

Book Reviews

Guy Bessette. *Involving the Community: A Guide to Participatory Development Communication.* Penang, Malaysia: Southbound, 2004. xiv+154 pages. Paperback. Price not given.

Participatory approaches, tools, and methods have become a buzzword and common practice in development programmes throughout the world. Institutions of participatory development, specialised expertise, and a body of knowledge relating to participatory development, developed over the last couple of decades, are now an important part of the development literature. Whereas much of the theory and practice in the Development Economics has been based on top-down models, they are being replaced by bottom-up participatory strategies to ensure that socio-economic needs of the poor and the vulnerable are met. There is ample evidence that participation strategies have been quite successful in the realisation of economic and social objectives.

This book, which is divided in three parts, introduces participatory development communication concepts, discusses the use of effective two-way communication approaches, and presents a methodology to plan, develop, and evaluate communication strategies. It also suggests how researchers and practitioners can improve the communication with local communities and other stakeholders. Of the three parts, Role, Methodology, and Tools of Participatory Development Communication, the first part presents participatory development communication and elaborates the notions of development communication, development, participation and research-action. It defines the roles of research teams and practitioners in using communication to facilitate community participation, and includes historical evidence, major trends, and limits of Participatory Development Communication (PDC).

The second part, introduces a methodological approach for planning communication strategies. The methodology deals with diagnosing, planning, intervening and making assessments. An integrated planning and action model for using PDC is presented. In this part the author discusses establishing a relationship and understanding with a local community; involving people in the identification of a development problem, potential solutions, and an action to implement; identifying the different community groups and stakeholders with the identified problem (or goal) and the action to carry out to solve the problem; identifying communication

needs, objectives and activities; choosing appropriate communication tools; preparing and pre-testing communication content and material; facilitating the building up of partnership and collaboration; producing an implementation plan; planning monitoring, documentation and evaluation, and planning, sharing, and utilisation of results. The first three steps are related to diagnosis, the next three to planning, and another three to intervention or experimentation, the last being assessment.

The third part discusses the conditions for effective utilisation of some communication tools in the participatory approach. These are split into different headings, viz., interpersonal communication; group media; traditional media; mass media; information and communication technologies tools. The interpersonal communication section deals with the common discussion and debate; visioning sessions; focus group discussions; PRA techniques; role playing; visits, tours, workshops, and exhibition tools. The effectiveness of discussion and debate resides in the complementarities with other activities; for example, discussions with a smaller and more focused group. The group media tools discusses photography, drawing, flip charts, posters and banners, video recordings, and audio recordings. The traditional media tools consist of theatre, songs, music, sayings, and stories. Under mass media, rural radio, local press, and televisions are discussed as tools. The information and communication technologies tools cover the computer as a slide-show projector, as well as the use of the internet. In this part author also identifies communications tools for different kind of applications.

PDC, a part of the Participatory Reflection and Action (PRA) approach, is an informal qualitative approach involving communities for sustainable development projects and development research. No doubt communication is essential, but it is insufficient by itself if the material, human, and financial resources needed to carry out the development initiative are not available. The community's participation and appropriation of their own development helps in resource mobilisation for development activities.

The challenge is to enable participatory approaches to spread and improve. Moreover, it needs to be ensured that participatory approaches are not misused. It has been observed that they have been misused to cover up sloppy, rushed, and biased work, but the author fails to mention the limitations of the participatory approach. Moreover, it would have been useful if some empirical illustrations, case studies, results and findings were provided while discussing different PDC tools and approaches, as well as possibly pictures related to environmental and natural resource management.

In the annex, the author discusses the major trends in development communication, i.e., an approach that favoured large-scale actions and relied on the mass media, and an approach that promoted grassroots communication (also called

community communication), promoting small-scale projects and relying especially on small media (videos, poster, slide presentation, etc.). Strangely, though, the citations have not been documented.

The volume is a good addition to the literature of participatory development. It may help them improve the relevant skills and possibly influence the course of change.

Usman Mustafa

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics,
Islamabad.