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Shaping the Future The Change Lab

Centre for Development Research
University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna

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Foreword

The Agenda 2030 was signed in New York in September 2015 by all 193 members of the UN General Assembly. It is entitled “Transforming Our World” and calls for radical changes in the ways we manage agriculture and natural resources. Among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), that the agenda defines, the SDG 2, eradicating hunger, is of particular importance for BOKU and the Centre for Development Research. By end of 2030, the international community plans to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, notably in rural areas, through sustainable agriculture. To achieve this ambitious goal, transformative policy reforms at national and supra-national level are indispensable. As implementation of the Agenda 2030 is non-binding and voluntary, its realisation will only work through wide scale participation of people concerned.

Over three decades, participatory methodologies have changed the rhetoric of research organisations, extension service providers, and aid agencies. Today, participatory approaches, tools and processes support community facilitators in communicating more effectively with farmers, agricultural input suppliers, traders, consumer groups, policymakers, and researchers. They have made societal change more democratic and acceptable. In theory, participatory methodologies are well

suiting for multi-actor collaborations aimed at implementing the Agenda 2030. In practice, however, values and quality standards of participatory methodologies have been eroded. Few remember that participatory methods initially aimed at reallocating power to marginalised members of society. Today, we often ignore that the currently common way of how participatory methods are used (or more correctly misused) in research and development programs instead silences poor people, leaving social relations and political exclusion unaddressed.

Furthermore, existing participatory methods will not be sufficient to tackle increasingly complex, intertwined problems that impede the implementation of the Agenda 2030. In our opinion, facilitation methods have to enable deep, radical transformations of agri-food systems to promote lasting change towards sustainability. Therefore, participatory methods need to be developed further and refined to address existing values, and enable people to develop new value systems.

Through the ChangeLab, an initiative launched by the Centre for Development Research, we contribute to overcoming the disparity between the original ideas that drove participatory methods and today's practices. The ChangeLab brings together like-minded colleagues, all involved in change management in their professional lives. We draw on experiences in cognate fields outside agriculture, including management studies, organisational development, group dynamics, and counselling. We seek methodological advances enabling the development and expansion of sustainable agriculture and agri-food systems. We focus on societies experiencing precarious livelihoods, socio-ecological fragility, and power asymmetries. We exchange insights on theories and concepts around resilience, adaptive governance, and translational leadership. Our propositions shall be applicable to action research, work for change agents and coaches, as well as community leaders.

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Michael Hauser

Insights

In agriculture and agri-food systems, participatory methodologies aim at enabling farmers, traders, extension workers and consumers to learn: to acquire new knowledge and skills about sustainable agriculture and the use of natural resources, but also to unravel their inherent capabilities and to develop consciousness about their values and beliefs about sustainability, thereby empowering them to actively pursue their hopes and visions. During the first ChangeLab Workspace, we concluded on five qualities to orient our attention to:

1. Engage people emotionally

Participatory methodologies often fall short of expectations. Why? The reason is that being aware or conscious about a situation, a challenge, a wish or a problem is not sufficient to induce changes in behaviour. In addition, clients need to feel emotionally affected to engage in a transformative process. Participatory methodologies must nurture such conditions.

2. Develop resilience

We live in constantly and rapidly changing times. Therefore, we must revisit the participatory methodologies we employ and analyze their performance considering their ability to deploy adaptive capacities. Arguably the biggest challenge will be to develop methods that strengthen resilience of farmers and communities.

3. Engage people at scale

Our world is becoming increasingly interconnected. If transformative change shall take place at meaningful scale, we need to succeed in enabling novel relationships between many actors. Participatory methodologies must be continuously improved to better accompany changes of multi-actor networks.

4. Work towards well-being

Participatory methodologies allow for change and empowerment through learning processes. Besides obvious objectives like reducing poverty and rendering livelihoods more sustainable, the ultimate long-term goal of participatory methodologies must be what we all seek in our lives, and which is extremely difficult to achieve and to maintain: well-being.

