+Intersections ✛

MCC theory & practice quarterly

Participation

Participation: more than a buzzword?

Participation has become a development buzzword. Seemingly all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) aspire to have local communities be active participants in development work, taking the lead in identifying changes they want to see in their communities, the means for achieving those changes and methods for assessing progress towards those changes. But just what participation looks like varies greatly from NGO to NGO and from project to project. In a vast sea of guidebooks, complicated methods, toolkits and manuals it is easy to become overwhelmed by just what participation is, who is participating and what they are participating in. In many ways this is encouraging. The ideological battle of participation is largely won. NGOs have become increasingly aware of the ineffectiveness of projects imposed on communities.

The ongoing challenge for MCC and all NGOs is moving participation from an aspiration to a reality. Unfortunately, this participatory reality is yet to be fully realized. As was documented in the book, *Time to Listen*, local communities are receptive to aid but desire a stronger voice in NGO projects (Anderson et al., 2012). Despite our own aspirations at MCC, we also struggle to make the ideal of participation a reality. These challenges are symptoms of more fundamental power imbalances among and within communities, local partners, international NGOs and donors.

This power imbalance is not the only challenge. Participatory methods themselves are often poorly facilitated. At times implementing agencies lack the capacity or resources to carry out the methods. As participatory methods have been mainstreamed they have become increasingly complex. That complexity can lead to a certain type of procedural elitism in which the methods can only be carried out by highly educated (and often highly paid) consultants. A review of the humanitarian response to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines indicated that the jargon, complexity and lack of consistency among NGOs' participatory approaches hindered local communities' abilities to participate meaningfully in humanitarian responses (Jacobs, 2015).

Gender and rights proponents have had an uncomfortable relationship with participatory methods, as participation can assume a monolithic community and can ignore local power dynamics.

On other occasions the challenge for meaningful participation emerges when the understandable pressure from donors to see results for planning and reporting do not allow for space and time for these methods to take place. One misguided trend among donors looking for increased accountability is a system of Payment by Results. In its most troubling form, local agencies do not receive money for a project from donor agencies until the anticipated project results are achieved. These approaches assume problems and solutions are embedded in simple systems where cause-and-effect relationships are clearly understood, something that is rarely true. Although assessing project outcomes is a key component to learning, results-driven project management with strict timelines can often be emphasized at the expense of the messier components of community participation.

These challenges to meaningful participation may arise because participation is no development panacea. Meaningful participatory processes do not always pair well with clean budgets, clear activities that lead to clear outcomes and known timelines. Instead, genuine participation is an iterative process in which activities are constantly being reflected on and adapted. On the other hand, strong participatory processes demand strong advance planning. Unplanned participatory processes can often lack transparency with a community and give too much power to facilitators. There is a delicate balance between planning and flexible responsiveness to developing contextual conditions that is difficult to achieve and maintain.

Participation is also not an obvious moral victory. Power imbalance is not a simple linear progression from donor to partner to community. Power exists in a multiplicity of complex relationships. Consequently, gender and rights proponents have had an uncomfortable relationship with participatory methods, as participation can assume a monolithic community and can ignore local power dynamics. For example, if a local community determines that it is culturally appropriate for decision making to happen through local male-dominated institutions, what impact will this insistence have on the inclusion (or lack thereof) of women and girls in participatory processes? Participatory methods can at times be troublingly gender-blind, depending on how they are implemented.

Despite these challenges, participation continues to be promoted as a key component to sustainable development. There are many reasons why participation is worth the complexity it adds to project implementation. Participation promotes learning and adaptation within the community. As communities participate in development projects they learn what works and what does not. This capacity building is more sustainable, strengthening the abilities of communities eventually to assume full control of projects. Another reason is that participation increases the possibility of project effectiveness as communities are able to contextualize projects and provide crucial information for their success. Finally, participation as community ownership and leadership within projects is essential because communities and individuals simply have a right to be decision-makers in the things that impact their lives.

So how can participation be more effective?

1. Participatory methods need to become re-simplified and accessible. As Luz Gomez Saaverdra of Oxfam said at a recent development conference, "the most amazing tool [is] sitting down under a tree with people" (Chambers, *Who Engages with Whom?*, 2014).

2. Facilitators of participatory methods need to be able to negotiate local power dynamics and ensure that all community members are able to meaningfully participate in NGO projects. Most methods are not inherently participatory or non-participatory. How methods are facilitated greatly impacts how participatory processes are.

3. Participation needs to happen at all stages of a project. Often participatory processes are heavy on front-end assessments, while evaluations are conducted by external consultants who write reports that rarely make it back to communities. Analysis of the data often is done by the consultant and not by community members. Local partners and international NGOs should find more creative ways of using monitoring and evaluation requirements to promote learning and adaption at a community level.

4. Facilitators of methods should build capacity with mixed methods approaches that use both qualitative and quantitative methods. Often qualitative methods are seen as the only participatory methodology. However, exciting work is being done in research facilities with quantitative methods such as participatory statistics and citizen science that has yet to be mainstreamed in development work.

5. Donors and NGOs need to find ways of being flexible with timelines, recognizing that the process itself is an important component of a project's success.

In this issue participation will be explored through analysis of case studies from Vietnam, Ethiopia, Palestine, Bolivia and Colombia. As the case studies make clear, participation is essential for sustainable and effective peacebuilding, development and relief work, but achieving genuine participation remains elusive. The essays in these pages offer ideas for how to ensure that participation is more meaningfully integrated into the development landscape.

