

# Commission on Nomadic Peoples

“Local Participation in Development Decisions: An Introduction”

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## LOCAL PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT DECISIONS/AN INTRODUCTION

by D.K. Ndagala

This issue of NOMADIC PEOPLES is devoted to the proceedings of the Symposium on Development and Policy in the Nomadic and Pastoral Sectors held at McGill University on the 24th of September, 1983. The Symposium was organised by The IUAES Commission on Nomadic Peoples and its Canadian Committee, with the support of the Quebec Department of Intergovernmental Affairs, the Canadian International Development Agency, McGill University, and McGill International.

In his opening remarks Professor Philip C. Salzman pointed out that the theme of the Symposium was important because many failures in nomadic and pastoral sectors were a result of decisions taken in total exclusion of the local peoples. Even before the deliberations started there was a general agreement on the need to have the local peoples participate in development decisions. It was appreciated, however, that before local participation became a reality many conceptual and organizational problems had to be resolved. The Symposium addressed itself to some of these problems.

Many of the official records I have looked at regarding nomadic and pastoral areas often have reports of project failures and, contrary to general anthropological views, the blame is put on the local people, the nomads and pastoralists. The local people are branded as 'irrational', 'uncooperative' or just as 'resistant to change'. The frustrations arising from policy failures have created a general dislike of the local people by the policy-makers. There are many examples of schools which are never used to capacity, watering facilities which are never cared for by pastoralists and expensive 'expertly' designed grazing-schemes which are never adhered to by the people for whom they are designed. Anthropological reports and monographs are full of evidence of nomadic and pastoral peoples' loss of land to cultivators and government sponsored projects. Through loss of land these people lose their relative political autonomy and economic self-reliance. The difference of opinion between policy-makers and anthropologists suggests the existence of a struggle between the policy-makers and the local people. This struggle evidenced by blame and counter-blame ends up in the deterioration of physical and socio-economic environment of nomadic and pastoral areas.

Should anthropologists be content with the view that policy decisions in nomadic and pastoral sectors fail because the local people do not participate in the making of decisions? Are the local people capable of making decisions? In my presentation on the Hadzabe hunter-gatherers I pointed out to the Symposium how some policy-makers did not believe nomadic peoples were capable of making decisions especially when these decisions had something to do with development. The capability of the nomads to make development decisions was elaborated by P.C. Salzman with examples from Baluchistan, Iran. The ability of nomadic and pastoral peoples to produce their basic needs is a result of the many decisions which they make and which vary both in space and time. For example, they make decisions on which types of livestock they should keep and in what proportions, when and where to move, how to obtain and allocate labour, etc., all of which are important in producing a living in those sectors. To believe that the policy-makers are the only people who know

how to make decisions is mere arrogance.

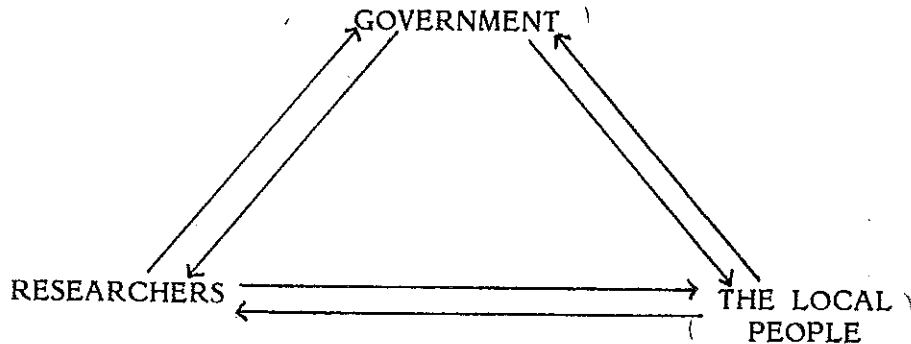
When at the local level people decide to do something, they do it on the basis of the information they have. The information may be a result of their practical experience in the area or a result of training programmes or the mass media. The people, for instance, may decide to plant a given crop because according to the training programme the crop is more resistant to drought or pests. Yet the same people may decide not to grow a given crop because it disappointed them the previous season. A different set of information leads to a different type of decision. This is typical of all locally motivated decisions whereby the information vital to decision-making is held by the decision-makers who are at the same time the decision implementors, the local people. I think this is true of the case given by William Dalton on 'Local Organization and Economic Development in Rural Libya'. Here the local people were able to penetrate and benefit from the various levels of decision-making because they had access to the necessary information.

Why then are the local people generally not allowed to participate in the decision-making process by the policy-makers? The reason which is at times given is that the people in question do not have the necessary knowledge to participate. What this means, simply, is that the people are not given enough information on the proposed alternatives to compare with what they have and, therefore, make a decision. By withholding the information, the policy-makers hold the power to manipulate, deceive and even exploit the local people. One thing which is often forgotten by the policy-makers is the fact that the information held by the local people is equally vital to development decisions which relate to the local area. Since most national or regional development decisions are targeted to particular peoples or particular localities, some of the vital information for the right decisions has to be obtained from the people of the respective localities. The local people know their particular constraints, their immediate needs, their abilities and implementation capacities all of which constitute vital information to development decision-making. Due to the fact that it is the local people who normally shoulder the consequences of the various policy decisions, it is not enough to obtain information from them and make a decision for or about them. The collection and dissemination of the information is a part of the decision-making process so that the local people should be participants of the entire process.

