

12 Participatory methods for measuring and monitoring governance

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Introduction

Natural resource governance, especially in the context of decentralization, emphasizes the utility of bringing together diverse stakeholders from different levels of society to define rules and processes for resource management collectively. Stakeholders frame problems and attempt to influence management differently according to their subjective view of the world, shaped by their knowledge, interests, power and personal experience with natural resources. Participatory and collaborative approaches to governance recognise that though these differences create challenges for decision-making, they also create opportunities for learning and improvement. Furthermore, these approaches give people greater ownership in the governance system, which facilitates implementation of policies, rules and informal agreements due to broad support from leaders and resource users. In this context, effective governance systems gain momentum from the collective action of stakeholders rather than top-down enforcement by government officials. Adaptive governance further emphasizes the importance of monitoring and evaluation, specifically by involving stakeholders in reviewing the effectiveness of the rules and processes that govern resource management.

While quantitative monitoring and evaluation frameworks play an important role in learning and adaptation, these frameworks represent a particular view of governance and resource management, which may not resonate with a broad range of stakeholders, especially stakeholders with non-Western worldviews or limited formal education. The participatory methods outlined in this chapter highlight qualitative approaches to engaging stakeholders in developing, monitoring and evaluating governance rules and processes, allowing stakeholders the freedom to frame problems in their own terms and come up with adaptive strategies that fit their needs and interests.

In this chapter, we discuss how to invite stakeholders to reflect on their role in resource management systems, their relation to others and their ability to change the systems in which they are embedded. Rather than focusing on such indicators as standardized measures for evaluating success, we highlight the use of narratives and critical reflection as uniquely valuable types of qualitative data that promote learning and action with participants who may all define success very differently.

In many cases, applying the participatory methods described here can be used to develop indicators, but we emphasize these methods as valuable in their own right (Guijt, 2000).

Depending on which stakeholders are involved and the focus of inquiry, participatory methods can address governance at the macro, meso or micro levels. Most published accounts of participatory monitoring focus on the micro level, involving community groups or local government actors, in an effort to amplify voices that may otherwise be marginalized in macro-level governance assessments (e.g. Geilfus, 2008). Participatory monitoring of meso-level governance is increasing with the prominence of multi-stakeholder advisory panels and a related interest in monitoring their effectiveness in terms of representativeness, legitimacy, impacts and, in some cases, environmental outcomes (Gaventa and Estrella, 2000). Although rarely discussed, participatory methods can also directly engage national leaders, policy-makers and heads of large non-governmental organizations, asking critical questions of their roles in formal institutions and governance at the macro level (Kezar, 2003).

At all levels, participatory methods are oriented toward building awareness and motivating positive change by cultivating a spirit of collaborative inquiry among participants (Reason and Bradbury, 2006). Thus, their use is fundamentally oriented more toward learning and improvement than toward making conclusive evaluations. However, in some cases the learning that emerges from these processes requires change that may fall outside the influence of participants. In these instances, groups can publicize their findings to advocate for broader change and attempt to reform a 'broken' system.

In this chapter, we present the underlying philosophy of participatory methods, the core concepts central to engaging and empowering stakeholders, and several participatory tools with examples that illustrate their use in various contexts. We emphasize that, if their creators lack an understanding of their fundamental philosophy and concepts, participatory methods can easily be misused, giving the superficial appearance of increased participation without truly engaging others in the co-production of knowledge (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). We close with a discussion of some common challenges to applying participatory methods and suggestions for how to navigate these challenges.

Philosophy and core concepts

The philosophy of participation

A philosophical commitment to learning *with* participants, not just about them, underlies participatory methods. These commitments are rooted in the philosophical traditions of pragmatism and critical pedagogy, as articulated by theorists such as John Dewey (1997) and Paulo Freire (1998). This philosophical orientation acknowledges both the 'unfinishedness' of human understanding, referring to knowledge as inherently incomplete and evolving; and the multiplicity of different ways of knowing and seeing the world, also known as pluralism (Reason

and Bradbury, 2006; Wollenberg et al., 2005). This philosophical orientation rejects practices that cling too firmly to one particular conceptual framework, or articulation of what governance is or how it works best. Participatory methods require that we continually seek to engage people with other worldviews, who see governance through different lenses based on dimensions of diversity, such as gender, ethnicity, cultural heritage, social position, political orientation and educational background, among other facets of identity (Tolman and Brydon Miller, 2001). Exploring these differences is a key source of innovation and creativity (Bakhtin and Emerson, 1984).

A participatory approach recognizes the plurality of different worldviews, and that individuals, groups and organizations will have access to different sources of power relative to those differences (Cornwall, 2004). Differences can be a source of creativity; however, actors can also abuse differences to leverage their own power and marginalize others, as in elite capture (see Chapter 10). Grounded in critical theory,¹ participatory methods challenge such power imbalances through self-reflection, dialogue with others, and building societal awareness by publicizing inequalities and advocating for change (Reason and Torbert, 2001). In this sense, participatory methods are inherently oriented toward empowering stakeholders through simple acts of inviting participation and creating opportunities to co-produce knowledge. This echoes the central tenets of governance, which emphasize decentralization of power and meaningful stakeholder involvement to make more equitable, informed decisions about resource management. In the following sections, we describe how these philosophical commitments translate into core concepts for stakeholder engagement.