Daniel Leonard is Operating Principles Coordinator for MCC.

Partnership and participation

Stakeholder participation is a widely accepted requirement for good community development (Arnstein, 1969; Chambers, 1974; Cohen & Uphoff, 1980; White, 1996; Cornwall, 2008). Yet understandings of what participation actually means varies widely—especially in practice (Cornwall, 2008). As Cohen and Uphoff (1980) pointed out nearly three decades ago, development practitioners often broadly endorse participation on normative grounds without much thought about what precisely they are endorsing. At one end of the spectrum, "empowerment" seems to mean nothing more than increased self-esteem. At the other end, endorsing participation means advocating radical transformation of power structures.

Learn more

ALNAP. *Participation by Crisis-Affected Populations in Humanitarian Action: A Handbook for Practitioners*. London: Overseas Development Institute, 2003.

Anderson Mary B., Brown, Dayna, Jean, Isabelle. *Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2012. Available at http://www.cdacollaborative.org/media/60478/Time-to-Listen-Book.pdf

Chambers, Robert. *Who Engages with Whom? Who is Accountable to Whom? Can the Development Sector Learn from the Humanitarian Sector?* (March 2014). Available at https://participationpower.wordpress.com/2014/03/20/who-engages-with-whom-who-is-accountable-to-whom-can-the-development-sector-learn-from-the-humanitarian-sector/

Chambers, Robert. *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. London: Routledge, 2014.

Jacobs, Alex. *Lessons from Haiyan: Five Steps to Improve Accountability to Affected People*. (January 2015). Available at http://ngoperformance.org/2015/01/22/lessons-from-haiyan-five-steps-to-improve-accountability-to-affected-people/

In an academic review of participation typologies, Cornwall (2008) noted that there are two general approaches for understanding participation: the technocratic approach and the critical theory approach. Technocratic theorists such as Cohen and Uphoff (1980) differentiate participation typologies according to the stages of a project or describe hierarchies and ladders of participation (Arnstein, 1969; White, 1996). In contrast, critical theorists approach the question from the perspective that participation is essentially a relationship issue and that power differences within a relationship will shape participation (Jantzi, 2011; Phelps, 2001; Chambers, 1997; Korten, 1990)

For this article, we found it illuminating to apply a critical theory perspective on the relation of power between MCC and the partners we support. The stakeholder is defined as anyone impacted by an MCC-funded project, while participation is understood here as taking part in decision-making. As MCC moves further into a partnership model instead of directly implementing our own programs, the issue of participation becomes more important—and at times more tangled. There are more layers of relationships. Many questions quickly surface.

How are all levels of stakeholders represented at the table to prioritize, plan, implement and evaluate any given initiative? In what ways does giving resources undermine participation by dictating priorities or approaches? How are outcomes and activities negotiated between those receiving financial support and those providing it, recognizing that the providing-receiving transaction may replicate several times among MCC-partners-community leaders-community members.

When the participation agenda comes into tension with patriarchal or other exclusionary practices in the context of the project, how does MCC influence change? As we propose broader participation, essentially pushing the existing boundaries of power structures, how do we also keep our own power in check? How can MCC honor relational principles of participation with partners when we hold so much power in our hands as donors? While there are strategies and principles that give us light to navigate power imbalances, relationships are still messy. Two stories highlight this reality.

Story one: Years ago, while working with MCC in the Yapacaní region of Bolivia, I (Elizabeth) participated in a collaborative project involving four institutions: two grassroots organizations, MCC and another international NGO (INGO). This process became the subject of my master's thesis in 2001, which gave me the opportunity to reflect deeply on how power had been shared, secured, lost and gained among the four participating institutions. Startling to me at the time, my research found that outside donor funding had a powerful effect of undermining stakeholder participation.

All four entities involved strongly-endorsed participation in all facets of the project. However, during the planning stages, an argument emerged between a grassroots partner (a cooperative) and the INGO over who would manage the project accounting. The INGO felt that the partner did not have the capacity for managing the funds and decided to carry out the accounting directly, to the bitter resentment of the cooperative's leadership. Later, another debate ensued over the purchase of a vehicle for the project—the local partner preferred a type of motorcycle common to the area, whereas the INGO generally used four-wheelers. Although

Learn more

Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation." *AIP Journal* (July 1969): 216-214.

Bebbington, Anthony. "Reinventing NGOs and Rethinking Alternatives in the Andes." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 554 (1997): 117-135.

Chambers, Robert. *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*. London: Longman. 1983.

Chambers, Robert. *Managing Rural Development: Ideas and Experience from East Asia*. Uppsala, Sweden: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1974.

Cohen, John and Uphoff, Norman. "Participation's Place in Rural Development: Seeking Clarity through Specificity." *World Development* 8 (1980): 213-235.

Cornwall, Andrea. "Unpacking 'Participation': Models, Meanings and Practices." *Community Development Journal* 43/3 (2008): 269–283.

trivial, each party developed strong opinions; when the INGO ended up winning this battle as well, it brought home to me the dramatic power implicit in donor funding. Although sometimes hidden behind the explicit endorsement of participation, a different implicit message—"Do it my way, or I won't approve the grant"—often weighs heavily on decisions.