Nevertheless, I do not think that even if the policy-makers were ready to have the local people participate in development decisions this would change the present status quo. Participation should mean more than numbers of the local people sitting in the meetings of the decision-making bodies. Concrete participation means that the participants understand in full the options before them to be able to compare the costs and benefits of each option and make the right choices. Participation, therefore should go hand in hand with access to the necessary information. In the absence of information, as pointed out earlier, the local people or their representatives will be manipulated. The necessary information has to be provided by the government, non-governmental organizations and researchers. Together with the collection of data, researchers should contribute to the people's understanding by providing information relating to their development.

Policy-makers on the other hand need information to help them avoid policy mistakes. The mistakes are at times due to ignorance. Apart from this, information coming from the people directly through their participation in decision-making could as well come from researchers, especially anthropologists. Piles of monographs continue to grow on how mistakes could be avoided in the respective areas and yet

the mistakes continue to recur. Anthropologists, especially those working on nomadic and pastoral peoples, should make an effort to disseminate their research findings to the researched people and their respective authorities. To sit back and shout after the mistakes have been made is to bolt the stable door after the horse is gone. For the local people to participate effectively in development decision-making there should be inter-communication between the local people, the government (policy-makers) and the researchers. The proposed intercommunication is illustrated in the following diagram.



#### INFORMATION FLOW FOR RATIONAL DECISION-MAKING

I have so far talked of the local people as if this is a definitive concept with specific reference to a specific category of people. The concept as used here and during the Symposium means people of a given locality. The term does not in this case constitute a homogeneous whole. In this case the local people may have, and indeed they do have, various and sometimes conflicting interests and belong to a number of different classes or social statuses. The social and economic organization at the local level influences the nature of participation and the way information is generated and utilized. What I have said on the local people should be assessed in the light of these intricacies which constitute some of the 'Unresolved Problems in Building Participatory Development' presented by Dan Aronson. Pastoralists with few animals have interests different from those of the pastoralists with many animals. A parent with a large supply of adult labour is willing to send at least some of his children to school while the parent with labour shortage may be opposed to the move. Who should represent these parents in decision-making committees and what move should he support? The other question concerns how to define development and in what social context, given a multiplicity of social or interest groups within the local population? Highlights on this question were given by J. Freedman during the Symposium.

Another problem was identified by Salmana Cisse during the deliberations. In his presentation he noted that participation at the local level was often hampered by traditional institutions. Allegiance to a King or Nobility, for example, may work

against 'modern' institutions of decision-making such as election by secret ballot or taking an alternative which is supported by the majority. Where the traditional institutions are still active nobody is willing, for instance, to vote openly against the interests of the nobles even if they are just a minority. These institutions supported by the traditional ownership and control of the local resources may work against effective participation by the local people in development decisions even where the policy-makers are willing to involve the people.

Government, as a party to and head of the policy-making process, is not a homogeneous whole. It has very many levels of control ranging from the village/camp to the nation and operates through a number of departments. Moreover, within government there are differences of interest and specializations between departments so that the weaknesses noted in one department may not be true of others. At times several departments may be dealing with the same or similar problems through different means so that a failure in one department may be alleviated through another department. A difficulty experienced at one level of control may be solved at another level of control provided the governmental structure is known. The compartmentalised structure of government and the intricate social organization of the local people make intercommunication for participatory development decision-making a sensitive undertaking which needs patience, caution and flexibility.

All said, the participants of the Symposium came out agreed that local participation in development decisions was one of the main strategies through which development or progressive change could be brought about in nomadic and pastoral sectors. By involving the local people in development decisions a sense of satisfaction, responsibility and accountability would be established among the people. Their felt needs would be correctly identified and pursued. Local participation would allow the use of local resources including indigenous skills and knowledge thus minimizing the costs of the respective development programmes.

One question was yet to be resolved. To whom were we addressing these views on the necessity of involving local people in development decisions? All the Symposium participants were researchers who were in general agreement right from the start. Why did we gather to talk or discuss matters on which we were already agreed? The purpose was to examine more critically the aspects which support local participation and elaborate them with examples from case studies and isolate aspects which would work against local participation. Armed with this knowledge we thought we could communicate more comfortably with government functionaries and nomadic and pastoral peoples through various forums. The publication of these proceedings and their dissemination to a relatively wider audience is an attempt to fulfill that aim. Responses from the readers will help in planning future gatherings in which the unresolved problems would be discussed jointly, I think, by the researchers, government functionaries and the local people in a chosen nomadic or pastoral area.

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