

Participatory Development: Supporting Local Grassroots Efforts

by

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The purpose of my talk is to discuss participatory development, specifically community improvement efforts that are created by and for people living in low-wealth communities. This conference is about remaking communities in the rural areas of Eastern North Carolina. Participatory development is an approach where the energy and direction for remaking communities comes from within the communities themselves. This presentation is organized into three major parts. In the first section, I introduce participatory development as a concept and a practice. Second, I discuss participatory development as carried out through the Center for Participatory Change, which is the nonprofit organization that I co-direct. Third and finally, I outline how the Center has used participatory development approaches to help farmers remake tobacco-dependent communities in Western North Carolina.

I. Introduction to Participatory Development

Concepts, Players, and Levels of Participation

It is useful to define participatory development. *Participation* refers to the idea that people shape the decisions and forces that effect their lives, their families, and their communities. *Development* refers to the broad range of activities involved in determining and trying to solve a community's problems or create a community improvement effort. Essentially, development is the attempt to make a community a better place to live. Concretely, this could refer to an economic development project, starting a community center, an educational or cultural project, and so forth. *Participatory Development* focuses on maximizing community participation in all stages of an improvement effort. It refers to the active involvement of people in the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of community development projects, activities, and policies that affect them.

Before discussing how one goes about doing participatory development, it is necessary to define the major players. Specifically, I will focus on three populations involved in participatory development: grassroots leaders, grassroots groups, and outsiders. *Grassroots leaders* are people living in a low-wealth or marginalized community, who are rooted in place through families, friends, homes, and church. In general, these actors do not hold paid positions in government or nonprofit agencies.

They often do community improvement work as volunteers. In our work, grassroots leaders form *grassroots groups*, groups of people rooted in a particular low-wealth or marginalized community who have come together to make that community a better place. In contrast, *outsiders* are people who do not reside or have roots in a low-wealth community but who care deeply about improving the quality of life in those communities. Outsiders often work for government and nonprofit agencies.

If you recall, I defined participatory development as the attempt to maximize community participation in all stages of a community improvement effort. There are different levels of participation in a community project or activity, and it is helpful to outline these various levels. I call the first level “no participation.” At this level, grassroots leaders or groups are not involved at all in the community improvement project or effort. Outsiders are responsible for all aspects of the effort. The second level of participation, “consultation,” occurs when outsiders create a community improvement project or effort after soliciting information from grassroots leaders and grassroots groups. In this case, outsiders conduct surveys, hold focus groups, stage a listening forum or community meeting—using that information to create a community project or activity. All authority and responsibility rest with the outsiders. Providing information is the only role for grassroots leaders and groups. Outsiders may choose to heed or ignore that information; however, they are not obligated to change their plans based on grassroots input.

The third level of participation, called “shared decision-making,” occurs when outsiders and grassroots leaders work in partnership to create a community improvement project. The two parties interact as much as possible as equals. Each starts with the realization that the other has something to offer and contribute. Grassroots actors and outsiders share authority and responsibility for the community improvement project. The fourth level of participation, “community control,” occurs when grassroots parties have the authority and responsibility for planning and carrying out the community improvement effort. In this instance, outsiders play the role of coach and provider of technical assistance. The direction, energy, and power to shape community improvement come from within the low-wealth community. *The goal of participatory development is to realize this fourth level of participation –community control – in all aspects of planning and implementing a community improvement.*

Stages of Participatory Development

When you have community control in all stages, a development project goes through a series of five stages. I will explain these stages and illustrate each of them by walking through an example from our work at The Center for Participatory Change.

The first stage of a community improvement effort is *initiation*, which involves coming up with an idea for a project that would make a community a more livable place. In participatory development, the idea for a project originates from grassroots leaders – from the low-wealth community, from

people living in and rooted in that community. The outsider's role at this point may be to enter the community and talk with people about their needs, resources, and ideas—then bring together people with a common vision for change. To make this concrete, I will tell you about a grassroots group that we work with called the Appalachian Heritage Crafters. The Center for Participatory Change started its work in January 2000 in Cherokee County, North Carolina. The county had just had two major plant closings, which resulted in 1000 jobs lost in a county of around 20,000 people. The Center started by asking people to identify the most pressing issues in the community. The overwhelming answer was the job losses from the plant closings. Consequently, we began speaking with laid-off workers. One of the plants that shut down was a Levi-Strauss plant. Discussions with laid-off women workers led to the idea of starting a crafts group. All the women had traditional Appalachian crafting skills, and saw crafts as a way to earn some extra income. Through these initial conversations emerged the idea of forming a crafts cooperative as a means of improving the community and addressing job loss.