Story two: In the Chocó region of Colombia, the Mennonite Brethren (MB) regional council supports the churches' social ministries, with roots stretching back to the 1940s. Local church volunteers, who are fully integrated into and affected by communities' realities, initiate and maintain most of these social ministries. We view this relationship as an exemplary case in which MCC lives out the mandate to partner with Anabaptist churches in response to suffering caused by economic exploitation and war.

In order to develop this partnership, MCC has required certain project cycle practices from the MB church which they had never done before, such as writing up plans in logframes ("logical frameworks" showing the relationship of activities to project outcomes) and documenting indicators. We argued that these are good practices for any institution, including churches, and that MCC would contribute training for church volunteers. Or, they could find people already trained in these kinds of activities, pay them a salary and then suddenly the process started to feel much more like an NGO project and much less like church-based voluntary initiatives. When we as MCC set program design and reporting terms, did we also define how the partner needs to function (more like an NGO than a church)? Did we widen the gap between project functionaries and community participants? Have we distorted the way the church has existed in this region for decades?

We learn from these stories that we need to critically monitor our own role in order to ensure that all stakeholders have real power in every stage of a project or community process. By injecting resources, donors easily gain an outsized say in prioritizing what needs attention (e.g., HIV/AIDS prevention over pastoral training), in setting terms for program design and implementation (e.g., encouraging female leadership despite unresolved local theological debate) and in shaping the definition of success (e.g., higher food production vs. greater integration of the church into the community).

MCC holds participation as a high ideal, particularly in favor of marginalized and disenfranchised persons in the communities where we support projects. Do we also remember that, relative to MCC, many of our partners, like the churches in Chocó, are also marginalized? A good long look in the mirror can help us evaluate how we are impacting all of the stakeholders and identify where we need to let go of control to facilitate participation.

Elizabeth Phelps is MCC Co-Representative for Colombia. Bonnie Klassen is MCC Area Director for South America and Mexico.

Learn more

Korten, David C. *Getting to the 21st Century*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1990.

Farrington, John and Bebbington, Anthony, with Wellard, Kate and Lewis, David J. Ed. *Reluctant Partners: Non-governmental Organisations, the State, and Sustainable Agricultural Development*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Jantzi, Terry. "Towards Developing a Theoretical Framework for Relationships in Community Development." In *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity*. Ed. Alain Epp Weaver, 397-418. Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2011.

Phelps, Elizabeth. "Participation and Power in Community Development Program Planning: A Study of a Process in the Bolivian Lowlands." Master's Thesis. Cornell University. 2001.

Pretty, Jules N. "Participatory Learning for Sustainable Agriculture." *World Development* 23/8 (1995): 1247-1263.

White, Sarah C. (1996) "Depoliticising Development: The Uses and Abuses of Participation." *Development in Practice* 6/1 (1996): 6-15.

Partner ownership of participation

Think about participation and immediately images from MCC's history come to mind: young adults in MCC's Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program circled by their host families; community groups gathered under umbrella trees; community members distributing food and mattresses; cycling groups raising awareness of peace commitments; relief sales; and more. These images reflect an MCC rooted in community and dependent on strong relationships in villages, towns and cities around the world. So as participation caught on within broader development and humanitarian assistance work, it comes as no surprise that many within MCC would view participatory approaches as operations as usual.

How MCC has worked to promote meaningful community participation in the design, implementation and monitoring of relief, development and peacebuilding initiatives has shifted over time. Before the 1980s, MCC workers (typically from Canada or the United States) were the primary agents facilitating participatory processes in the communities where they were placed. With the shift to a partnership model of operation, starting in the 1980s, MCC's local partner organizations (churches, national NGOs, community based organizations, etc.) began to take the lead in animating community participation. This led MCC to focus on partner capacity building for community ownership and less so on how service workers facilitate direct community participation. As MCC has shifted to partnering with local organizations and churches, what are the habits and practices that encourage active participation?

Classic approaches like Participatory Rural Appraisal pioneered by Robert Chambers and newer shorthand guidance like the Emergency Capacity Building Project's *Good Enough Guide* use practitioner case studies and participatory methodologies for involving communities and individuals in all project stages. These participatory methods often focus on practical ways to engage a community. MCC should and does promote these resources with partners. But how do international NGOs promote participation when two steps removed from the community? It begins with acceptance that local partner organizations, not MCC, are the agents driving community participation. MCC's role is resourcing and reinforcing partner participatory practices; carrying out that role well requires creating space to listen to our partners and for them to share together. This space can promote partner-community participation by modeling partner-with-partner and partner-with-MCC engagement.

One helpful practice for enhancing participatory relationships among MCC and its partners is for MCC to organize regular learning events, gatherings where the agenda is largely sharing and listening. Many MCC country programs have begun holding annual partner gatherings, for which one of the main purposes is to create learning and sharing opportunities among partners. Almost always, partners report that their most valued takeaways from these gatherings is the chance to network with each other. While those partner connections sometimes yield cross-fertilization of relief, development or peacebuilding approaches, more often the gatherings generate enthusiasm for future learning and collaboration. For example, Michael Chapman, MCC Representative for Guatemala, observes that MCC Guatemala's annual partner gatherings have been relational learning spaces that led partners to independently send their staff to other partners and projects to provide trainings, learn, do evaluations or just visit. MCC Guatemala also used the partner

> **Local partner organizations, not MCC, are the agents driving community participation. MCC's role is resourcing and reinforcing partner participatory practices; carrying out that role well requires creating space to listen to our partners and for them to share together.**

gathering to listen to partners' expressed mutual interests and then support a local learning tour: perceiving a lot of traction around agroecology work, MCC planned and sent three staff members from each partner that works in agriculture to an agroecology training center in Guatemala. MCC's role in Guatemala has been to convene the space for partners to identify and explore their mutual interests (unconstrained by project parameters), to listen actively and intently and then to support initiatives that emerge from the mutual engagement of MCC's partners.