Core concepts

The risk of participatory methods is that those applying them may choose a standardized ‘out of the box’ approach and use it without following the underlying philosophical commitment to learning with participants (Campbell, 2002; Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Critics point to this common pitfall as an explanation for why many international development projects fail to reduce poverty or improve environmental conditions (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). The core concepts described in this section help join the abstract aspirational goals of empowerment with the design of group activities that fall under the category of participatory tools or methods. Fluency in these core concepts allows one to tailor a particular tool to the culture or context of a specific situation and improvise in response to participant feedback, staying true to the philosophy of empowerment (Kincheloe, 2005). Specifically, we highlight five core concepts – dialogue, language, relationships, social networks and experiential learning – that together acknowledge important aspects of diversity and power, providing guidance for how to engage stakeholders in learning and adaptation.

Dialogue

Dialogue refers to the relational process of opening up to others through language. Dialogue is more than simply conversation or discussion and is fundamentally

different from deliberation (Bakhtin and Emerson, 1984). Dialogue refers to the process of explaining one's own worldview, listening to and considering the views of others, and mutually creating space to explore differences, which builds understanding and stimulates creativity (Figure 12.1). Dialogue can be expressed in conversation, in writing (such as through letters), or even internalized, for example, by imagining how colleagues would respond to an idea and using that internalized feedback to refine the idea before speaking.

Whereas debate and deliberation have established places in the public policy arena, their emphasis on arriving at a rationally optimal solution can obscure important differences raised by stakeholders and thus can inadvertently silence less powerful voices. In the context of governance, agreements reached through consensus or other means are foundational to establishing roles, responsibilities, shared goals and rules for resource management. However, an overemphasis on agreement often leads to decisions that do not consider the full range of stakeholder interests and knowledge, and thus those decisions may prove inadequate or

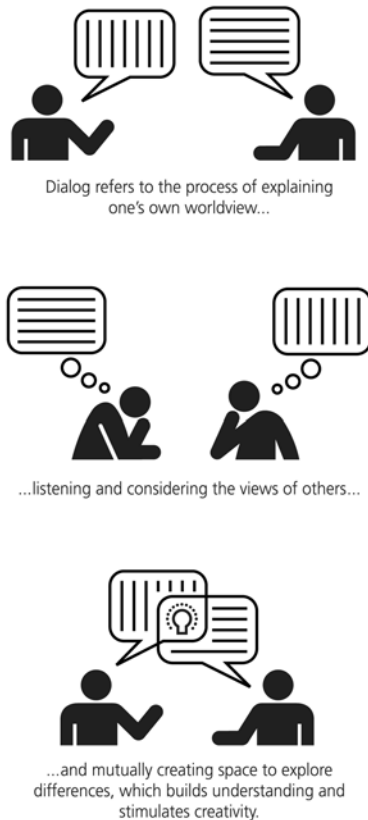


Figure 12.1 In conversation, dialogue occurs when people speak freely, listen openly, and blend their ideas to create new meaning. (Dialog and Thinking icons by Luis Prado from the Noun Project.)

difficult to implement due to limited stakeholder input and support (Connelly and Richardson, 2004).

Participatory methods shift the emphasis from reaching final agreements to learning, with the expectation that greater understanding among stakeholders tends to lead to wiser, longer lasting agreements. Similarly, adaptive governance emphasizes learning over the design of optimal policies and processes, with the expectation that decisions will be adjusted and refined over time as stakeholders reflect on the effectiveness of their choices (Bradbury, 1998). In this sense, the goal of dialogue is not resolution of difference, but rather appreciation of multiplicity (Bakhtin and Emerson, 1984).

Dialogue emphasizes that all meaning is created in a context of relationships and subjectivities – those dimensions of diversity that shape a person's identity and worldview (Hamilton and Wills-Toker, 2006). From this perspective, meaning is created in the relational space between people; it is negotiated in particular social contexts involving particular actors (Bakhtin and Emerson, 1984). This concept of dialogue, when applied to participatory methods, requires that we pay particular attention to how we create safe, inclusive social spaces where people can explain, listen and explore different perspectives on topics such as governance (Cornwall, 2004; Gaventa, 2004).

Language

Central also to participatory methods is the concept of language or discourse. People use language to articulate their own views of the world and position themselves in relation to others (Fairclough, 2008; van Dijk, 1993). Discourse theory recognizes that social groups develop their own words and meanings from shared views of the world (Gee, 2005). Thus, an understanding of how groups use language can help bridge differences and motivate broader participation.

For example, when attempting to engage stakeholders, we can be more successful when we use words familiar to stakeholders (see Box 12.1). In many cases, people may not be comfortable using technical terms to discuss governance issues; however, they may eagerly engage in discussion about why they have not been able to access their forest parcels and get good prices for their products. Instead of limiting language to technical terms, we must be attentive to recognize when stakeholders are discussing issues relevant to governance using their own words and concepts.

When applying participatory methods, we seek to learn the language of our participants so that we can identify similarities and build common understandings. The words we use to convene groups and focus critical attention on governance issues may not have the desired effect if those words do not resonate with what matters to participants (Fairclough, 1992). Self-awareness of our own use of language is especially important when dealing with controversial issues, since social groups tend to develop oppositional language that accentuates differences and creates polarization (Gee, 2005). Powerful groups can use polarized language to exclude or marginalize others (see Box 12.2). For example, decision-makers may use overly general stereotypes to lump marginalized groups together,

Box 12.1 Examples of different language used to convene community groups

Imagine the following announcements were printed on posters and hung throughout a community to publicize a meeting. The first example below uses technical terms that would be familiar to government officials, lawyers and some non-governmental organizations:

Local communities are not well represented in national forest policy. Come participate in a panel discussion and share your thoughts with national leaders.