The second stage of a community improvement effort is *project planning and design*, which involves constructing a general outline of what the project will look like, and laying out very concretely assigned roles, a projected schedule, and estimates on the cost of the project. In participatory development, planning is done by a group of grassroots leaders or by a grassroots group. An outsider may facilitate the planning, but it is the community that determines the project's direction. Outsiders use a toolbox or “grab bag” of participatory planning methods to facilitate planning processes, making sure that the project plan comes from the community. Allow me to return to the story of the Appalachian Heritage Crafters. In February of 2000, a group of six women began meeting weekly to talk about establishing a crafts cooperative. Those women were the core of what became the Appalachian Heritage Crafters. My colleague at the Center, Thomas Watson, facilitated a series of meetings over a few months where the group answered questions that determined its future – for example, did the women crafters want to sell crafts retail or wholesale, through shows or try to open a store? By April they had answered most of these questions for themselves and were ready to expand their group.

The third stage of a community improvement effort is *project implementation*, in which the project is actually carried out. In participatory development, it is the grassroots group that carries out the planned project. Outsiders typically play the role of supporter and connector—supporting project implementation with knowledge, skills, or labor; and connecting the grassroots groups with other resources that can help them carry out the designed project. With the Appalachian Heritage Crafters, project implementation focused on organizing crafts shows and opening a retail crafts store. Our support consisted of helping everyone stay organized and focused, pitching in when needed, and connecting the group with other resources (for example, with another nonprofit that focuses on helping groups write business plans). The Appalachian Heritage Crafters, which now has around 100 members, has carried out four craft shows, and in May of 2001 they opened a retail store in Murphy. The store has earned members around \$50,000 since it opened.

The fourth stage of a community improvement effort is *organizational development*, the ongoing strengthening and development of the grassroots group. This might mean learning to make deci-

sions as a group, setting a strategic plan, creating a fundraising plan, developing fundraising skills, forming an organizational structure, perhaps forming a board of directors, and perhaps even forming as a nonprofit organization. The goal is to make the organization self-sustaining and independent. In participatory development, outsiders play the role of coach and provider of technical assistance as grassroots groups develop and strengthen their organization. Outsiders lay out all of the various issues that need to be addressed to make a grassroots group sustainable over the long haul. Next, they help the grassroots group address those issues, by both facilitating the process of organizational development and providing technical skills and knowledge when needed (i.e., how to write bylaws, how to write a grant proposal, what is the role of a board of directors). The Center for Participatory Change has done a great deal of organizational development support work with the Appalachian Heritage Crafters. We attend all the craft cooperative's weekly meetings, and the focus of most of our work with them now is organizational development. We have coached them through the process of establishing an organizational structure, forming a board of directors, creating a budget, writing bylaws, forming as a nonprofit organization, writing grant proposals and managing grants.

The fifth stage in a community improvement effort is *evaluation*, which involves evaluating the work that has been done and assessing how that work affected the community. This information is used to continually improve the community improvement effort. In participatory development, the grassroots group carries out evaluation. There is an emerging field within evaluation called participatory evaluation, and outsiders use these methods to help grassroots groups develop the capacities to evaluate their efforts, on their own terms.

Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors in Participatory Development

Participatory development is more than a set of stages. It is also a set of values that shapes interactions of outsiders with grassroots groups. In our work at the Center for Participatory Change, we focus significant attention on our core values. Specifically, our work revolves around the five core values explained in Table 1.

Table 1: Core Values of Participatory Development

Participation: People shape the decisions and forces that effect their lives, their families, and their communities.

Social Justice: Through participation, people can attain more responsive institutions and systems; fairer policies and procedures; and a more equitable distribution of resources.

Capacity Building: Participation and social justice are achieved by strengthening what groups of people are capable of collectively doing and being.

Community Control: People gain the strength, confidence, and vision to work for positive change by controlling the processes through which they learn and act.

Grassroots Organizations: Representative, accountable, democratic grassroots organizations are the engine of fundamental social change.

Complementing these core values are five core attitudes and behaviors in participatory development. These attitudes and behaviors provide guidance for outsiders as they work to support grassroots efforts. Table 2 lists and explains these attitudes and behaviors.

Table 2: Core Attitudes and Behaviors in Participatory Development

Believe in Everyday Folks: Participatory development starts with a rock-solid belief that it has to be the people who define and create positive change in their community, and that the people truly can come together to improve their lives and their communities

Draw Out People's Wisdom: Participatory development is built from the knowledge and wisdom that people have gained from their experiences – the main job for outsiders is to draw forth people's wisdom, knowledge, and ideas.

Listen: Listening to grassroots leaders – deeply, fully, and actively – is a key behavior in participatory development; this means asking a question, staying quiet, and working to hear what the person you are talking with is trying to say.

It Comes from the People: Grassroots leaders are seen not as 'service recipients' or 'clients' who receive a pre-determined program, but as agents or actors, people who can work together to make significant and long lasting change.

