Participation: Do villagers really want it?

by Paul Jurmo

Why do participatory education programs lose support from the villagers who are supposed to be the participants? Do the programs fail merely because of poor management, or are they the victims of a larger "oppressive system" that squashes attempts at self-determination?

A staff member in a functional literacy program where participatory ideas were to be tested encountered a variety of obstacles that may help proponents of participatory education to understand the traditional decision-making process and the intricacies of the general socio-economic system that will affect the programs they are planning.

Yusifa first heard about the new night classes when he was called to the chief's compound. There he found a crowd gathered around the chief, the elders, and three strangers—apparently government officials. The officials described to the chief and elders, and to Yusifa and the village's several other "school leavers" who had also been invited, the new adult education school that they wanted to bring to the village. The officials' organization, a "literacy committee," offered to train the school leavers and supply them with books and supervision so they could become teachers of basic reading, writing, and arithmetic to the other villagers who had never attended school. They wanted to involve the villagers at the planning stage and use participatory techniques in the program.

In accordance with tradition, the officials addressed their remarks primarily to the chief and the elders, who then discussed the idea among themselves so that all could hear what they said. The villagers generally supported the idea of education, although many weren't sure about all of the implications of this form of learning activity. The elders didn't ask many questions; they didn't want to scare away these visitors whose program might benefit the village. Also, the visitors were polite, and it was a tradition that visitors always be warmly received.

The elders spoke approvingly of the visitors' ideas. Then they turned to the village's school leavers, who stood on the edge of the gathering, and asked them "Do you want to work in this program, as teachers in these night classes?" The youths all answered "yes," and were told to be ready to go for a two-week training course in about two months.

Will it help me to get a job? Yusifa went home that night and thought a bit about what had been said. He wasn't quite sure whether this teaching would lead to a job for him. He was in the position of many school-educated youths in his country: he was 27 years old, he had returned to his village after leaving school, and he had never had a paying job that lasted more than a year. The only place to find such a job was in the capital, or perhaps at a government agricultural station in the provinces. But Yusifa had just stayed in the village with his family, helping on the family farm and farming a small plot of his own. He was something of a celebrity in this end of the country because he was a champion wrestler. Still, he was living no better than his father or grandfather, and had no decent clothes or even a soccer ball or radio. He thought of how his appearance contrasted with that of one of the visitors, who was well-dressed, suave, and articulate, and who had a weekly radio program on the national farm broadcasting band.

Yusifa was not the only one who was apprehensive. The visitors themselves were not so sure of what they were doing. They had been sent by a loosely organized literacy committee that had first begun meeting ten months before. The committee had done a little reading about programs in other countries, and a few committee members had been sent to see other functional literacy programs in progress. The purpose of the committee was to take action on the government's intentions to bring functional education to the rural people. More specifically, the committee wanted to determine what approach was best suited for the country and how the government might establish a national functional literacy program.

The committee consisted of representatives from various government departments who showed some interest in the country's rural development. Their consistent attendance at meetings and their willingness to volunteer time to committee work indicated a genuine interest; but as time passed and functional education became seen as a possible source of jobs and special trips, allowances, and so on, some committee members were charged that their interest in the committee was primarily self-interest.

After eight months of meetings, the committee agreed to test its ideas in a pilot project. Funds were to come from an internationally-funded agricultural development project that was underway in one-third of the country's rural districts. The committee proposed to test three major principles: first, that classes should be functional, based on villagers' stated needs and interests; second, that local languages should be used so students can fully understand and participate in the learning process; and third, that classes should be locally controlled, particularly through recruiting local school leavers to be the instructors of the classes. The committee hoped that the government would learn from this project and set up a national functional literacy program as soon as possible.

A slip-up in the schedule. Now that it had clear objectives and reliable funding, the committee organized a small staff. Under the direction of an experienced schoolteacher and linguist, staff members prepared basic reading

texts and organized the two-week training course that had been promised to Yusifa and 17 others in the six target villages. The committee decided that classes had to begin as soon as possible to take advantage of the approaching dry season when farming activities would cease. Thus, the materials initially prepared were not purely functional—i.e., based on students stated interests—because no time was available to make the planned surveys and specialized design necessary to prepare such materials. Instead, the initial materials would be aimed at teaching general literacy, which students could later use to read more functional materials that would then be prepared.

The training course was carried out in an informal setting, which helped establish friendly relations among the 18 young instructors and between those instructors and the committee staff. Nevertheless, the program was weak in providing practical teaching skills and the young men returned to their villages with only a shaky grasp of the methods needed to teach the basic reading skills, and a limited sense of how they could help in their villages' development.