Many community members would probably not be motivated to attend because of the abstract language. They may also be intimidated by the idea that they would have to speak directly to national leaders. The second example frames the issue in practical, concrete terms that may better resonate with the interests of small-scale forest owners:

Do you need better access to your forest parcels? Are you getting a fair price for your forest products? Come, listen and share your concerns at a community meeting.

Either may be useful to convene participants, depending on whom you seek to involve and what you seek to accomplish.

Box 12.2 An example of polarizing language

When stakeholders are polarized around an issue, they typically express their views in terms that imply others are wrong. For example:

If we want to save jaguars, we must enforce anti-poaching laws. Ranchers claim they have to kill 'problem animals' to protect their livestock, but we know they kill for sport. They consider jaguars a nuisance and don't care about our country's natural heritage.

This language implies that ranchers are the problem to be controlled. Also the speaker describes all ranchers as the same. This type of polarizing language implies there is only one 'right' way to look at a problem. By using this language, the speaker signals to others that ranchers should not be included in framing the problem or developing solutions.

thereby suppressing important differences in how each group needs to manage their resources. In a process focused on learning about inequities in governance systems, language can be an important tool to identify and challenge subtle power imbalances (Fairclough, 2008; van Dijk, 1993). Knowing the language of different stakeholder groups allows us to motivate broader participation. By blending words and meanings of diverse groups, we can create a welcoming atmosphere that encourages dialogue and learning, creating momentum for consensus and action.

Relationships and networks

Building from the concept of dialogue and language, we come to relationships, which are key to understanding stakeholders' views and, ultimately, to motivating collective action to improve institutions (Senge, 2006). Further, relationships do not exist in isolation, but are embedded in larger, dynamic networks of relationships. Participatory methods recognize that actors cannot analyse a resource management problem from an objective, removed position; instead, their understanding of a problem is inherently linked to who they are and how they relate to others in the governance system (Prell et al., 2008). Some researchers would see this lack of objectivity as a weakness, but we emphasize that participants' socially situated understanding of a resource system puts them in a uniquely powerful position to influence the very governance issues that we seek to understand and improve (Bouwen and Taillieu, 2004).

An understanding of social networks at the macro, meso and micro levels can help us identify the 'right' mix of people to engage in examining governance issues, for example, identifying people who are influential at different levels of society. Further, an understanding of stakeholder relationships can help us design safe spaces for participants to engage in dialogue about potentially sensitive issues (Estrella and Gaventa, 1998). For example, organizers need to know about any unresolved conflicts and understand the history of participants' relationships before inviting them into a group setting to discuss governance more broadly.

Inviting people into participatory processes works best as an iterative process, and fundamentally depends on a good understanding of how participants are linked to each other and embedded in larger social networks (Bouwen and Taillieu, 2004). Inviting participants also depends on the topic of interest, which will likely change as new people begin to engage in framing problems and asking questions (Estrella and Gaventa, 1998). Further, social networks are dynamic and may change as stakeholders form new or deeper relationships through their involvement in a participatory process. Typically, these group processes build momentum when motivated individuals, who are deeply engaged in the issues, begin to reach out to others through their social networks, either by inviting them to participate directly or by keeping them informed, interested and ready to help when discussion and dialogue transition into action.

This transition from learning to action is possible when participatory processes involve people in leadership positions or individuals who are highly connected and influential in their social networks. As the process unfolds and key issues are identified,

participants must pay attention to who is missing. Understanding participants' relationships through social networks is critical to identifying and reaching out to those individuals or groups who may be missing from the process. Involving participants in mapping their relationships to others, as in social network analysis, can help identify people in key positions of influence and facilitate the selection of appropriate participants (Prell et al., 2008). An understanding of how participants are linked may also reveal divisions between social groups or marginalization of some individuals. If such divisions between groups are relevant to the governance of a particular resource system, participatory methods can be designed to reach out to those marginalized groups and constructively talk about differences.

Experiential learning

Finally, we turn to the concept of experiential learning, which explains how we arrive at new ways of seeing the world by integrating experience, analytical thinking and experimentation (Dewey, 1997; Freire, 1998; Kolb, 1984). This concept, similar to the others highlighted in this chapter, draws strongly on the power of reflection – both self-focused reflection on personal experience and group-oriented reflection on shared experiences (Reason and Torbert, 2001). Kolb's experiential learning (see Figure 12.2) recognizes four stages of learning:

- concrete experience, in which participants take actions and make decisions in everyday situations;
- reflective observation, in which participants distance themselves from the experience to describe what happened;
- abstract conceptualization, in which participants interpret their experience and arrive at preliminary conclusions; and
- active experimentation, in which participants experimentally apply their new understanding to attempt to influence future experiences, which then reinitiates the cycle (Kolb, 1984).

Kolb's experiential learning cycle is a relatively straightforward model of experiential learning and easy to use with participants. It has similar theoretical roots to Freire's (1970) theory of praxis, which emphasizes critical action paired with reflection, as well as Dewey's vision of progressive education (Dewey, 1997). Dewey recognized that experience alone does not necessarily lead to new thinking or experimentation. To increase participant learning, new experiences should link to what participants already know and related experiences should be interspersed with time for reflection. With such cycles of experience and reflection, learners can continually test their assumptions and experiment with emerging ideas in new situations. Dewey believed a mentor's role was to immerse learners in new experiences and to create time and space for reflection and experimentation in between successive experiences.

In the following sections, we highlight a variety of participatory 'tools' that draw from these core concepts to engage participants in questions of governance.