5. Choose your facilitators carefully

Both, the success of participatory processes as well as their outcomes, depend highly on the facilitator's attitude, capabilities and skills. Setting the stage for transformative learning, definition of goals, and crafting strategies is demanding. Flexibility is a prerequisite for adapting to different situations. Excellent communication skills are needed, just like readiness to embrace any direction a participatory process might take.

Throughout the history of science, different disciplines have always contributed to and profited from mutual exchange. We need to explore the links to cognate subjects more deeply and without reservation. Can we benefit from advances in related scientific fields? Which approaches can we transfer and adapt to our context?

include farmers as clients at all stages from establishing information, to defining goals, elaborating and implementing strategies. Just as the simple export of technologies without considering transferability can never be successful, any methodology that reduces human beings to mere subjects of research or of external intervention is bound to fail. In an attempt to incorporate clients as individuals, to increase their identification with and ownership of measures, the so-called participatory methodologies have been developed. Some decades ago, their introduction in the agricultural field work has nourished high hopes for the empowerment of farmers through raising their awareness of their intrinsic capabilities and their knowledge. Nevertheless, extension workers, change agents and researchers are still struggling with low farmer participation and only temporal adoption of newly developed practices. Why do we still fail to induce lasting transformations despite the plethora of methods we have at hand?

We believe that the answer to this question is rooted in the form most development work still takes today: often development or governmental donor organizations start projects on a problem-based approach, focussing on difficulties, constraints and unmet needs. While this approach fits well with the requirements of the donor-side (e.g. ease of administration through standard form-type documents, fast generation of information, clear-cut time line), it fits very poorly with clients, who largely dwell in dire living conditions and first need to be given time and conceptual space to develop new perspectives. Only then can they themselves address challenges they might be facing. Not only is the traditional, deficiency-centred way of dealing with challenges highly discouraging and de-motivating. It also creates directionality and fosters dependency on outsiders. Under the aspect of the global challenges ahead, but also from a philosophical point of view, to continue proceeding in this way is not only wrong, but irresponsible.

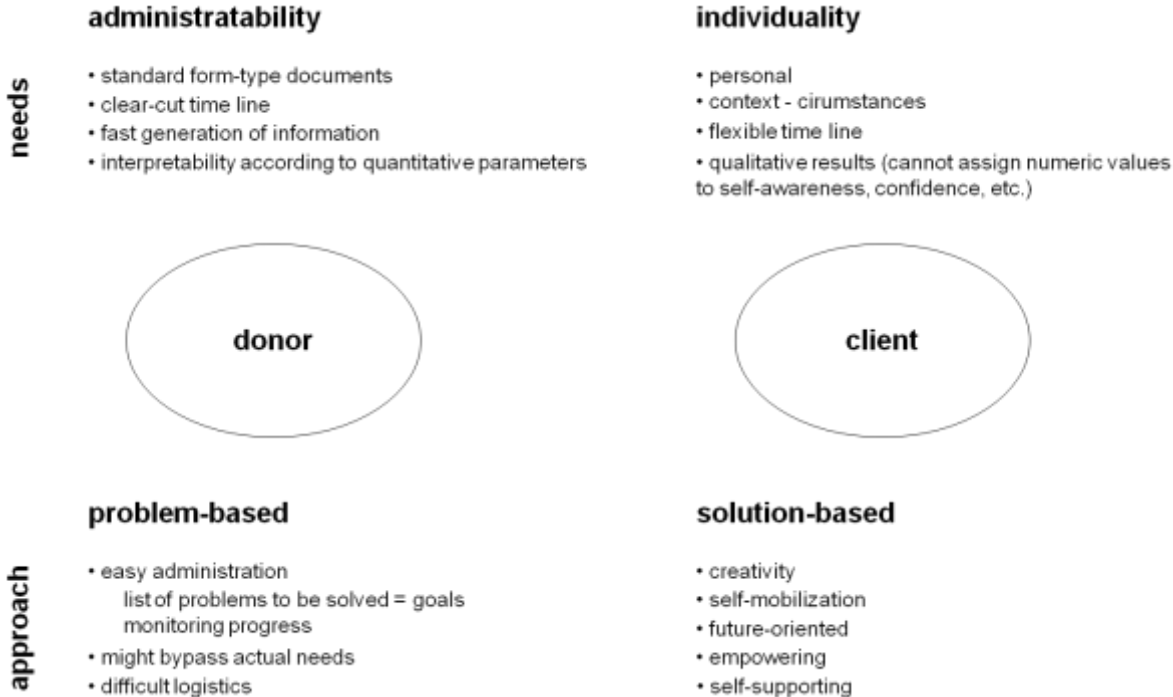


Figure 2. Client needs and donor needs sometimes do not correspond, but need to be reconciled.

