect, social justice, and the protection of the people, their land, and their wishes. In this case, the gap between the two disciplines was closed when each party recognized that cooperation could lead to the fulfillment of everyone's objectives.

In community projects, the subject of power and how it is used or shared is an important consideration. Being the project manager put me in the most powerful position on the team, giving me the authority to ask the project engineers to reconsider their choices. Had an engineer been the project manager, as is far more common, it is highly questionable how much influence a sociocultural specialist would have had—if one would have been involved in the project at all. It was the power of the donor and cooperation within the project that made this management arrangement possible.

My experience in this project, especially in land issues, strongly informed my work to settle land issues in the PERRP. Although there was no land acquisition in PERRP, the Bangladesh project's land acquisition expert demonstrated that it was possible to get cooperation from government officials to make things happen swiftly, especially if community members could come to agreement among themselves first.

As the project ended, the chief engineer and I went to the communities along the embankment to say goodbye. One of the men, who had first met us on the riverbank brandishing an old rifle in his hands, now apologized to us for greeting us that way. He said, "We just never imagined anybody would listen to us back then. But you did."



### Syria—"We're Not Too Happy You're Here"

Though the rise of participation in the development field was heralded by many as the solution to countless existing problems, it was not seen that way by others.

In the late 1990s, I was contracted as a consultant by two Rome-based UN agencies: the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Program. I was asked to go to Syria to train the Syrian department of agriculture's rural extension workers to more effectively engage farmers. I was told by staff in Rome that, on visits to their Syrian field offices and agriculture projects, they had observed that extension workers had minimal contact with farmers—and when they did, they acted as if they were issuing orders to the farmers. It was a case of the educated, city-based extension workers simply telling the poor farmers what to do. The UN staff who had arranged for my consultancy had seen how the FAO and other agencies were playing a leading role in some countries in introducing participatory approaches, and they wanted their Syrian program to adopt similar approaches. But this view was not shared by all.

Upon arrival at the Damascus International Airport, I was met by the local FAO representative, who said, "Don't take this personally, but we are not very happy you are here. This community participation stuff is crazy and just the latest fad dumped on us from head office."

Despite his reluctance and doubt, we proceeded, setting up a workshop with around twenty key extension workers from across the country. In the workshop, after a couple of days of introductory exercises and discussions to break the ice, I demonstrated what I would be encouraging them to do with farmers—a participatory analysis. I had the extension workers analyze their professional situations, to think of problems, priorities, and resources; I asked

them what needed to be done and how it could be done. Eager to talk, and apparently enthusiastic about taking new directions with farmers, they spoke openly about their own work problems. Despite the political conditions—this being in the days of the brutal dictator and president, Hafez al-Assad—they shared their perspectives, and such talk could have been dangerous, especially since all their problems as described stemmed from a lack of government support. As they said, their main problem was that they had practically no funding or resources to go to the rural areas for any work with the farmers.

Knowing that continuing to talk about solutions would be too political and thus too risky for employees of the regime, we instead went ahead with plans to visit a few rural communities. To avoid taking a crowd of extension workers to tiny villages, I would take multiple trips, with three or four different extension workers each time, to four or five places. The trips would be both a demonstration and an opportunity for practical experience: the plan was to sit down with a few farmers in each place, and have the newly trained extension workers talk with the farmers in a conversational style, explaining to them that this was only the start of a process. There would then be follow-up meetings in which farmers could talk more about their problems and work toward solutions. That was the plan with these extension workers, but soon that plan went far off the rails.

Despite the plan to go to the villages as discreetly as possible, several UN vehicles showed up to take all trainees all at once, and soon we were in several large, white UN vehicles traveling in a presidential-looking convoy up the highway out of Damascus. Not only did the trip turn out very differently than had been agreed, so too did its result.

About an hour north, in the hills, we arrived at a community hall building and were ushered inside to be greeted by an audience of a few hundred poor men, women, and children, and then I myself and a translator were taken directly to a podium at the front to give a speech. Unprepared for this, I talked to the audience about why I was in Syria, describing the new training program and the process that extension workers would be following. Soon there was a rumbling in the audience, and people were angrily talking among themselves, clearly disturbed. As this talk escalated, one of the senior extension workers came to me at the podium and suggested that we leave the building quickly, which we did. Outside, it was explained to me that whoever arranged this meeting had enticed people to attend by giving them the false story that a foreigner was coming from Damascus to give each family a cow. The rumble was people starting to demand the gifts they'd been promised. We returned to Damascus immediately.

I never found an explanation for what had happened. While the UN vehicles reportedly had been provided due to a miscommunication, clearly someone had decided that no community-based participation would hap-

pen. Unfortunately, this turned out to be another case of rural communities being misled and manipulated.