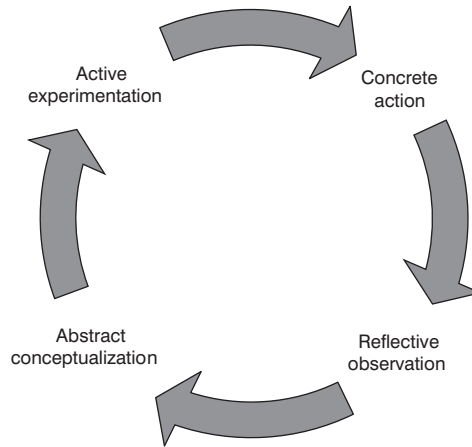


Figure 12.2 The experiential learning cycle, adapted from Kolb (1984)

Participatory tools for adaptive governance

There are as many ways to define good governance as there are participants with different views of the world. The previous chapters describe specific frameworks, indicators and analytic approaches to measuring and monitoring governance at the macro, meso and micro scales. Rather than describing the specifics of additional methods here, we present participatory ‘tools’ that can be used to increase participant engagement in defining and improving governance systems.

Before applying these tools, we must carefully consider who leads a participatory process, who participates and who does not, because the answers to these questions affect learning and adaptation. Continual reflection on the philosophy and core concepts of participatory methods is key to maintaining a genuinely participatory process that leads to insightful findings and empowering results.

In this section, we highlight several participatory tools – storytelling with photos, video, timelines and maps, field experiences with structured reflection and empowering focus groups. For each, we explain the tool’s connection to the philosophy and core concepts explained above. We provide examples of how the tools have worked in real-world contexts and we discuss challenges and pitfalls of applying them, along with recommendations for the most effective use of each tool.

Storytelling

Storytelling is a fundamentally human activity that takes on many different forms and styles, but that crosses all cultures, classes and education levels (Riessman, 1993). Consistent with our philosophical values of recognizing and including a diversity of views, stories can take on the language and culture of the speaker.

People use stories to share their view of the world, express their identity, highlight their values, and draw people's attention to key issues and actors (Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004). Stories are also flexible, in that participants can conclude with either clear, pointed messages or more subtle critiques that may be easier for people to hear without 'losing face'.

Some stories, such as myths or national histories, are well-established and carry almost identical messages even when they are told many times by many different people; these stories represent accepted meanings shared by one or more social groups (Gee, 2005). For example, a common story of national identity in South Africa is how Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for his leadership role in the anti-apartheid movement, released after 27 years, soon became South Africa's first black president and subsequently initiated the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an attempt to unify South Africa under democracy. For many South Africans, the Commission's focus on reconciliation rather than retribution is symbolic of national healing.

Other stories may be more dynamic, representing unclear conclusions, unfinished learning or personal discovery; these stories tend to change as the storytellers shift their understanding or orientation toward the problem (Gergen and Gergen, 2006). For example, a mayor's story of how her city coped after a major earthquake immediately after the event will be very different from her story years later, when the damage has been fully assessed and the response effort has been discussed publicly. When using storytelling to engage participants in reflecting on governance, the goal is to stimulate people to look critically at their current experience, gain new insights and tell new stories. In cases where powerful elites have undue influence on a particular governance system, many people may repeat well-established stories that are favourable to those powerful leaders; for example, national governments may have aggressive media campaigns targeted at fixing public opinion in favour of their administration. In these cases, we must think critically about participants' stories and respectfully challenge them to question familiar messages and conclusions.

Stories can be created and told by individuals, but groups can also create stories (Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004). Such a shared story can help to create a shared identity and group cohesion, as we see in a team-building activity. However, when there are conflicts such as those related to equitable distribution of resources, people often develop multiple competing stories that portray vastly different interpretations of past events and current issues under debate. Bringing together small groups of diverse people and asking them to develop a single story can stimulate dialogue, learning and, in some cases, even healing within the group (Seaton, 2008; Winslade, 2006). In other, potentially volatile situations, asking participants to develop their own stories and then later convene a larger group to listen to the stories and explore differences may be more effective.

Stories occur naturally in conversation all the time, yet we can also cue people to tell stories on particular topics quite easily. Photos, videos, timelines and maps are especially good at prompting people to tell stories.

Photos and videos

Photovoice is a commonly used participatory tool. Participants are given cameras and asked to take photos on a particular topic and present them back to a group (Wang and Burris, 1997). Organizers may assign topics, or the group can come up with a list of topics that they want to pursue. The latter option is more consistent with the philosophy of empowerment, since each group will likely define the problem differently. However, a broad topic assigned by the organizer may get people out taking photos faster, with plenty of time for the group to centre the discussion with their own stories and photos once they reconvene. For example, if participants are invited to photograph the value of a forest, participants who make a living from the forest may take photos of harvested trees or other forest products, while visitors may focus on the forest's aesthetic beauty. When participants return to discuss their photos, these differences will emerge, and the group can decide how to focus the discussion.

Referring to the experiential learning cycle, participants initiate reflective observation when they describe what they observed and photographed. Then, when others ask why they chose the subject and what it means, they transition to abstract conceptualization. This builds from personal reflection to group dialogue when the group asks questions of the presenter and explores the meaning behind the photo more deeply. As different people present different photos on various related topics, the group may start to build a shared understanding of a particular success or challenge. If the topic motivates the group enough, this may progress into experimentation, where they actively seek to initiate change. In some cases, groups will continue to take photos and come together to reflect on their progress, or they may find other ways to further discussion and stimulate change. If the desired change lies outside the group's sphere of influence, they may decide to use the photos to advocate for change more broadly. Numerous examples of photovoice show that the concrete visuals of photography engage participants emotionally in issues that may otherwise be too abstract or removed from everyday experience to motivate their participation.