How can we address the challenges we face through global changes? How will we be able to feed our growing population in the light of resource scarcity, land degradation and competing goals? How will we manage to protect our environment while increasing

agricultural productivity? If we are to meet the SDGs or at least credibly attempt to, development work cannot rely on approaches whose inherent directionality creates dependency and halts creativity. We need comprehensive approaches and an entirely different underlying philosophical concept. We need methodologies that address clients in their entirety, as individuals with capabilities of self reflection and creativity, as individuals embedded in their social context, as active players, not merely as passive recipients of aid. It is inevitable to switch from problem-oriented to solution-oriented approaches focusing on strengths, if we want to create more equitable, cooperative and positive mechanisms to foster the resilience we need in the face of global challenges like climate change and finite resources. Development work is no longer solely about the reduction of poverty and ultimately of inequality, but it also has important contributions to make to our quest for sustainability.

Bearing all these challenges in mind, we have met under the topical umbrella of the ChangeLab to define hotspots and cutting edges which research needs to explore. In the following sections we will give a brief summary of the insights we elaborated drawing on experiences in the field and on our diverse professional backgrounds, ranging from agriculture to business coaching and organizational development. We envisage the ChangeLab as a regular working space for exchange about our research and cutting edge topics that will advance development work.

Engage people emotionally

Despite an enormous potential for knowledge expansion and (personal) empowerment, participatory methodologies frequently fall short of expectations when facilitating change processes, such as conversion to soil and water conservation practices. So why is it so difficult to translate these blueprints into action and change? Resource constraints, lack of information, and poverty itself are critical barriers to sustainable agriculture. Another eminent reason is that being aware or conscious about a situation, a challenge, a wish or a problem is not sufficient to induce profound and lasting changes in behaviour. In addition to being aware, clients need to feel emotionally affected to engage in transformative processes. Participatory methodologies must nurture such conditions, but most methods do not address the values, beliefs and self-perception of participants. It is imperative to advance participatory methods so that they emotionally engage individuals and groups, while addressing power relations that limit bottom-up change.

While participatory methodologies aim per definition at empowering people, they rarely address power relations.

How can we create a learning environment that will stimulate transformation and ideally entail empowerment, as opposed to simply serving as a kind of entertainment? It goes without saying that actors need to judge a method useful in order to reach their goal, but if the method delivers additional positive side effects, like increased prestige in the case of participatory videos, these are likely to spur the process of learning and empowerment.

In order to be able to cope with the challenges ahead, we need to engage all sorts of different actors in learning processes that will lead to deep transformations; transformations not in a mere technical sense, of our tools and approaches in agriculture, but transformations regarding our values, beliefs and convictions. If these transformations are to occur, the perspectives of the actors concerned must be open to change. Providing occasions for such deep changes in one's frame of reference is what transformative learning aims at. Adult learning is singular in its demand for justification. Contents will not be condoned tacitly, but instead will be subjected to intensive questioning. We therefore need to provide an environment, which participants deem as safe to express themselves, with trustful relationships among participants and also among participants and the facilitator, where there is room for critical reflection and rational discourse. Without all these prerequisites, we will fail to tap our full innovative and adaptive potential. In order to establish trustful, relational communication and enable transformative learning, we need to keep several factors in mind, upon which such a process is based:

- **individual experience**
An individual experience needs to be emotionally engaging to offer an opportunity to reconstruct one's reality.
- **critical reflection**
We need to promote situations in which participants critically scrutinize the/ their world and try to find new answers to questions of how, what, and why?