Build Relationships: Participatory development is built on relationships and trust; chatting, laughing, and joking are the foundation upon which significant social change is built.

II. Introduction to the Center for Participatory Change

My colleague Thomas Watson and I co-founded the Center for Participatory Change in 1999, and we began work in January 2000. We currently have four staff members. Our vision is to work throughout 18 rural counties in the Appalachian mountains of Western North Carolina. All of our work is rural and we currently work with approximately 25 grassroots groups in 10 counties.

Programs

The Center for Participatory Change sponsors four programs to support and strengthen grassroots groups in low-wealth communities. They are:

- (1) **Grassroots Organizing Program**, which brings together people from low-wealth communities and helps them plan and carry out projects that improve their community;
- (2) **Capacity Building Program**, which provides leadership development, and supports growth of grassroots groups through training on starting a nonprofit organization, board development, fundraising, etc.;
- (3) **Networking Program**, which brings together grassroots groups to learn from each other, share experiences, and shape a common vision for change; and

(4) Western North Carolina Self Development Fund, which provides small start-up grants (\$500 to \$5,000) to new grassroots groups or projects.

Current Projects

Currently, the Center for Participatory Change works with grassroots groups that fall into three major project clusters.

- (1) Collective Entrepreneurship Project** brings together and supports grassroots groups where the focus is helping members earn extra income for their families.
- (2) Communities of Color Organizing Project** focuses on developing the power and civic participation of grassroots groups in communities of color.
- (3) Grassroots Support Project** provides general support for grassroots groups and grassroots-driven nonprofits across Western North Carolina.

III. Participatory Development with Farmers: Appalachian Small Farms Project

In this section, I will describe our work with farmers making the transition from a tobacco-dependent agricultural economy. In the far western part of North Carolina, you have burley tobacco farmers operating farms much smaller than ones in the eastern region of the state. The Center for Participatory Change is carrying out a project called the Appalachian Small Farms Project, which has been generously supported by the Golden LEAF Foundation and the North Carolina Rural Center's Civic Ventures Fund. The project began in fall of 2000, in partnership with the Cooperative Extension Service offices in Cherokee County and Graham County. Although staff members at the Center do not know a great deal about farming and agriculture, they do know how to support grassroots efforts. The Extension Service, which provides farming expertise, has cooperated with the Center in outreach, one-on-one conversations, and farm visits to identify issues, opportunities and grassroots leaders in the agricultural sector. This outreach led to larger public meetings, which resulted in the creation of two new grassroots community groups: the Smoky Mountain Native Plants Association and the Cherokee County Small Farmers Association.

Smoky Mountain Native Plants Association (SMNPA) is a group based in Graham County. It was established by farmers, wildcrafters, native plants growers, and herbalists interested in creating economic opportunities through the sustainable cultivation, processing and marketing of native plants. The group—which consists of several current and former tobacco farmers—focuses on herbs, food crops, ornamentals, and wetland restoration plants. Group participants have carried out test plot research on ginseng, ramps, and goldenseal cultivation with Cooperative Extension and started a tailgate farmers' market in the county.

Cherokee County Small Farmers Association (CCFSA) is a group dedicated to creating new income opportunities through agriculture, to preserve the county's agricultural heritage, and to involve

more young people in farming. Partnering with 4-H and Heifer Project International, this group has started a youth livestock project. They also established a tailgate farmers' market.

In just a year, the activities of SMNPA and CCSFA have resulted in several significant outcomes, such as: two new farmers markets; increased income for farmers; a revitalized 4-H program; a new interest in preserving and cultivating native plants; dozens of people becoming involved in community decision-making; webs of relationships and friendships (an increase in what academics call social capital); a small grants program for local farmers; and movement toward larger scale economic projects such as cooperative marketing

IV. Conclusion

This conference has focused on remaking tobacco-dependent communities in Eastern North Carolina. Remaking communities is what participatory development is all about. If nothing else, taking a participatory development approach will remind us that there is a wealth of wisdom and experience in rural communities. There is much value in gatherings like this, but there is also a great deal of insight at the grassroots level. Rural communities can remake themselves – they have the wisdom, the energy, and the power. They need support from outsiders with technical expertise and know-how, but they can make it happen. It is not easy, supporting rural low-wealth communities. Outsiders often work with stakeholders who have little formal education but a host of life experiences. Rural people have not had numerous opportunities to operate within social, economic, and political systems. Consequently, one may have to be patient while rural people get up to speed. The process can sometimes be messy and slow. However, I believe that the effects of remaking communities will be more long-lasting and more fundamental if the direction and drive for the whole process comes from within rural communities themselves. It has been my experience that local populations will work hardest when the work of remaking communities springs from ideas and activities that they have designed and made real.