A slightly more ambitious variation on this approach is participatory video (Lunch and Lunch, 2006). The non-profit organization Insight specializes in teaching basic technology and filming skills to community groups so that they can write, direct, film and produce their own stories using video. Their website showcases some examples of participatory videos (see www.insightshare.org). In one example, the Batwa, an indigenous group from Uganda, were removed from their ancestral forests as part of a conservation initiative and tourism development project. In their video, they tell their story of decisions made without their input, development plans implemented poorly and the hardships that resulted, including racial discrimination, poverty, landlessness and unequal access to education and healthcare.

Obvious challenges to using photo or video methods are the start-up funds needed for equipment and training, which are substantially greater for video. Also, some people may be intimidated by the technology, particularly those with lower

education levels, or women in cultures where digital technology is considered men's work. The risk is therefore that people who feel intimidated by the technology would not participate and thus their perspectives on the topic would not be included. In some cases, creating separate groups for those needing more support may encourage their engagement and creativity. However, this approach has some drawbacks; for example, it may lead to division between groups (Arora-Jonsson, 2008).

In addition, photo and video monitoring require significant time commitments from participants. In the case of photovoice, participants usually take photos over a period of time, during which they have periodic meetings to review and discuss photos. The awareness of the group tends to build over time as they get deeper into the process of asking questions and exploring those questions with photography. For participatory video, producing a finished video requires a significant amount of time. This type of group work can be challenging if participants live across a large geographic area where travel is costly and difficult to coordinate for large group meetings. Further, if one or two individuals take the lead on final production, their editorial decisions may eclipse other important perspectives from the group. Despite these challenges, finished photography or video projects can be quite persuasive in communicating findings to political leaders and donors, and quite effective in advocating for needed changes (Wang and Burris, 1997).

Timelines

Storytelling is commonly oriented toward telling histories. Many cultural traditions emphasize the importance of recounting history, and people generally enjoy remembering events, people and places from their past, especially those connected to key aspects of a person's identity. For example, a farmer tells how she learned to cultivate crops from her grandmother or a community leader tells how she was groomed for leadership from a young age. However, telling histories may also be painful for people who have experienced trauma or social groups who have lived through discrimination or ethnic violence. Facilitators must therefore be sensitive when asking people to tell their stories.

Inviting groups to create a shared timeline or draw a picture of events leading up to the present often spurs the group to discover that different people see past events through different lenses. Facilitators can stimulate group dialogue by placing a timeline before the group and asking participants to identify key events or turning points relative to the topic of discussion, for example, asking how a community worked with a government agency to become co-manager of a protected area. Alternatively, facilitators can ask small groups to draw their own timelines or pictorial histories, and then these groups can present back to the larger group for more discussion.

As participants list key events, they are encouraged to remember details and tell the story as they understand it. As people share ideas with the group, they typically begin to build on each other's stories, inviting others to fill gaps in their own memories. Facilitators can stimulate discussion by asking how one event



Figure 12.3 As an example of a timeline activity, people in small groups draw a river as an analogy to tell the story of how their collaborative forestry initiative began and how they envision working together in the future

links to another, or by asking what else was going on at that time in the larger political or economic context. By creating a timeline, participants begin to build a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities they have experienced. This represents movement along the experiential learning cycle, from reflective observation to abstract conceptualization. As participants reflect on their own role and their position relative to others, they may identify how particular relationships between key actors played a role in the decisions implemented. As fragmented stories coalesce to a more or less complete history, facilitators can cue people to move toward the evaluation or conclusion of the story by asking how these lessons from the past can be used to improve the current situation. This encourages people to move from abstract conceptualization to the experimentation phase of the experiential learning cycle. If participants are influential in the relevant social networks, they can reach out to people in their social networks to implement ideas suggested by the group (Gergen and Gergen, 2006).

Maps

Maps are also quite evocative for people, especially when they relate to culturally important places, key resources used for subsistence, or conflicts over resources or property rights.

While some community mapping exercises aim to collect specific data to inform the development of resource management plans or higher-level policies, in the context of governance, maps can be used to stimulate reflection on how decisions are made about resource use and who is invited to make those decisions (Duchelle et al., 2009). Depending on the issues to be examined and the participants involved, the types of maps used in these activities can range from symbolic images, hand-drawn by participants, to more directly representational images that depict scientifically collected data, such as aerial photos or satellite imagery, or officially sanctioned government data, such as political boundaries. In many cases, these approaches can be combined to great effect, for example, by presenting maps with official data and asking participants to draw features on them.

Using the experiential learning cycle as a guide, facilitators ask participants to depict their experience with current management regimes by drawing features on the maps. As people orient themselves to key places and begin to interact with the maps, they often naturally transition into storytelling, asking each other why they drew certain features, or whether one person's map feature should be closer or further from another. Participants may naturally begin to engage in dialogue, exploring different perspectives on the topic of discussion. However, if conversation is halting, unfocused or is dominated by one or two speakers, facilitators may also cue people to transition from reflective observation to the next stage in the experiential learning cycle, abstract conceptualization, by asking people to reflect on their ability to effectively manage their resources, their connections to other resource users and the influence of political and economic forces on their ability to make decisions. As dialogue continues, participants may begin to build a common understanding of successes and areas for improvement. In some cases, facilitators can help this process along by summarizing, comparing and contrasting people's ideas. Moving toward experimentation, facilitators cue participants to brainstorm actions that will help target the needed improvements identified by the group.

Field experiences with structured reflection

The previous examples highlight storytelling, in which people draw from their memories to reflect on experiences that other participants may or may not have directly witnessed. Conversely, field trips bring participants together to create a shared experience, which stimulates dialogue in the moment and provides a shared reference point for later discussion.

