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## **ASSESSING PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES THROUGH KNOWLEDGE BUILDING**

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*Participatory development is seen by many to be the answer to the issues of ineffectiveness and insustainability which plague externally-imposed international community development. Critics discount this, questioning the inclusivity and sustainability of participatory methods. This paper argues that stakeholders undertaking truly participatory development must balance power to create a discourse surrounding the development effort. The effect of this dialog is knowledge building. It is hypothesized that the overall effectiveness of participatory development efforts can be assessed by evaluating the knowledge building that occurs throughout the efforts. A model, based upon Bessette (2004), is presented as a means of framing such an assessment. The knowledge building associated with four participatory development case studies is analyzed using this framework. The results show that development efforts with increased knowledge building have greater overall success and sustainability.*

### **DEVELOPMENT, POWER, AND DISCOURSE**

International development has historically been based upon interventions crafted by external organizations, which often ignored the input of the local community. Arguably, the top-down nature of these approaches accounts for the failure by many developing communities to achieve sustainable development. More and more voices have been speaking out against these practices, calling instead for more inclusive development practices (Earle & Simonelli, 2000 ; Schrijvers, 1993, in Sanderson & Kindon, 2004). Inclusion in the development process is, perhaps, better understood as power-balance (Muller, 1980, in Smith-Nonini, 1997).

Power is integral to sustainable development efforts in any community (Alinsky, 1977). Externally-imposed projects are inherently imbalanced, as power is held by the development organization rather than by the community. Such one-sided power maintenance prevents the community from being able to make decisions and to act on its own behalf, thereby precluding sustainability, which depends upon community action. Power gaps can be exacerbated in post-colonial contexts, where local communities have fresh memories of unequal and exploitive relations that characterized the colonial period.

Power must be balanced for parties involved in a community's development to participate in a dialog (Chambers, 1997, in Sanderson &

Kindon, 2004). Power and discourse are inextricably connected (Foucault, 1988). Freire (1970) delineates oppression from liberation along antialogically and dialogically processual boundaries, respectively. Oppression (imbalanced power) occurs when there is no discourse between two parties, and liberation (balanced power) takes place through dialog. Assuming that development is a liberating process, it must also be a dialogical one. "Participation should result in freedom, exercised in an environment where differing views find a common platform" (Makuwira, 2004, p. 120).

Foucault extends the power/discourse relationship by entwining power and knowledge, neither of which can be gained without the other (Racevskis, 1983). Balanced development discourse allows for the sharing and synthesis of knowledge, building a body of knowledge surrounding the development effort. Post, a development practitioner with diverse international experience, says that knowledge itself creates the opportunity for development (personal communication, April 19, 2006). The knowledge building that occurs in the development discourse process is an indication that the dialog is inclusive and the power is being created in the context of the development effort (Sanderson & Kindon, 2004). The body of knowledge created informs the entire development effort and is, therefore, vital to its sustainability.

## **PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT**

The inclusive development practices mentioned above incorporate participatory development. Participatory development is the practice of involving all stakeholders (local populace, development professionals, and funders, to name a few) in every stage of the development process, from project design to implementation and review. Such methods are becoming more widely practiced and are seen by some as being the remedy to the sustainability and power-balance problems associated with externally-imposed development efforts. Practitioners such as Bessette (2004) go so far as to say that true development is necessarily participatory in nature, thereby making "participatory development" redundant.

Bessette (2004) has created a model, standardizing participatory development communication (See Figure 1). Meant as a guide to assist development practitioners in the facilitation of participatory development efforts, the paradigm's discursive focus lends itself well to explaining the process and logistics of this type of development work. According to Bessette (2004), participatory development consists of four multi-faceted processes, which interact in a cyclical nature:

