

Shirley A. White. *Participatory Communication*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 1994. 470 pp. Hardbound. Indian Rs 395.00.

This book is an extremely valuable addition to a very important topic concerning development issues at the grassroots level. It calls attention to the difficulties related to the participatory process in the absence of effective direct communication with the ultimate beneficiaries.

It is divided in four parts. The first highlights the concept underlying the use of the word "participation", a buzz-word of recent times. The authors of the different articles in this part emphasise the need to change the current patterns of development which are completely non-participatory. They relate the failures of the participatory approach to misconceiving the notion as capable of a universal application in the developed and developing countries, without due regard to the absence of some very basic prerequisites in the latter countries. In other words, the assumptions underlying the theory of the participatory approach to development in the less developed countries are found lacking due to the very different and poor economic and socio-political infrastructures in these countries. Thus, the first four chapters suggest that unless the notion of participation is systematically extended to the national and international economic and political spheres, it would fail to be of much help beyond the rural development context.

The second part of the book comprises five chapters, titled "Participatory Approaches and Models", and it discusses the different models of such approaches with a strong focus on dialogue, or direct communication, with the people who are to benefit from the development projects being undertaken. These models emphasise the need to maintain and further develop the existing socio-cultural norms of society through a meaningful dialogue with the people. In this context, Chapter 7, which is based on extensive fieldwork experience of the authors, is quite important. They speak about the cultural renewal of communities (through the participatory process); cultural renewal does not imply a return to the traditional ways; rather it means following a continuous dialogue with the local people which enables them to overcome the barriers of traditional cultural values. The authors maintain that this encourages higher participation by the people at the lowest levels. Consequently, the inputs to the development programme are strengthened, which helps improve the utility of the projects. It is a lengthy chapter but is rich in content and explains the strategies in a very systematic and convincing manner.

The central message in Part II is that we must keep studying the process of participation through theory and practice in order to increase its possibility as an organic ingredient of development. However, although important, the dialogic model in Chapter 6 is very complicated in its theoretical explanations. Furthermore, the use of this model requires the kind and amount of data which make it almost

impossible to apply to developing countries.

The section on “Participatory Decision-making and Action” is the most important section in the book; it highlights the everyday wrongs committed by the policy-makers or the donors and benefactors without their ever recognising it to be the main cause of failure of the projects. The articles in this section, on the basis of field experience, show that benefactors of a project sometimes completely ignore the linguistic barriers faced by the beneficiaries, a situation which biases and hinders communication between the two parties. Furthermore, the benefactors have not bothered to simplify the technical terms to increase the comprehension of the beneficiaries and give them the opportunity to understand the pros and cons of the schemes set up for their own benefit. Such disinterest of development workers thus fails to communicate the worth of their work to the people directly concerned. This lack of dialogue and communication results in establishing projects which have little or no utility for the people concerned, and leads to the failure of such projects. However, development workers tend to blame this failure on the conservatism of the beneficiaries. These concerns are taken up by all the authors in this section, recommending a big role for neutral professional communicators to assist both the beneficiaries and the benefactors to save the failing projects.

The chapters in the last section concentrate on the ways to solving the problem of creating a meaningful dialogue between the development workers and the beneficiaries. The articles in this section show how the direct involvement of the poor women in making videos of their problems, the setting up of rural television to educate farmers, and the production of sound slides by farmers in the developing countries could overcome the dialogic communication barriers of language and literacy. This section is very illuminating for the active development worker and provides absorbing reading for all.

This book is to be recommended to all serious development workers in the developing countries as well as the donors or benefactors at the national and international level if they wish to achieve the desired results of their well-intended projects for the uplift of the poor. It shows that participation is not a panacea, nor a total solution for social change. However, through numerous successful examples and case-studies it shows that, if adopted sincerely, participation is an organic ingredient of the development process. In fact, the book provides concrete guidelines and solutions to newcomers in the field of development in the less developed countries.

Faiz Bilquees

Pakistan Institute of
Development Economics,
Islamabad.