Arranging annual partner gatherings does not by itself make engaged partner participation happen: that depends upon good facilitation. As CDA Collaborative Learning Projects has insisted, engaging people effectively requires specific skills in listening, facilitating problem solving and managing conflict. At MCC orientations, we are rethinking how to frame program development from an evaluative capacity perspective to include skill-building in each of these areas along with a familiarity of basic project planning and implementation. This comes naturally out of an emphasis that project planning, monitoring and evaluation is a process, not fundamentally a bureaucratic exercise in filling in templates. By building staff skills to facilitate learning processes, we open the doors to creativity and equip workers to look beyond what the problem is and what is needed to fix it. This has a ripple effect. As staff listen and engage with partners, partners perceive the importance MCC places on local engagement in the midst of immediate and urgent work.

To take this engagement process to the particulars of participation and learning at the project level requires explicit space to review and analyze project implementation data and information. Sharing together in project analysis is a form of MCC's participatory work with partners, but it can be hard to realize when time is short, staff is limited and deadlines loom. Just as MCC's partners must spend long hours with community members to ensure that they are active participants in shaping relief, development and peacebuilding projects, so must MCC staff dedicate significant time to building relationships with partners, relationships that involve shared analysis of project directions and discussions about critical questions about project vision and implementation.

Like MCC, Lutheran World Relief (LWR) works in collaboration with local partners. LWR has developed a Reflection Meeting guidance tool to facilitate conversations between LWR and local partners working on a specific project in which they together review and analyze project implementation data and information. The desired outcome of these time-intensive Reflection Meetings is for LWR's partner organizations to come away with a completed progress report that both captures vital project learnings and meets LWR's reporting requirements. One of the main obstacles to involving multiple people in reflection and analysis is the pressure of report deadlines; LWR's Reflection Meeting tool addresses this obstacle by providing a needed product (the completion of a required project report) and structured time for joint project analysis. By only involving key project stakeholders and focusing on reviewing and analyzing a specific project, LWR staff and partner representatives can focus their discussions on analysis of project learnings, strengths and challenges. Such structured meetings could potentially be adapted for use within MCC.

Learn more

Chambers, Robert. *Rural Appraisal: Rapid, Relaxed and Participatory*. London: Institute of Development Studies, 1992.

Emergency Capacity Building Project. *Good Enough Guide: Impact Measurement and Accountability in Emergencies*. Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2007.

Engaging with our partners and encouraging them in their community involvement is not complicated but neither is it easy. Because our circle of primary engagement is with partner staff, we need to create and conserve the open spaces for relationally listening to our partners while also intentionally modeling and affirming feedback loops and dedicated times for reflection and analysis. Building MCC workers' skills of facilitation, listening and analysis will strengthen not only MCC's relationship with its partners but also build the capacity of partner organizations to mobilize participation in the communities in which they live and work. While doing so, we should also pay attention to MCC's role in networking partners, MCC's responsiveness to partner feedback, and creating times and spaces that shift attention away from doing in order to give opportunities for MCC and its partners to engage in reflective assessment. For MCC as a partnering organization, the recommendations from Peace Direct's Local First in Practice report are particularly relevant: creating relational learning spaces, brokering relationships and looking for assets and capacities among our partners are some of the ways international NGOs like MCC can enhance practices of participatory engagement with partners.

Kristen Zimmerman is Learning and Evaluation Coordinator for MCC.

The participation of men in gender equality work

At the center of Kim Thuoung Commune in northwest Vietnam, villagers stand in three lines, blinking, squinting and making other interesting facial expressions toward one other. Bursts of laughter fill the room as each group tries to communicate a specific number down through their line, without speaking or using hand motions. The exercise is supposed to highlight the challenges of communicating when lacking helpful tools. One encouraging aspect of this exercise is the number of men among the group of about 30 villagers contorting their faces in the spirit of a friendly competition. The workshop which the men are attending is animated by the conviction that the active participation of men is vital to address domestic violence at the community level.

When MCC conducted domestic violence trainings in partnership with women's unions in Vietnam from 2010 to 2014, participation from men was almost nonexistent. In a culture in which men are typically the heads of households, garnering significant male support or attendance for an event arranged and run by women proved challenging. A review of that initial project stressed the importance of men's participation in these trainings if attitudes and behaviors regarding domestic violence were to change. Training women's union members, who then trained other women's union members at the village level, was not successfully engaging those who hold disproportionate power in patriarchal family structures, namely men.

So in 2014, as MCC began new projects with villages of displaced ethnic minority Muong and Dao peoples in northwest Vietnam, project organizers approached the farmers' and youth unions—which have mostly male membership—to take part alongside women's union members in conflict resolution training. Instead of domestic violence being the primary focus of the training, it became one subject interlaced into broader conversations about understanding conflict, managing anger and fostering good communication.

> **"The active participation of men is vital to address domestic violence at the community level. Training women's union members, who then trained other women's union members at the village level, was not successfully engaging those who hold disproportionate power in patriarchal family structures, namely men.**

Vuong Chien, a project manager with MCC Vietnam, is hopeful that imparting general conflict resolution skills will help to change attitudes about domestic violence and give couples the tools to navigate conflict in a positive way. "Many participants entered the training believing that conflict is always a negative thing, that it cannot be positive," observed Chien. "So we shared some examples of how conflict can be positive, and also how to deal with anger in the initial moments of a conflict."

