b) Participation

Participatory processes do not automatically recognise inequalities and differences between women and men

Experience shows that participatory processes and ‘attempts to involve poor people’ do not automatically include women. Attention to gender differences and inequalities is required if participatory development initiatives are to involve women as well as men. Specific issues include:

Power imbalances in communities: Communities are not harmonious groups with a common set of interests and priorities. There are often strong divisions along the lines of age, religion, class, and gender. These power differentials make it difficult for some people to voice opinions that contradict general views. Power differentials may even affect who participates in specific meetings. Outside officials may only invite ‘community leaders’ (generally men) to participate in consultations.

Intra-household and intra-family relations: Some women may find it difficult to speak out in front of their husbands or fathers. They may also believe that discussions relating to family matters (even issues relating to workloads) are not for public forums.

Different constraints to participation: Men and women have different responsibilities and workloads, with women often having less time to devote to new activities. Attending specific meetings may raise problems for women if they are set for times of the day when women tend to be occupied. Women’s responsibilities for childcare may also make it difficult for women to participate.

Different abilities to participate: Given gender biases in education, women and men often have varying literacy levels. Men may also have more experience putting their arguments forward to outsiders and more confidence dealing with new people.

Perceived benefits of participation: Women and men may make different calculations about the costs and benefits of their involvement in participatory processes. Given the already high demands on most women’s time, they not see the extra effort required to participate as worthwhile, especially if the benefits are questionable.

Gender-sensitive participatory practices challenge development cooperation organisations

Participatory methods are only as good as the people who use them. It is now clear that there is more to participation than a series of exercises. When they are done well, gender-sensitive participatory processes challenge organisations in many ways.

- **Skills:** Organisations need to develop the skills to do this type of work. Facilitating gender-sensitive participatory processes requires experience, skills and the ability to deal with conflict, if it arises.
- **Time:** Participatory processes can take a long time and may require support over years.
- **Flexibility and adaptability:** The selection and sequencing of methods should be based on the specific circumstances. Responding adequately to specific contexts requires flexibility.
- **Support:** Participants (women and men) require support as they explore new issues. It is extremely irresponsible for an outside organisation to encourage people to raise issues of gender inequalities and then not support the consequences.
- **Follow-up:** Can the organization respond to the issues raised? If development cooperation organisations are serious about participatory processes, they must be prepared to act on the priorities identified and issues that emerge.

Meeting the challenge of equitable participatory development means integrating gender awareness into practice, and not pursuing two approaches with two sets of principles and two series of methods. This much is clear: participation, a loose term to describe a wide variety of practices that aim for more inclusive development, does not automatically include those who were previously left out of such processes. It is only as inclusive as those who are driving the process choose it to be, or as those involved demand it to be...

For those who might be tempted to say, ‘Why should we also be looking at gender? We’re already following a participatory approach!’ we hope they will reconsider.

Specific methodologies are under development by various organisations. For example, the Food and Agriculture Organisation is developing the GENDER-SENSITIVE PARTICIPATORY RAPID APPRAISAL (PRA): a family of approaches, methods and behaviours that enable people to express and analyse the realities of their lives and conditions, to plan themselves what action to take, and to monitor and evaluate the results. See: L. Mayoux (1995). “Beyond Naivety: Women, Gender Inequality and Participatory Development,” in Guijt and Shah (eds.) Power of Participation, IDS Policy Briefing Issue 7, August 1997. (http://www.ids.susx.ac.uk/ids/publicat/briefs/brief7.html). PRA methods form the basis of many other participatory methodologies, such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). These methods include mapping, seasonal calendars, flow diagrams, and matrices or grids, scored with seeds or other counters to compare things.

Numerous practitioners have warned that PRA methods can be gender blind. Specific efforts are needed to ensure that they take gender differences and inequalities into account. See


Specific methodologies are under development by various organisations. For example, the Food and Agriculture Organisation is promoting the use of SEAGA (Socioeconomic and Gender Analysis). For handbooks, reports of applications and background information, see http://www.fao.org/sd/seaga.