- **dialogue**
Transformative learning in this context means learning in a social setting. Participants need to be able to express their personal opinions and feelings and others must be self-disclosing, truthful. Otherwise interactions will remain superficial instead of being meaningful and authentic.
- **context**
Personal and socio-cultural factors influence learning and the time it takes to learn, such as the rules and norms that accompany this process.
- **holistic**
There needs to be a balance between cognition, the facts and figures, and affective or relational content.
- **authentic relationships**
Relationships must be authentic and genuine to foster transformative learning, and they must be stable enough to support questioning and possible disagreement.

Organisational development has defined two parameters in order to characterize when or how change will happen: the urgency or necessity for transformation and the capacity or willingness to undergo this process. Traditionally, a crisis is held to be required to kick-start transformative learning. However, experiences from social work and coaching argue strongly against broaching even more issues of worry or despair with clients who already face dire living conditions. Instead we should concentrate on more motivating, future-oriented approaches that spin around solutions, not obstacles. We need to shift focus from the traditional problem-centred attitude to a more positive, solution-centred mindset.

Develop resilience

Today's rapid global changes make many of our traditional ways of problem solving ineffective. The majority of participatory methodologies worked well in the past, stable environments; but the present world is becoming increasingly unstable and develops less predictably. Therefore, we must revisit the participatory methodologies we employ and analyze their performance considering their ability of developing and strengthening adaptive capacities.

Development works with human beings, with individuals that are embedded in communities. However, the psychosocial factors that are at work and their dynamics have largely been overlooked to date. As we face global challenges like climate change, resource scarcity and ever growing inequalities, we urgently need to revisit the methods at hand and invest in the improvement of those that strengthen resilience, foster self-reliance as well as adaptability, and release the creativity of farmers and communities.

Engage people at scale

Our world is becoming increasingly interconnected. We will have to enable novel relationships between many actors with often conflicting interests. In the past, most methods have proven to work best with small groups, but we will need to extend the circle of participants. It will no longer be sufficient to address villages as units of change. We need to think in much larger dimensions. Which methods can we use to effectively facilitate interaction between hundreds or thousands of actors, exceeding organizational units like villages or small communities?

A large proportion of the extensive participatory methodology is not suited to such large numbers of actors. How can we even address so many players with one procedure? Which will be the trade-offs? In organizational development, narratives have become very popular to accompany change processes in companies. Can we incorporate methods like storytelling to facilitate communication and learning in multi-actor networks?

Agricultural development has seen an increasing use of modern means of telecommunication, like mobile phones and video. Participatory video, for example, has been proven to be very appealing to clients and holds the potential for dissemination of narratives to numerous actors at once.

Another important question is how we will empower farmers to reach out and enlarge the multi-stakeholder network. To address for example structural issues, it is necessary to involve government officials, members of institutions, and other players.

Work towards well-being

The strength of participatory methodologies lies not only with the community- and people-centred way change is enabled. Their true power lies in the strengthening of actors' belief in their capabilities and skills. Of course, we need to develop strategies for obvious objectives like reducing poverty and rendering livelihoods more sustainable; but the ultimate long-term goal of participatory methodologies is the empowerment of marginalized groups.

If we want to address inequalities, we cannot expect transformations to occur top-down. We need to create environments in which actors are led to the experience of learning and where learning is associated with positive clues.

Well-being not only consists of material factors like gaining enough income not to be hungry, having access to basic goods and health care and so on. It also encompasses psychosocial factors like the sense of belonging to a group or community, or the conviction not to be helpless in the face of adverse events. The sense of being able to take decisions about and induce changes in one's life is one of the most critical factors of well-being. In order to take decisions, trust in one's own capabilities and skills, it is necessary to be aware of them, of past achievements and to experience acceptance in one's own social structure. Participatory methodologies can contribute significantly to the development of these factors.

Choose your facilitators carefully

The outcomes and the success of participatory processes depend heavily on the facilitator's attitude, capabilities and skills. The best, well-intended tools will remain futile or even prove detrimental if they are utilised by unskilled people, or by people with wrong intentions. We must bear in mind that not only the farmers, but also the professionals who accompany them during the transition to sustainable agriculture, are above all human beings with different predispositions, values and beliefs, inherent capabilities and acquired skills. We will not be successful if we continue to focus on the technical details of methods, while neglecting the individuals who employ them.