Through lively role plays, group discussions and other interactive activities, both men and women are learning to understand conflict better, how to communicate effectively in resolving conflict and what to do with initial feelings of anger when a conflict arises. Workshop facilitators urged participants to try taking a break in the moment of their anger—to exercise, practice deep breathing, journal or talk with a friend—instead of jumping straight to violent reactions. "Do these alternate things first," said Chien, "then go back and address the conflict after you've been able to calm down." Participants were surprised to attend such a lively workshop, but also seemed to enjoy all the interaction, Chien reported. "We asked a lot of questions that made them have to think reflectively and respond." After the initial trainings with representatives from the women's, farmers' and youth unions, participants returned home to share their newly acquired learnings with their corresponding union groups in the villages. By this method, both men and women have received the same information together, with women then passing along the information to women, and men passing the information to men. After the union representatives hold their own trainings at the village level, all of the villagers will be invited to a drama performed by the three unions, who will compete with one another in presenting what they have learned and how they are implementing that knowledge in their village groups. Such cultural performances will involve all members of the community: men, women, the elderly, children and influential village leaders.

The interactive workshops, corresponding local trainings and drama performances are also a way to get the conversation started about conflict and domestic violence. As in many other contexts globally, domestic violence is not often discussed in community settings in Vietnam, as it is still largely considered a private family issue. Typically, only serious cases are reported, such as those resulting in death.

In 2010, the General Statistics Office of Vietnam conducted a national survey to determine the prevalence of domestic violence. Results indicated that 32 percent of women who had ever been married had experienced physical violence within their marriages, while 54 percent of women had suffered emotional abuse. Programs and communication campaigns that have sought to raise awareness have focused on women rather than men, thus arguably not addressing the causes of domestic violence.

In the Xuan Dai and Kim Thuoung communes, where MCC currently supports community development initiatives, issues of domestic violence are linked to the stresses of poverty and food shortages and exacerbated by alcohol consumption. In Xuan Dai Commune, roughly 30 percent of households live below the poverty line, and an additional 30 percent hover just above it, earning less than US$25 per person per month. Most of these villagers used to be forest dwellers, until much of their land was declared a protected national park in 2002, and they had to relocate outside the forest perimeter. Lacking knowledge of effective cultivation techniques,

> **Through lively role plays, group discussions and other interactive activities, both men and women are learning to understand conflict better, how to communicate effectively in resolving conflicts and what to do with initial feelings of anger when a conflict arises.**

they struggle to farm the little arable land available. Men are traditionally responsible for the "heavy" labor of loading and transporting their limited crops, which is intensive only at certain times of the year. Women are tasked with more continuous responsibilities, such as weeding, fertilizing and similar tasks of tending the fields. This leaves many men with bouts of inactivity in a culture in which drinking alcohol is a social way to pass the time.

Alcohol has also been cited as a coping mechanism for men who are stressed about food shortages and being unable to provide for their families. Villagers report that idle time, combined with these life stresses and lubricated by alcohol consumption, results in some men becoming physically or psychologically aggressive with their families.

As MCC seeks to involve both men and women in conflict transformation trainings in Xuan Dai and Kim Thuong communes, concurrent MCC projects strive to address the intertwined issues of food security and education. Each project was designed from the villagers' own assessments of their communities' needs.

Present cultural norms regarding gender equity and domestic violence are not likely to be reshaped with just one workshop, or even through a multi-year series of workshops. But there are glimpses of hope for reducing domestic violence. As workshop participants gathered to eat together after the first training in December 2014, people quickly noticed the absence of alcohol typically present at such meals. "This is the first time in my life I have eaten a [celebratory] meal like this without alcohol," noted a surprised Phung Van Thuon from Kim Thuong Commune. "But if not drinking alcohol might mean less violence," he reflected, "I can do without it."

This project is still in its early stages. But men's growing participation in the conflict transformation workshops, trainings and community awareness performances are encouraging steps forward in villagers being able to address family issues without violence.

Karen Treadway is MCC Co-Representative in Vietnam.

Southern voices on northern NGO partnerships

MCC is committed to working through a partnership model in which the values and priorities of local communities are respected and supported. Within this model MCC provides programmatic support and funds for partners to implement activities. This is not, however, a linear donor-recipient relationship. Instead, MCC strives for this partnership to be characterized by collaboration, accompaniment and engaged participation. MCC seeks to work and plan together with local partners to meet the needs that are raised from within the communities in which partners operate, convinced that community members are best positioned to identify priorities and the most appropriate and effective means to address those priorities. This collaborative process ideally involves multiple levels of accountability, including mutual accountability between MCC and local partner organizations and accountability of MCC and local partners to the communities in which MCC supported projects unfold.

Learn more

Cornwall, Andrea. "Whose Voices? Whose Choices? Reflections on Gender and Participatory Development." *World Development* 31/8 (2003): 1325-1342.

Edström, Jerker, Abhijit Das, and Chris Dolan. "Introduction: Undressing Patriarchy and Masculinities to Re-politicise Gender." *IDS Bulletin* 45/1 (2014): 1-10.