Especially when dealing with conflicts over resource use or allocation, a shared experience can help people separate issues of substantive disagreement from issues of misunderstanding or perceived difference. For example, if the right to graze livestock in a particular area is in dispute, the disagreement may continue without either party really understanding how the other party defines the area in conflict, or why that area is particularly important. By getting out and looking at the resource on the ground, people often realize that differences that initially seem insurmountable are in reality within the realm of reasonable negotiation.

To organize a field trip to stimulate dialogue on governance issues, organizers should start by talking with key participants who can help identify issues likely to be the focus of discussion. As those issues are identified, organizers should talk with a wide range of participants to select field sites that best illustrate a range of conditions, are accessible and safe, can be visited feasibly given the time available and set the stage for exploring different perspectives on the topics of interest.

Organizing an effective field trip can be quite time-consuming; however, substantial learning can occur even during the planning stage. For example, if preliminary discussions uncover the perception that some community forests have more valuable timber species than others and that property boundaries were delineated to unfairly benefit one particular community, visiting forest stands perceived to be more and less valuable allows people to raise those questions as everyone experiences the look and feel of those forests together. Rather than standing on the edge of the forest and explaining the characteristics of the site, facilitators should encourage participants to experience the forest for themselves and invite them to describe what they see in their own words.

The facilitator would then cue participants to move from reflective observation to abstract conceptualization by asking them to explain why these forest conditions are relevant to the issue under discussion and how they relate to the functioning of the larger governance system. Hand-outs such as maps, diagrams or data summaries can be useful prompts to spark dialogue on key issues, linking observations at field sites to the surrounding context. Maps that present data at different scales can also help people naturally transition from a discussion of local conditions at the field site to patterns and processes evident at the regional scale.

Attractive maps and hand-outs can help orient participants to the different sources of data that may be used in management or policy decisions; however, the challenge is that participants may understand these materials to be fact when a good deal of uncertainty is actually associated with their production. In addition, if participants view their environment differently from the way the hand-outs portray it, they may perceive that the data represent the majority view and that their own views are not welcome. To address this challenge, facilitators can introduce hand-outs by explaining how the data were produced and the associated uncertainties. In some cases, map symbology can indicate areas of uncertainty or lack of precision, for example, by delimiting community boundaries with fuzzy lines or overlapping, transparent polygons.

Another challenge relates to the concept of language: complex maps and data tables may be written in a language unfamiliar to participants, especially if they describe statistical relationships or use technical jargon to describe resource conditions. Further, hand-outs must be simple, attractive and written in straightforward language, while avoiding oversimplifying the messiness of the data. When using hand-outs, obtaining preliminary feedback from a range of participants can help ensure that materials are clear, yet do not overly simplify the



Figure 12.4 A field tour brought together policy-makers, biologists, foresters, computer modellers, and planners to experience an old-growth forest stand and discuss management options, scientific uncertainties and stakeholder concerns related to this unique ecosystem. For some participants, this was their first personal experience with the ecosystem despite their extensive knowledge of associated forest data and policy options.

information presented, a problem that might ultimately constrain opportunities for dialogue.

Adequate preparation for field trips, including careful choice of field stops and development of clear hand-outs, is important to frame key points of difference and create spaces for participants to explore those differences. Without intentional moments for reflection, participants may lose focus and become bored, distracted or even frustrated. As Dewey reminds us, experience by itself does not necessarily promote learning (Dewey, 1997).

Empowering focus groups

Focus groups are a common tool in research and project planning and evaluation. A lead facilitator designs and directs traditional focus groups with the primary goal of collecting data that researchers will later analyse. Conversely, empowering focus groups are a forum for participants to direct their own discussion with multiple goals of increasing awareness of key issues, articulating problems and catalysing action to address those problems (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999; Pini, 2002; Wilkinson, 1998).² The key difference lies in the role of the facilitator. Unlike traditional focus groups, in which the facilitator

regulates discussion to stay within the bounds of a predefined topic, facilitators of empowering focus groups encourage the group to take ownership and guide the direction of conversation.

Empowering focus groups emphasize the importance of relationships.³ Typically, participants are invited because their concern over an issue has already begun to surface, and they have begun preliminary conversations within their social networks about how to address these concerns. In some cases, these individuals will naturally come together, either to discuss issues informally or to establish a formal group. In other cases, for a variety of reasons, such individuals may not be able to connect with each other effectively, and when they do, they may not have the opportunity to talk about issues of concern without interference from everyday distractions. Focus groups create an intentional space for these discussions.

Empowering focus groups can catalyse dialogue and action by creating a safe space for focused reflection and bringing together a cross-section of people who are in positions to effect change (Wilkinson, 1999). Typically, a lead facilitator, who may be a researcher or community organizer, initially convenes a focus group, but once participants begin to engage, the group may take on a life of its own that may then lead to establishment of a formal group (e.g. Arora-Jonsson, 2008). Facilitators often convene groups around several questions that broadly encompass participants' general concerns. The questions can evolve through preliminary conversations with participants and, if designed well, will motivate key participants to attend. Discussions are then facilitated using the experiential learning cycle, with participants first being asked to describe their current situation, as in reflective observation, then invited to explore how they got to this point by reflecting on their role, their relation to others and the larger social, economic context. Discussion often naturally transitions to a focus on actionable steps to initiate change. Once participants begin focusing their attention on specific issues and potential actions, they can reach out to others in their social network to extend their influence. In some cases, facilitators may convene parallel focus groups involving different stakeholders, for example, separate groups for adolescents and adults.

