



chapter 6

#6

Reviewing your participation strategy

VI.1 Who participated?

The previous five chapters should have helped you develop a participatory approach and reflect on some of the factors that will affect how and why people participate in your projects. Developing a strategy for participation is only the first step. Participation is a dynamic process, which can evolve in various ways over the course of a project. It is inevitable that some of the choices you make will later prove difficult to implement or you may find that they are inappropriate. Therefore it is important to actively review your strategy and adapt it as necessary. This will also enable you to build project and institutional memory, share successes and deal with errors.

Your participatory approach should therefore be reviewed at several points in the project process as presented in this handbook:

- at the end of each project cycle phase (assessment, design, implementation and monitoring, and evaluation)
- as part of the project final evaluation

Reviewing your approach should not be seen as a laborious or burdensome undertaking. It can be done informally, e.g. through team workshops at the end of each project phase, to reflect collectively on how the phase was carried out. Reviewing may seem time consuming, but it can save you a lot of time later on by helping to identify and tackle problems before they arise, get blown out of proportion or lead to security and protection incidents.

When reviewing your participatory approach consider these three issues:

- 1 Who participated? Who did not participate?
- 2 How did people participate and how effective was their participation?
- 3 What is your motivation for using a participatory approach?

- 1 List the key individuals, institutions (government institutions, NGOs, CBOs...), or population groups (e.g. women refugees, adolescent boys, small land-owners, etc.) who were involved in the phase.
- 2 Were the individuals and groups involved representative of the wider population? Were any groups excluded from the process? Why?
- 3 Were some groups included unnecessarily? Remember, people may have time constraints and other responsibilities, including you!
- 4 Were you able to respect the principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality? Participation often involves engaging preferentially with parts of the population or particular stakeholders. The important thing is to make sure you are aware of the implications of underlying political dynamics in the selection of participants, and that you communicate the reasoning behind your choices.
- 5 Were you able to gain access to minorities and work with them without stigmatising them further or posing threats to their security?
- 6 Were people from marginalised groups within the community able to participate?

VI.2 How did people participate?

- 1 How were people involved? List the techniques you used: assemblies, focus groups, meetings with partners, participation in decision-making, etc.
- 2 Did you work directly with members of the population or in collaboration with another institution (NGO, CBO, etc.)?
- 3 Did people engage actively in the process? In what ways? If not, why not?
- 4 Did women and men participate in the same way? Were women and men equally able to actively engage in the process?
- 5 Were people from marginalised groups within the community actively engaged in the process?
- 6 How effectively was information transmitted? Did people understand the messages you shared with them, in particular concerning your organisation, the different stages of the project, potential constraints, etc.?
- 7 How effective was the consultation? Did people succeed in transmitting their ideas to you? Did they feel consulted and that their contributions were taken into consideration? How do you know? Ask them if they feel that they were consulted or involved in decision-making. If participants made requests or demands that couldn't be accommodated did they understand why?
- 8 What was the impact of participants' contributions in decision-making and in the project?
- 9 What was the impact of participation on the quality of the relationship between the aid organisation and the population and other stakeholders? Was mutual respect and trust established?
- 10 Were participants, other stakeholders, or other members of the population exposed to risks as a result of the participation process? If so, what did you do about it?

VI.3 What is your motivation for using a participatory approach?

Remind yourself why you were motivated to use a participatory approach and reflect on this during the project – your main motivation may change at different stages in the project cycle.

- 1 To ensure positive impacts beyond the project duration
- 2 To improve project flexibility
- 3 To help reduce or avoid negative impacts
- 4 To increase the resources and expertise available for the project
- 5 To enhance project relevance
- 6 To improve project management capacity
- 7 To enhance project effectiveness
- 8 To improve project efficiency
- 9 To build a relationship of mutual respect and understanding
- 10 To support lesson learning
- 11 To integrate the project in the social and institutional environment
- 12 To respect your organisation's mandate and principles

Measuring whether one has achieved one's objectives is, of course, very difficult before the project is completed. However, it is already possible to assess whether one is going "in the right direction" from the very earliest stages. It is good practice to include periodic reviews and time for reflection when using a participatory approach. This is the principle of 'quality assurance' as opposed to 'quality control': you anticipate potential difficulties and weaknesses, or at least identify them as soon as they occur, rather than wait till the end of the process to spot failures, by which time it is too late to make the necessary changes.

Remember that respect for the affected population should be central to any participatory approach. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether people can feel your respect for them, but generally this should be apparent from the respect they show you.

Before moving onto the next stage, use the answers from the questions above to adapt your participatory approach as appropriate. The questions listed above reveal how challenging it can be to adopt a participatory approach. But do not be discouraged! The following sections of the Handbook will guide you. They contain tips and warnings on how to manage a participatory approach step by step. Participation is a challenging enterprise, but one that is most rewarding.