Hawkins, Kate, et al. *Undressing Patriarchy: Redressing Inequalities.* Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2013. Available at http://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfileIDS OpenDocsStandardTermsOf Use.pdf

For this partnership model to operate well, all parties to specific projects must be active participants, with the communities and individuals that are to benefit in some way from the projects proactively shaping project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. If local organizations (e.g. churches and community-based organizations) are to be truly accountable to the communities in which they operate, they must also be active partners with international donor organizations (such as MCC) that provide project resources (funds, material resources, personnel, training and more), not simply carrying out initiatives planned by donor organizations but instead taking the lead in forming those initiatives. These multiple layers of accountability and participation are reflected in the "Principles of Participation" agreed to by the Global Humanitarian Platform, a network that represents major development actors such as the United Nations and large NGOs. The key principles upon which to base partnership, platform members concur, include equality based on mutual respect, financial transparency and open dialogue, a coordinated result-oriented approach, taking on activities responsibly and working together to complement the comparative strengths of different partners.

Amidst these principles of participation, partnership and collaboration, however, there remains an inherent asymmetry between donor organizations like MCC, on the one hand, and local partner organizations, on the other, regarding resources and funding. A central role of MCC as a partner is to provide funding for local organizations so they can effectively implement programming. MCC has a vested interest in ensuring that program and financial best practices and international standards are met (both because of MCC's accountability to its donors and because these best practices and standards reflect long and broad global experience about what contributes to project success) and expects partners to engage with MCC's questions about how best practices are being addressed in project design and implementation in order for MCC to transfer resources to those partners. Ideally, project reporting offers opportunities for conversation about project implementation and progress and helps create space for dialogue between MCC and its partners. It cannot be denied, however, that MCC has a greater level of access and control over key project resources and uses this power to shape how and when those resources are used.

To overlook this imbalance is to do a disservice to MCC's relationship with local partners and can harm participatory processes. Historically, so-called development has often been imposed upon communities based on a particular western-driven framework. Within these parameters, funding from international agencies has often resulted in institutional restrictions that limit the capacity and engagement of communities and partners (Pinnington, 2014). With the increasing prominence of participatory development approaches, the rhetoric of partnership is in danger of becoming tokenism without authentic follow-through.

One fundamental way in which MCC works to acknowledge its role as a partner within this broader context is to take tangible steps to listen to the voices of local partners and to seek out their opinions on whether or not MCC is fulfilling its mandate to facilitate mutually accountable partnerships. MCC's participation in the Keystone Performance Survey represents its commitment to mutually accountable partnerships. Keystone is an independent organization dedicated to improving the effectiveness of social purpose organizations through a focus on how participatory

> **Historically, so-called development has often been imposed upon communities based on a particular western-driven framework. Within these parameters, funding from international agencies has often resulted in institutional restrictions that limit the capacity and engagement of communities and partners.**

Learn more

Pinnington, Rosie. *Local First in Practice: Unlocking the Power to Get Things Done*. London: Peace Direct, 2014. Available at http://actlocalfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Local-First-In-Practice.pdf

Brinkerhoff, Jennifer. *Partnership for International Development: Rhetoric or Results*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002.

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. *Harmonizing Donor Practices for Effective Aid Delivery*. DAC Guidelines and Reference Series. Paris: OECD, 2003.

and mutually accountable the relationships those organizations have with local partners are. In the Keystone Performance Survey southern NGOs rank and assess their northern NGO partners in a number of categories, including financial and non-financial support, capacity building support, administrative processes, relational approaches and commitment to understanding and learning from local partners and their contexts. This voluntary and anonymous survey is a unique way in which MCC can hear directly from local partners on how they perceive MCC as a partner and it presents MCC with an opportunity to assess whether the organization's principles are translating into daily operations and program engagement. On the one hand, the Keystone Performance Survey revealed broad partner affirmation for MCC in a variety of areas, including cultural sensitivity, respect for partners and support for partner priorities. On the other hand, the survey also provided important insights into areas where MCC can improve and be more aware of the challenges faced by local partners. This includes understanding the dynamics of control over funding, for example. Slightly less than half of respondents felt that MCC often allows partners to make changes to specific grant conditions such as the way funds are spent (although the majority of respondents felt that MCC is transparent about funding). Additionally, one of the top requests from respondents was for MCC to offer increased support in accessing additional sources of funds.

How to acknowledge these concerns and still work within a funding system in which MCC is also accountable to its own donors (both individual donors and institutional donors like the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, the Foods Resources Bank or the Canadian government's Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development) is an important discussion, and one that is necessary when working with partners. At the center of partnership and participation is this dynamic relationship that requires mutual reflection and learning in order to progress. Engaging with partners through a mechanism such as the Keystone Survey and acknowledging an imbalance of access to and control over funds are important first steps.

Allison Enns is Food Security and Sustainable Livelihoods Coordinator for MCC.

Community participation and sustainability

Five hours north of Addis Ababa, beyond the Nile Gorge, lies the community of Debre Markos. For the past six years, MCC Ethiopia has partnered with Migbare Senay Children and Family Support Organization (MSCFSO) in support of its work in food security and watershed rehabilitation in the rural area surrounding Debre Markos. The project combines working with vulnerable, marginalized people who are food insecure for four months of the year, with cash-for-work to rehabilitate the severely eroded communal and individual farm lands in activities such as gully rehabilitation and terracing. Both food insecurity and land degradation are common and intertwined problems throughout Ethiopia. But what is distinctive is MSCFSO's approach to this work. The community is involved in all levels of planning, implementation and evaluation of the project. MSCFSO believes that unless communities

participate in all levels of project management, development initiatives cannot be successful or sustainable.