The challenges of empowering focus groups include identifying the right mix of people to attend, and coming up with one or more broad questions that will motivate their participation. If the topic used to convene people is not salient enough, the focus group may not motivate the kind of participation that will lead to sustained participation and eventual action. Travel and timing may also be challenges to holding repeat meetings if participants are not geographically close to each other.

Common challenges to using participatory methods

In the following sections, we highlight three common challenges to using participatory methods, which all relate to the power dynamics of working with diverse stakeholders. Facing these challenges effectively and respectfully requires a certain amount of skill in dealing diplomatically with tense or awkward situations.

Box 12.3 An example of an empowering focus group addressing sustainable ranching

In the Southwest USA, livestock ranchers depend on grazing access to rangelands under various tenure arrangements, for example, private and state leases and permits to graze on national forests. Over the last 20 years, environmental advocacy groups have pressured US Forest Service managers to eliminate livestock grazing as a means to restore degraded watersheds and stream systems. Degradation is attributed to multiple causes such as historic logging and ranching practices, long-term chronic drought, increased impacts from recreation, increased elk populations and also overgrazing by livestock. Although ranchers acknowledge the problems of overgrazing, many ranchers pride themselves on carefully herding livestock and monitoring vegetation and watershed conditions to prevent negative impacts. These progressive ranchers feel unjustly targeted by environmental litigation and frustrated that they cannot influence the direction of national forest decisions to maintain their access and responsible use of federal grazing lands.

In response to this situation, agricultural extension specialists convened a series of empowering focus groups with different groups of ranchers known to be progressive in their management philosophy. We convened the groups and stimulated discussion with the following questions: How do you make grazing management decisions and what barriers do you face in implementing your vision of sustainable range management? Many of the discussions centred on the need to increase their capacity to participate in national forest planning decisions. One of the groups was motivated enough to decide to meet again, and they soon established themselves as a formal organization with the goal of educating themselves and other ranchers on national forest planning policies, monitoring methods and innovative management techniques. In the past several years, they have hosted educational workshops, improved communication with forest service staff and influenced decisions related to forest management, including their own grazing permits.

Wielding the power of leadership

Playing a leadership role in convening groups and facilitating participatory methods is always personally challenging, if done well. That is the nature of devolving power. An inherent tension exists between the desire to involve a diversity of stakeholders equitably and the desire to address a specific resource problem or power imbalance that the convener has identified (Connelly and Richardson, 2004). Leaders of participatory processes are often motivated to invest time and energy into a situation because they see a problem and a path

forward for improvement. However, to be effective, they must hold tentatively to their own convictions and make space for others to define problems and propose solutions (Arnold et al., 2012). Otherwise, leaders of participatory processes risk recreating a top-down, expert-driven social system, dependent on their own expert view (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Ironically, many leaders of participatory processes fall into this trap, even though this concentration of power is exactly what participatory methods seek to deconstruct.

For this reason, we emphasize that facilitators can be more effective at decentralizing power and enhancing learning when they prioritize dialogue above decision-making and action (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). Governance essentially exists as a series of decisions, whereby individuals or groups decide on rules, processes and formal or informal agreements that structure how resources are used and by whom. However, adaptation occurs through a combination of learning and decision-making, as learning occurs when individuals or groups explore different perspectives on a resource system through dialogue. Thus, to support adaptive governance, facilitators must create time and space for participants to engage in dialogue *before* encouraging people to synthesize ideas and negotiate decisions (Gaventa, 2004). This can be a challenging role for leaders of participatory processes, who enter a situation already convinced of what the problem is and how to solve it. The key to avoiding this potential problem lies in the facilitator's ability to ask for feedback from participants and remain open to other ways of looking at problems and solutions. Obtaining this feedback may not be straightforward either, especially at the micro level, where participants may be humbled by a facilitator's status and may not easily offer critical feedback. Leaders of participatory processes must be sensitive to the potential pitfall of this dynamic and create a comfortable, non-threatening environment, inviting honest feedback. Leaders should continually ask themselves: Am I learning and adapting from the feedback of others?

Engaging participants at the micro, meso and macro levels

Motivating participants to engage in dialogue on governance issues involves distinct challenges relative to the scale of participants' involvement in decision-making and their connections to resources. At the micro-level – the most common scale at which participatory methods are used – participants' primary interests tend to centre around practical issues of accessing and using resources to provide for their families and support local or regional economies. People may not have much time to dedicate to exploring abstract questions of governance if their schedules are full of family and community responsibilities. People are more willing to participate if facilitators take the time to build relationships and make personal invitations. Learning how to speak local dialects or use local expressions can also help make connections between abstract questions of governance and the rhythms of daily life. At the micro level, intimidation or suspicion may become a barrier to participation if people feel threatened by the formality of a participatory process. People may only passively participate if they feel those leading a participatory

process have more status and education, and thus more right to speak. They may feel nervous about challenging traditional power structures, for example, by openly challenging local elites. Conversely, they may only passively participate if they are suspicious that participatory processes are being used to generate public support for decisions already made behind closed doors.

At the meso level, participants are often motivated and focused on the topic of governance. They typically have risen to this level of decision-making because they recognized that their participation could make a difference. They often have relatively strong communication skills, demonstrated leadership and formal education. However, we have found stakeholders at the meso level often lack the time and energy to effectively bridge decisions made at the macro and micro levels. They may have good intentions to represent micro-level interests, but be unable to spend the time needed to connect to local issues. They may also invest a lot of time actively trying to increase their influence among leaders at the macro level, for example, through networking, lobbying or campaigning. While they are usually quick to acknowledge the value of adaptive governance and participatory methods, ironically, they may not have the time to invest in engagement personally. In our experience, they also try to delegate participation to lower levels without recognizing that their participation would have greater meaning because of their leadership position. We have also found that stakeholders at the meso level request surveys or questionnaires that require a much smaller time commitment, even though they may desire the collective learning and action associated with participatory methods.