Setting the stage for transformative learning, defining goals and crafting strategies is exigent. Obviously, excellent communication skills are a prerequisite for successful facilitation. Furthermore, flexibility and adaptability are needed depending on the situations encountered, as well as open-mindedness and the readiness to follow where the participatory process leads, may the direction be unexpected or different from one's own conceptions.

Reaching conclusions bottom-up is often more time-consuming than making decisions top-down and facilitators tend to stick to their favourite methods, even though other approaches might be more adequate. The facilitators need to withstand the temptation to put adherence to a formal schedule over content-related progress. Agents therefore have to allow for time, while bearing in mind deadlines that have to be met. Priorities need to be set, but facilitators have to refrain from acting too directive. This holds true for administrative requirements, as well as for the participatory process itself, its topics, contents, strategies and outcomes. In practice, these contradictory functions are extremely difficult to embody and professional need to be trained comprehensively. Further, it will require increasing the flexibility on the donor or administrative side regarding time requirements and schedules.

The facilitator's position is crucial to learning and empowerment. It is therefore necessary to clarify and maybe redefine which attitudes, capabilities and skills enable a facilitator to fulfil his or her role in a way that is beneficial for the clients and the participatory process. Based on these insights, the training of agents will have to be ameliorated, maybe even with a shift in emphasis, to allow these professionals to cope better with both, the aforementioned conflicting interests and the high degree of uncertainty that comes with transformative processes.

New research directions

1. Engage people emotionally

How can we trigger necessary emotions to render participatory processes more effective? Which instruments can we offer to dissolve lock-in situations and enable people to disengage themselves from seemingly overwhelming circumstances to regain mastery of their lives?

2. Develop resilience

How can we combine different methods to enhance their effectiveness? Can we establish a grid that can serve as a selection guide to facilitating agents?

Can we profit from advances in related fields like business coaching or others to develop methods that will foster resilience?

Participatory video has proven to be an especially powerful method; not only is it unusually appealing, it also offers additional beneficial outcomes. How can we integrate this approach into other methods?

Can we build upon past experiences to provide orientation on which methods and approaches are particularly suited to which mindsets and situations? Is it possible - and if yes, how - to derive a scheme, that will tell us which method will work under which circumstances?

A prerequisite for such a routing system is the evaluation of existing methods according to performance criteria. These need to be defined, even though their relative importance is likely to differ depending on what shall be facilitated: orientation, strategy development or implementation. Possible criteria could be how time-consuming a method is, how adaptable it is to different needs, whether it increases transparency, or whether it is suitable for a high number of stakeholders. Other factors include whether a method can handle uncertainties, stimulates creativity and innovation, or is suited for large groups of stakeholders.

3. Engage people at scale

How can we reach large numbers of participants?

4. Work towards well-being

How can we create a learning environment that will stimulate transformation and ideally entail empowerment, as opposed to simply serving as a kind of entertainment? Participatory video is a powerful method for transformative learning, often leading to unexpected outcomes that contribute to change. How can we fuse it with other approaches to fully exploit its potential?

5. Choose your facilitators carefully

What can we do to ensure that community facilitators are trained in the best possible ways to prepare them for the challenges ahead?

6. General

Can we benefit from advances in related scientific fields? Which approaches can we transfer and adapt to our context?

How can we translate the abstract goals of the Agenda 2030 into measures *and recipes* that can be applied readily and straightforwardly?

CDR at a glance

The Centre for Development Research (CDR) was established in 2009, provides evidence-based solutions to reduce inequality and poverty, and to assure world food security through sustainable agriculture and renewable natural resources. It searches for pathways to sustainable livelihoods, and aims to build resilience to disaster and conflict.

The CDR cooperates with experts of the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna, covering a wide array of scientific disciplines, but also maintains close ties with international collaborators. It conducts research, offers higher education to students, communicates insights to experts, as well as a lay audience, and develops capacity to recognise and manage critical developments in agri-food and natural resource systems.

Contributors

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