The MSCFSO project in the Debre Markos area began, like other MCC-supported MSCFSO initiatives, with a community meeting that identified the core problems to be addressed along with potential challenges. From the beginning, MSCFSO looks to the communities in which it works for the depth and breadth of their knowledge and experience. MSCFSO incorporates a rural participatory approach with techniques developed by Paulo Freire that assumes that marginalized and exploited persons can and should be enabled to analyze their own reality. Initial project meetings are conducted in open forums which also give voice to all in the community, with care taken to ensure that all voices are heard. This process includes those who are marginalized and helps to empower the vulnerable participants whose food security and other development needs the project seeks to address. MSCFSO also uses focus group discussions to help dig further into the problems and challenges and to identify the resources available to meet those challenges.

This process helps to develop a sense of ownership, as project participants begin to claim that this is our work that addresses our lives and therefore we need to work together now and for the future. In Debre Markos, farmers participated in determining which watershed was most degraded, the delineation of the area for rehabilitation, the selection criteria for project participants and, in conjunction with the local government, the number of project participants.

A watershed development plan was made in conjunction with the community. A watershed committee was formed in each of the watersheds and those committees, made up of representatives of the women, youth, elders and farmers participating in the project, established bylaws to ensure people obey the communal land rules. For example, if animals are found grazing on the land being rehabilitated by the project, the animals' owners receive a warning, followed by fines for further infractions. Knowing that there is broad community commitment to the effectiveness and sustainability of the project and to protecting the rehabilitated watershed fosters a spirit of strong, mutual accountability within the community.

A major concern of the community as the project was developed was how to address the 'free grazing' of animals once the harvest was completed. Some community members want access to the watershed's rehabilitated land for fodder for their animals, but others raised the concern that this grazing could threaten the trees and grasses planted for land stabilization. The solution to this dilemma came from within the community. Community members agreed that grasses that grow at the edge of crop land during the growing season could be harvested for animals. Also, it was decided to plant tree lucern (a fast-growing, nitrogen-fixing tree/shrub) on soil bunds in the watershed that is rehabilitated that can then be harvested and pruned, thus encouraging a "cut-and-carry" method for feeding animals that were once allowed to graze freely.

The implementation of the Debre Markos project depended on active community participation, with community members gathering materials like stone and sand for the construction of check dams in the watersheds. With some of the activity being carried out on communal land, broad community participation and ownership in the project was essential.

> **Knowing that there is broad community commitment to the effectiveness and sustainability of the project and to protecting the rehabilitated watershed fosters a spirit of strong, mutual accountability within the community.**

Berkes, Fikret, Johan Colding, and Carl Folke. Eds. *Navigating Social-Ecological Systems: Building Resilience for Complexity and Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Davies, Mark. Et al. "Climate Change Adaptation, Disaster Risk Reduction and Social Protection: Complementary Roles in Agriculture and Rural Growth?" *IDS Working Papers* 320 (2009): 1-37.

Ostrom, Elinor. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Pretty, Jules N. *Regenerating Agriculture: An Alternative Strategy for Growth*. London: Routledge, 2013.

Project participants and the broader community alike understood the potential benefits of the project and how it would help to improve both the land and their livelihoods.

At first it was hard for some in the community to believe that the problem of land degradation was possible to resolve. But with a growing commitment from the watershed committee and the broader community to protect the rehabilitated watershed and its surrounding crop lands, along with the support and technical assistance of MSCFSO and the local government development agents, skeptics began to see progress and believe that change was possible. The involvement that community members had in the project increased their confidence in their abilities to solve difficult problems.

MSCFSO has found that a key component of mobilizing community participation is involving local institutions. During project implementation, MSCFSO engages social and religious organizations that already play vital roles in the community. For example, in a community like Debre Markos in which the vast majority of the population is Ethiopian Orthodox Christian, the church organizes regular opportunities during holy days and saints' days for church members to gather and discuss community issues. Institutions like the church are able to apply social pressure to encourage community members to act in ways that conform to broader community needs, such as reducing the free grazing of animals. To be sure, mobilizing key institutions like the church to reinforce community ownership of specific projects can bring power dynamics issues and imbalances to the fore, and careful attention must be paid to such potential dynamics. With regards to the free grazing and deforestation issues that the Debre Markos project addressed, however, there was unanimous agreement within the community about the negative impacts of free grazing and deforestation on watershed rehabilitation and the urgency of finding ways to address those challenges.

MSCFSO's experience in Debre Markos demonstrates that community involvement in all stages of project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation is essential for strong community ownership of development initiatives. Such ongoing participation ensures that development projects are viewed as belonging primarily to the community, rather than to a local NGO like MSCFSO or to an international NGO like MCC. In Debre Markos, the strength of the social cohesion when all segments of a community work together has proven successful in several watersheds over the past six years. Community participation and sustainability, strength and ownership—all keys to success.

Cath Woolner is MCC Co-Representative for Ethiopia, with assistance from Yihenew Demessie, Program Director for MSCFSO.