Like the micro level, the macro level is quite challenging because of the power differential between participants and conveners or facilitators. Leaders at the macro level may not want to engage in participatory methods because they may feel threatened that group learning may lead to group pressure for them to change rules or agreements in ways that conflict with their own interests. They often have risen to leadership positions because of their ability to project confidence and be decisive in complex situations. Participatory methods encourage people to reflect openly on the prospect of improving current methods, and to accept that no one person has all the answers. This atmosphere of egalitarianism is often personally challenging for leaders at the macro level. However, leaders at the macro level *can* and *do* at times engage meaningfully in participatory processes, with implications for governance at all levels. In some cases, leaders are pushed into using participatory methods because their traditional approach to leadership and decision-making has proved inadequate or ineffective. In other cases, they become interested in participatory methods because of their sincere desire to stimulate innovation.

At all levels of governance, facing the challenges of motivating and sustaining participant engagement becomes easier through fostering personal relationships. We cannot emphasize the importance of personal relationships enough. Through trusting relationships, leaders of participatory processes can personally invite feedback from participants on specific challenges, and together brainstorm solutions to tailor a participatory process to the needs and interests of stakeholders.

Developing organizational support

Finding sponsor organizations willing to invest significant time and resources and to face the substantial challenges associated with decentralizing and devolving power to lower levels of governance is central to the success of participatory methods. Some critical theorists point to the methods universities and other public institutions increasingly use to market themselves as supporting democracy and good governance as a means to attract public recognition and funding, especially as government funds are cut and organizations must increasingly rely on private donors (Fairclough, 2008). Critics find that large organizations far too easily pay lip service to participatory methods to attract more recognition and funding without truly committing the time, resources or attention to actively engaging with participants and responding to the learning that emerges (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

In a practical sense, leaders of participatory processes may feel betrayed if the support they have relied on comes from organizations only superficially invested in a participatory initiative. Such leaders may have invested considerable time and energy building relationships with stakeholders and setting expectations for how they will work together and what they might accomplish. If funding is suddenly cut or organizational leaders suddenly decide the project should go in a different direction without consulting others, participants may become frustrated, lose interest or become cynical about possibilities for changing governance. Leaders of participatory processes must work closely with donor organizations to help donors understand the connections between the philosophy of participation, participatory methods and their own actions as powerful actors. We will be more successful with participatory processes if we apply the same concepts with donors as we do with participants: carefully build relationships, pay attention to language, engage in dialogue, reflect on experience and experiment with actions.

Conclusion

The philosophy, core concepts and participatory tools discussed in this chapter can help to engage a broader range of stakeholders to ask questions and propose solutions to natural resource problems. These participatory methods emphasize narrative and critical reflection, which are common across all cultures, yet flexible enough to accommodate new technologies and new global realities (Tolman and Brydon Miller, 2001). However, the effective use of these approaches faces many challenges. For example, leaders of such participatory initiatives must have strong communication, facilitation and conflict management skills. To be successful, participatory initiatives need financial and institutional support from sponsor organizations. This may be a challenge when sponsor organizations value quantitative, large-scale assessments over localized, participatory learning-centred approaches (Pierce Colfer, 2013). Further, participants must have the time and attention to invest in participation. In some cases, extenuating factors such as family illness or economic hardship prevent key stakeholders from participating;

however, in other cases, participation may increase when the issues are framed appropriately to motivate key stakeholders to prioritize their involvement.

Although there are many calls to ‘scale up’ participatory methods, we caution that engagement is inherently a localized process that loses its power when participants no longer have the control to adapt the process and the language to fit their worldview. However, we acknowledge that localized processes may also have limited power to effect change. Their power is directly related to the participants’ identities and social roles, how they participate and how they are linked to others who have influence to effect change. In some cases, a small group of the ‘right’ people can catalyse large-scale change from a localized participatory process. In other cases, effectively publicizing the work of a small-scale participatory effort may prove an especially powerful tool for reform. Although government officials and donor agencies prefer large-scale quantitative assessments, stories, photos, videos, maps and timelines can be quite powerful in shifting public opinion and advocating for reform (Hampton, 2004; Lunch and Lunch, 2006; Wang and Burris, 1997). In short, success with participatory methods requires personal dedication, significant preparation, a touch of serendipity and a good dose of improvisation on the part of all involved, but when everything comes together, the results can be uniquely powerful.

Notes

- 1 Critical theory refers to a diverse body of work that examines injustice and the various ways that powerful social groups seek to maintain their dominance in society (Crotty, 1998). It originated in post-First World War Germany among scholars from the Frankfurt School with the Institute for Social Research, and continued to evolve as these scholars fled to the USA after Nazis took control of Germany. In the 1960s, American strands of critical theory led by Marcuse provided a philosophical foundation for the New Left (Kincheloe, 2004). The focus became political and personal empowerment from those who seek to concentrate power and dominate others, with activism focused on the Civil Rights Movement and opposition to American imperialism in Latin America and Africa.
- 2 Empowering focus groups are modeled after Freire’s learning circles (Freire, 1998), where groups of people come together to reflect on current problems, while building literacy skills, political awareness and their capacity to affect change in their communities.
- 3 This reflects the theoretical perspective of social constructionism, which recognizes that all knowledge is socially constructed, such that learning occurs through relationships with others (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999).

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