Is facilitation just another fashionable buzzword, or have we only recently recognized it as a crucial element in any participatory process? Regardless, no matter what type of community forestry intervention is anticipated, there is the need for a good facilitator to make it happen.

Negotiating management agreements, resolving conflicts, or building forest users' capacity in forest management all need effective facilitators. But why is facilitation so crucial? What do we mean by facilitation? And why are good facilitators so rare?

**Why is facilitation so crucial?**

Ideally, community forestry in its many forms is based on interaction between farmers and facilitators. Through this interaction, both learn the main traits and dynamics of the local livelihood systems. Some activities suitable for generating this interaction are:

- defining priority forest management/production problems;
- generating ideas on possible management practices;
- establishing field experiments based on the 'best-bet' options for improvement;
- observing and reflecting on field experimentation; and
- identifying the best solution to the identified management problem.

These options are based on ideas and experiences derived from both indigenous knowledge (both local and elsewhere) and formal science. Therefore, the facilitators need to know both their subject and updated appropriate technologies very well. However, it is even more crucial that they know how to communicate with forest users, in order to gain insight into their knowledge, to understand how to build users' confidence in both problem identification and experimentation, and to be able to increase the exchange of information and facilitate group decision-making.

Facilitators also need the skills to establish a safe and comfortable learning environment in which users are encouraged to learn by doing, by trial and error, and by experimenting and discovering for themselves.

Most important of all, the facilitators should improve the ability of forest users to make better management decisions within the context of their own particular resource situation.

This improvement is part of a process of social change. Encouraging local innovation through the self-organized planning, implementation and evaluation of systematic experiments fosters self-confidence in the communities involved. It also brings about a process of social change, as the planning and assessment process obliges the user and facilitators to take into account the different needs of different people in the community, especially when dealing with common property regimes. Facilitators are often involved in negotiations about the equitable use of natural resources.

**What do we mean by facilitation?**

Facilitation can be best described as a conscious process of assisting a group and functioning within one, to successfully achieve its defined task. In order to facilitate, we need to facilitate the process of group dynamics and the team learning process.

To understand the role of the facilitator, it is first necessary to understand the characteristics of adult learning. Studies of adult learning show that adults come to new experiences knowing a great deal, and they learn best
by building upon their own experiences. They learn more by doing than by listening, and they learn best when they are engaged and assisted. Adult learning theory stresses that adults need opportunities to experience, reflect, discover, and apply. In practice, then, we need to understand that:

- To learn from new experiences, forest users need to be able to relate these to their own values, beliefs and previous experiences.
- To learn by discovery, users need to have confidence and responsibility, to experiment and find their own conclusions.
- To learn by application, users need to use and test a new skill and receive feedback on their performance.
- To learn by sharing, users need to be able to trust that learning by sharing with other farmers will not harm their business.

The evidence for learning is change: changes in behavior, knowledge, understanding, skills, interests, values, awareness, or attitudes.

In order to facilitate these changes, it is more effective to begin with an experiential activity during which the users can work out their own conclusions, rather than to give lectures or demonstrations. Thus, facilitators need to match learning activities with desired learning outcomes.

A good facilitation program includes a broad variety of learning activities, such as field experimentation, group reflection and discussion, presentation and demonstration. Each has its own merits and uses. These activities are selected specifically to encourage users to become active and animated: users offer ideas, raise questions, build on one another's statements and challenge one another's opinions. They learn from, and with, other users and work together on a collective analysis.

Therefore, the facilitator's job is to structure and encourage rather than deliver information, explain or provide answers. Facilitators initiate discussion and then draw in the farmers; they amplify some comments and summarize others; they compare and connect remarks and point out opposing views; they draw the threads of discussion together and highlight the learning points. In short, the facilitators guide the process, but not the outcome.

The following have been identified as being necessary functions for a facilitator:

- Sustain or create interest and mobilize farmers and villagers.
- Create a comfortable and open learning environment.
- Understand and explore farmers' problems and priorities.
- Identify and organize learning opportunities for farmers outside their village context.
- Facilitate dialogue and participatory group decision-making to promote mutual understanding.
- Foster inclusive decisions.
- Build farmers' confidence in experimenting, reflecting and learning from this process.
- Provide assistance for solving problems.
- Increase farmers' knowledge in forest management/silviculture techniques.
- Encourage and promote the sharing of learning and best practices.

Why are good facilitators so rare?

There are probably a number of reasons why there are only a few effective facilitators. First, there is the lack of recognition that the participatory approach to education is the most effective with adult learners. Secondly, there is the lack of recognition that good facilitation is a crucial element in any participatory approach. Most educational and training interventions still focus on the technical knowledge base of the trainer/teacher and there are many ways to balance the situation more in favor of facilitation such as:

- Select potential facilitators not only on the basis of their thematic expertise but also on facilitation experience or potential.
- Dedicate a substantial and integrated part of any training event to facilitation skills, techniques and tools.
- Create opportunities for "new" facilitators to learn the main traits on the job, apprenticed to more experienced facilitators.
- Develop a regular backup/feedback/reflection sharing and refresher’ event for facilitators who often work in isolation.
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