Learning under siege

In the middle of the city of Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, dozens of boys age 11 to 16 spend their winter school break at the Bunat al Ghad Center, run by the Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA), an MCC partner. [CFTA also operates a winter camp for girls on alternate days.] Entering from the road through a small gate and turning the corner past colorful murals of animals and cityscapes, participants in the winter camp are welcomed by a large sign and smiling staff and then disperse

to different rooms for a range of activities, including drawing, theater, creative writing, experimentation in a science lab and active games and sports. At CFTA's winter camps and other activities, Palestinian children and youth take an active role in planning CFTA's program.

Near the back of a room at Bunat al Ghad where one cohort is playing musical chairs, 17-year-old Mohammed Ramadan maneuvers around the energetic group, snapping pictures and filming the activity. He is one of CFTA's youth leaders, a young participant in the center's programs encouraged to develop his leadership skills.

The development of personal agency is immensely important in the context of Palestine, where 67 years of displacement and dispossession have left millions of Palestinian refugees scattered across Palestine and around the world, and where 48 years of occupation by Israel leaves millions of Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip stateless, deprived of basic citizenship rights and subject to tight restrictions on movement, economic growth, religious activity and more.

In Gaza in particular, the Israeli closure regime initiated in 2007 that tightly restricts the movement of people and goods into and out of the Strip puts enormous strain on the entire society. Of a population of 1.8 million, more than two-thirds are refugees from 1948 and their descendants, while 60 percent are under the age of 18. This community is effectively locked in a piece of land only 25 miles long and three to seven miles wide. Due to the Israeli blockade and frequent military operations, Gaza, Harvard political economist Sara Roy explains, is one of the only places in the world considered to be undergoing a process of "de-development."

This past summer, 50 days of Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip by the Israeli military plunged Gaza into an even more desperate humanitarian situation, leaving entire neighborhoods decimated and thousands injured and killed. According to the Protection Cluster Working Group (PCWG), Operation Protective Edge killed at least 1,549 Palestinian civilians, including 539 children and 306 women. And at the time of this writing—almost six months since the end of hostilities—reconstruction is at a virtual standstill, while the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provides humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees, is reporting a funding gap of US$620 million for its programs and services in Gaza.

In such a context, Palestinian youth would seem to have two options: despair and hopelessness, on the one hand, or determined resilience, on the other. Palestinians have an amazing capacity for creative resistance to injustice and speak of the need for *sumud*, Arabic for "steadfastness." All of MCC's Palestinian partners embody the concept of *sumud*, and CFTA's commitment to empowering youth is just one iteration.

For Mohammed, participation in CFTA's programs has certainly activated his leadership potential. When CFTA decided to host the winter camp during the school break, it enlisted the help of a committee of children and youth, including Mohammed, to design and plan the activities. On the first day of camp, the participants sat together in the center's various rooms and created a list of regulations and rules that would guide that activity's play, such as: "Keep the room clean," "respect others' opinions" and "respect people's differences."

Learn more

Alareer, Rifaat. Ed. *Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine*. Charlottesville, VA: Just World Books, 2014.

Levy, Gideon. *The Punishment of Gaza*. London: Verso, 2014.

Roy, Sara. *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-Development*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995, 2001. 3rd edition forthcoming.

UNRWA situation reports available at http://www.unrwa.org

CIDA Child Protection. *RBM and Children's Participation: A guide to Incorporating Child Participation Results into CIDA Programs*. Ottawa: CIDA, 2003.

The tools provided by CFTA inspired Mohammed beyond helping to organize the camp. He has proven adept at electrical engineering, and the science lab at Bunat al Ghad enabled him to test alternative power sources that could be used in his community. Even before the latest war, the sole power plant in Gaza and the electricity bought from Israel and Egypt covered only a fraction of the population's power needs, leading to a rolling cycle of only eight hours of electricity each day. Since Israel's bombing of the power plant during the war and renewed scarcity of fuel to run the plant or generators, the availability of electricity across Gaza decreased to only four to six hours per day on average. Seeing the needs created by limited electricity, Mohammed created a system of battery-powered lights that could be used in households in Khan Younis. Mohammed gives credit to CFTA for providing space and encouragement for him to develop his ingenuity, noting that CFTA "helped us to help people directly targeted by war." The close-knit culture of Gaza means that inspiring creativity in individuals like Mohammed will likely result in solutions for the people around them.

Encouraging Mohammed's leadership skills has had a trickle-down effect on the younger children at the camp who learn to look up to their peers and rely on each other for inspiration. Mohammed Darwish, a shy 14-year-old who enjoys writing poetry and wants to be a language teacher when he is older, said that he has learned from Mohammed Ramadan's experiments in the lab.

When asked to identify skills learned at the center that they will continue to use as adults, both Mohammed Ramadan and Mohammed Darwish said that they had learned how to be leaders and how to respect other people's opinions and values. CFTA's history certainly affirms that these lessons, once learned, will continue to provide inspiration to others. Hani Selmi, an author in his thirties who coordinates the creative writing department, first came to CFTA at age ten. CFTA was hosting a Palestinian writer to talk with the children, so Hani brought several short stories he had written and showed them to the author. He cites that moment as a turning point in his own aspirations: armed with positive feedback and encouragement to pursue writing, Hani went on to publish seven books and short stories and hopes to encourage other children to do the same.

The ongoing Israeli occupation severely limits the realization of the potential of Palestine and its people. But in spite of violence, societal difficulties and issues that can only truly be solved on a national or international level, the children involved in CFTA's programs know their own power and agency through their participation in coordinating and designing the center's activities.

Jessy Hampton is Advocacy and Learning Tour Assistant for MCC in Palestine.

Mennonite Central Committee

Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