### Ontario, Canada—The Potato Patch

Two of the most fundamental skills in community participation are how to listen to and talk with people. One summer, when I was a teenager, I convinced my father to let me take over the family's half-acre vegetable plot for one summer. I wanted to grow potatoes so that I could be a member of 4-H, an agriculture club—one of the few youth activities in our far-flung, rural, forested area. He agreed, but on the condition that I look after the potatoes, including all the necessary weeding. As the potato plants grew, so did the weeds. Despite his many reminders, I never got around to removing them.

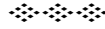
One day—unannounced, and out of the ordinary for our region—a government agriculture officer showed up, making it his business to view any agriculture in sight. Assuming my father was responsible for the vegetable plot, his reaction was instant: “What have you let happen here? This is terrible! You’ve just let weeds grow like this!” Walking among the greenery, he proceeded to criticize my father for the mess, and demanded of him, “Well, do you at least know the names for these weeds? What about that one, and that one?” My father did not answer, and discreetly gestured for me not to say anything. Finally, the agriculture officer decided he’d had enough of such irresponsible people, and headed back to his car, adding another insult: “This is really a shame. You should not let your crop go like that.”

As the agriculture officer left, I asked my dad why he hadn't said anything to him. “Doesn't matter,” my dad said. “Just let the city people have their say.” A young recent university graduate—who may never have grown anything himself—had talked down so disparagingly to my father, who had been growing potatoes his whole life. Neither my father nor I had mentioned that the lack of weeding was my fault.

We never saw that agriculture officer again. It wasn't until about fifteen years later when I first discovered Chambers's writing that I felt vindicated for being so upset by the agriculture officer's behavior. As Chambers wrote:

Agriculture scientists, medical staff, teachers, officials, extension agents and others have believed that their knowledge was superior and that the knowledge of farmers and other local people was inferior; and that they could appraise and analyze but poor people could not. Many outsiders then either lectured, holding sticks and wagging fingers, or interviewed impatiently . . . not listening to more than immediate replies, if that. (1994a: 963)

I had seen city people treat us like this before. Chambers' book had been meant for workers exactly like our visitor, but it obviously had not been part of his education.



### **No to Community Participation!**

Refusal by officials to allow community participation can come for different reasons: they may already have experience with “participation” being imposed on them, or they simply are not willing to share power.

Besides having many schools to reconstruct, PERRP was also assigned sixteen health facilities, which included fifteen Basic Health Units (BHUs) and one fifty-bed hospital. While the area had already been drastically underserved by health facilities before the quake, the destruction of those facilities had greatly complicated overall medical and health conditions and added many more demands. When PERRP arrived a year after the quake, virtually all hospitals and clinics were operating either in what remained of heavily damaged buildings or in tents or the open air, struggling to provide the services needed. These services were in far higher demand following the quake.

PERRP had the same assignment for both schools and health facilities: both types of buildings were to include substantive community participation, which would facilitate construction and involve the community in improving local health and education. While the School Management Committees became highly active in helping with construction and hosting community activities with teachers, parents, and students (sometimes in the school building itself), such broad participation was not allowed for health facilities. PERRP had proposed to the Department of Health that committees at each health facility could help with construction, and that, with Department of Health training and leadership, the committees could become community promoters in preventative health—creating a new role in the area.

While another project did train the committees in health, and the Department of Health did allow the formation of temporary construction committees, Department of Health officials refused to allow community participation in health matters. One health official stated, “What do those village people know about health? They know nothing. We [doctors] are educated and know all about health, so there is no use for villagers to be involved.”

The same official further explained the refusal of community participation. He and the others in charge had worked in the field long enough to have experienced the first wave of donor agency community participation efforts in the 1990s, and our efforts were now seen as an imposition. He explained how, at that time, another donor project had required community

participation, but it was “nothing but trouble.” All of a sudden, villagers had started showing up at the clinic demanding to know where the health worker was or why certain medicines were not in stock. “They started thinking they were the bosses. So, we just stopped all this participation idea,” he explained.

Unfortunately, while the School Management Committees contributed greatly to school construction and thrived in including the community and parents in the improvement of education, no such activity or benefits occurred for the health facilities. PERRP could not trace the 1990s project that had been brought up by the district official, but it appeared to be one that led the people to raise their voices, but this backfired. This change may have come about too fast and too hard, to the extent that those in power could not accept it. The prior project simply had not dealt with the realities of local culture and its power, nor the ways in which the power structures could support, not compete with, each other.



### Myanmar—“What Is This?!”

In some parts of the world, the concept of participation is still considered revolutionary and so is associated with inciting populations and threatening the status quo—the reason I had a bit of trouble getting a visa for Myanmar. At the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok where I was applying for the visa, it was necessary to complete a detailed questionnaire, which included providing details of my work for the previous ten years. I dutifully filled it in, listing several short- and long-term assignments in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and presented it at the embassy’s visa department, along with my passport and requisite photos.