For the next two years these facilitators conducted classes in their villages. While the committee was pleased that several hundred students were progressing through the four basic readers, the project staff and instructors were struggling with constant problems of logistics and community relations.

Equipment and supplies were often not made available to the project staff. Staff members were overextended, and being inexperienced, often misjudged how long it would take to receive materials and how much time and energy they would be able to give to the projects. Relations between the instructors and the learners were also shaky as the students failed to support the school farms that they had originally agreed to work as a way of "paying" their instructors. Class committees that the students were supposed to form and support petered out due to lack of interest. The project staff was overburdened and was unable to supervise the classes adequately. Materials were slow in coming and the instructors could not maintain the original momentum and enthusiasm of the classes. These logistical problems were compounded further when, after the first year, the committee decided to expand the project from 6 to 15 villages and had difficulty getting support from the government.

This last problem—lack of government support—was seen by some committee members to be the result of politics. In their view, certain government officials resented and felt threatened by the growing authority of the committee. This led them to prevent the committee from getting funds that had originally been promised.

Edging toward collapse. I served in the project's core staff from the beginning, and I had hoped to apply the principles of participatory education and self-determination that I had read about in Freire and in reports from the University of Massachusetts' Center for International Education. As an American, I talked with my closest host-country co-workers in the project, explaining my ideals. They understood these ideas, and they implemented them in their own way through their close relations with the villagers. Villagers talked as brothers and sisters with these staff members about local and personal concerns. Still, the original participatory plans—having local facilitators, class farms, class committees, functional materials based on local needs, and local languages spoken in the classroom—all met with various types of obstacles, until after two years the project was edging toward collapse.

Many of these problems could be attributed to inexperienced and overworked core staff, and inadequate planning of logistics, timing, funding, workloads, etc. School farm failures were due in part to lack of rainfall and bad seeds. No one had prepared agricultural, health, and other extension agents in the area to support the classes with functional demonstrations and projects. Supervision of the well-intentioned village instructors (we did eventually call them *facilitators*, in keeping with participatory principles) was poor due to lack of transportation and to field staff who were busy in the central office rather than in the field. And hanging over the whole project was the specter of the politicians, who seemed gradually to be ruining it by withdrawing what little support the staff had to rely on. In the village, the students grew tired of their lack of progress, since the materials were not adequate in number or content, and weren't being tied in with any enjoyable or profitable activities. Facilitators wanted to leave the villages and get paying jobs.

A combination of impediments. The precarious state of our "participatory principles" appeared to be caused by inadequate funding, staffing, training, and planning, and by politics. But I wondered whether, even if we suddenly did have the right political backing and a great improvement in the funding/staffing/planning situation, would our problems in the classes go away? I believe that our progress toward fulfilling our participatory ideals would still be limited by two major factors:

- Decision making on the village level is done according to the socio-political hierarchy: elders make the major decisions, and youths, our primary target group, do not have much say in village affairs.
- New ideas, like that of our functional education project, have historically been introduced to villages from the "outside" (first by Europeans, and then by their successors, the government). Power resides with the government, which controls most jobs and services to the people. Thus, new practices and ideas tend to be considered foreign or alien.

Caught between two forces. We must carefully consider how to work within the village decision-making system if we are to get our foot in the door, let alone "revolutionize" the lives of villagers. African historian Basil Davidson says that decision making in the African village community is done by the elders because it is they who traditionally held the knowledge necessary for survival. New ideas in such a system are still viewed with skepticism, if not fear. When we introduce new technological ideas and work through the youth of the village, we may be violating the traditional system and, despite our good intentions and our friendly relations with the elders and the community, we may end up getting nowhere with our participatory approach.

Villagers, particularly the youth, are now caught between two forces when they are asked by projects such

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as ours to "decide what they want" for their education and their development. On the one hand, they aren't even supposed to be making such decisions, and on the other, their experience is that new ideas about how life could be have historically been introduced by outsiders.

A nonformal education program that tries to be participatory in such an environment has to deal with these underlying cultural forces. Without respecting such forces, well-intentioned nonformal educators might themselves be guilty of cultural imperialism by imposing their participatory ideals on other cultures. Not only may we do some damage to those cultures, but our efforts may be simply wasted as societies already entangled in a snarl of outside influences resist our whole approach to change.

Postcript. I would like to add that despite the many problems encountered by the project, Yusifa continues to lead 35 village youths in night classes, without pay. On weekends he walks two miles each night to help another facilitator in another village, who has over 100 students of his own. Such work of both facilitators and students, despite all the negating forces cited above, is a sign of the participant interest we are looking for. □

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