From where I waited, I could see the visa officer talking about my application with another official, both bent over side by side at a desk in an adjoining office, carefully perusing what I’d written. When the visa officer came back to the counter, he called me up to the front of the line, and pointed at my application in his hand—now marked with many yellow highlighter slashes where I’d written the words “community participation.” “What’s this?” he demanded. I explained, “That’s what I do as work: I show people how to organize and participate in projects together.” As soon as I said it, I regretted it, as the look in his eyes seemed to confirm something with him—that I might be a threat—and he again told me to wait and returned to the same official, both of them turning to look at me silently. I was told to come back in three days.

Three days later, I was met by the same officer and two more officials. Although I’d applied for a tourist visa, they demanded to know what I planned to do in the country, should I get a visa. I told them my plans, showing them

my itinerary, reservations and tickets for the boat trip planned on the Irrawaddy River. And no, positively not, I was not planning to do any work in communities; I was there only for a holiday.

This was in 2009, when the military government was still holding the Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest. Given the intense pressure Myanmar was under due to the international sympathy for Aung San Suu Kyi, these officials seemed to think I might be one of those foreigners coming to organize the Burmese, to incite or mobilize people against the government. I was told to return the next day. It was not looking good as they still looked nervous about me, but I was relieved to be granted a visa. Keeping my promise, I spent most of my time on the water and only ventured onto land to visit exquisite temples.



### **Afghanistan—Afghan NGOs Start Up in Refugee Camps in Pakistan**

No matter how dire circumstances may be, concentrating on capacities and participation can bring many benefits.

In the late 80s, I worked for an international NGO in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, where over three million people had fled from war in Afghanistan. Like all the other NGOs, the one in which I worked provided help and services to the refugees. In our case, we provided schools, clinics, and water wells on the remote desert land where the camps had been established. Although I lived outside of the camps with a large extended family of Afghans, I worked in the camps, where I watched daily how the people coped with the crisis. Even before the war, most of the people who were now refugees were among the world's poorest, and some had already been in the camps for years. Despite these hardships, most still were self-assured and hospitable, with the strong sense of purpose and determination for which Afghans have been historically recognized.

One day, driving out of the vast camp, which was spread across the desert in all directions as far as the eye could see, a European colleague and I stopped the car and got out to look over the sand-colored view. Gesturing to the expanse of crude mud houses, he said, "If this happened in my country, I think we'd just lay down and die. We simply could not survive the misery of living in such a situation."

To put it into the development lexicon, the Afghans' positive attitude was one of their main capacities. They put this positive attitude to use in different ways to cope with or reduce their many vulnerabilities—the camp's living conditions, their treatment by camp authorities and police, and the poor supply of food and water, among other severe hardships.

As I worked with the NGO, I started encouraging the Afghans I met to put their strengths to work: to speak up about the problems they were facing in their camp neighborhoods, to get together with others, and to use the NGO as a platform to get solutions from the Pakistani administration of the camps, while also offering to help the administration however they could. A few took the suggestion, made their requests known to the administration, and offered to identify where help was most needed, mainly in the widows' section of the camp. These actions got results—notably, there was a visible improvement to the camp administration's food ration and water distribution.

In the NGO, and later for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, I began training the refugees in related subjects: project design and management, proposal writing, monitoring and evaluation, and especially in how to form their own NGOs. The idea was to encourage Afghans to organize this way while they were still refugees, but especially to think ahead to when there would be peace in Afghanistan and they could go home. How then would they work in their own communities? How would they influence their fellow community members to work together for the good of the community?

This was at the time that the USSR was planning to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan, and the international aid community wanted Afghans to be prepared to take over the aid programming—a process of “Afghanization.” Also, by then some leading Afghans were pleading with the aid community to “now let Afghans make the decisions for Afghanistan.” Most of the staff of the international NGOs were Afghans, but more Afghan involvement was needed in the form of their own NGOs. To start, I was assigned to train and facilitate the first six Afghan groups who expressed an interest in organizing. However, even after months of work with each group, they still refused to meet one another. Reasons for the refusal were partly over historical differences such as ethnicity or sect, but even more significant was each refugee's war history. As the communist Afghan government was still at war with the resistance, it was a dangerous time for all. Refugees feared each other based on political alliances and what reputation those alliances had.

When the groups finally agreed to get together for the first time, about fifty people arrived, many bringing their bodyguards and their Kalashnikov rifles, which they leaned against the meeting room wall as they took their seats at the table. That first meeting was tense but productive, and from that day, the number of groups grew rapidly. Within a few months they did the unthinkable and formed their own community of NGOs: an umbrella group.

Within a few years, there were hundreds, and later thousands, of Afghan NGOs. A few of the Afghans involved then went on to become cabinet mem-



bers in the post-Taliban government. They identified the NGO training they had as refugees as their main education for mobilizing and landing these top jobs. One of those individuals was the minister of Rural Reconstruction and Development, who located me nearly fifteen years later to help him set up the country's first Afghan rural development training center, which is where I was working when the Pakistan earthquake struck in 2005.