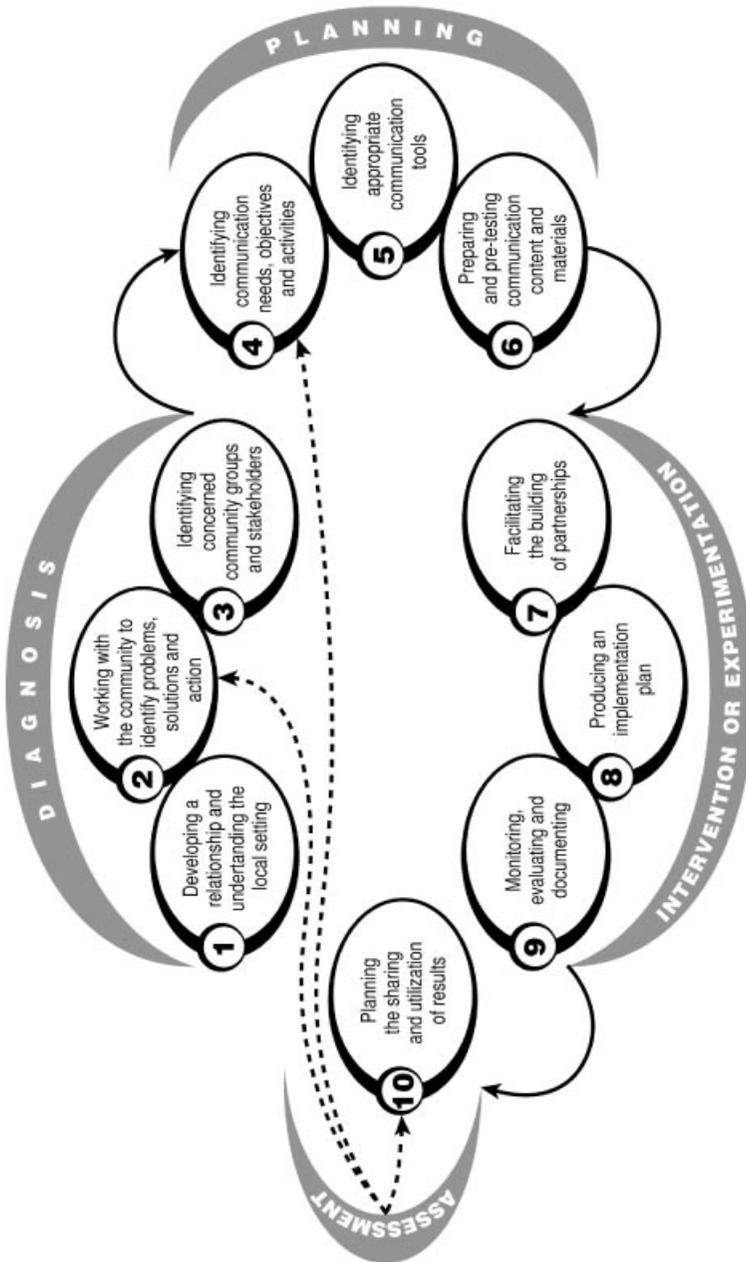


Figure 1: Bessette's (2004) model outlining participatory development communication (p.37).

1. *Diagnosis* involves the initiation of discourse between development practitioners and a community. This may be informal or structured, depending upon the circumstances and the cultural norms of the community. Once rapport is built, the stakeholders discuss the assets and needs of the community and identify possible actions for addressing those needs. This discourse must be inclusive or participation is ineffective, meaning that if groups marginalized by age, gender, or class are excluded, the issues emphasized in future work may lead to an exacerbation of the community's internal inequalities.

2. *Planning* occurs when stakeholders have identified the most urgent needs and the most plausible means to address them. The discourse then shifts to creating a pragmatic plan incorporating these actions by specifically describing the methods, resources, and timelines to be used in the project. Included in the planning phase of participatory development is the determination of the manner, in which communication will continue through the implementation of the plan. This aspect of planning is crucial to the ongoing discourse of participatory development because the third process is not as naturally dialogical as the other three.

3. *Intervention/Experimentation* is the implementation of the planned actions for addressing the needs of the community. It bears a two-dimensional title because development efforts may be undertaken on a broad, permanent basis or in a more reserved, trial-like fashion. The discourse continues in this stage as the process is monitored and discussed and traditional and technical practices are synthesized.

4. *Assessment* can occur at different points during participatory development, depending upon the extensiveness of the intervention. Formal assessment may occur at designated times throughout the effort or simply at the end, but ideally, constant evaluation and adjustment should take place to ensure the most effective intervention possible. The assessment process can be the greatest opportunity in the entire participatory discourse to build knowledge because it affords stakeholders the opportunity to retrospectively critique and admire their efforts and to think of creative and innovative improvements for the future (Sanderson & Kinson, 2004).

The outcomes drawn from the assessment process lead stakeholders back to the diagnosis phase, and the cycle continues. One of the ultimate goals in implementing these processes is the external facilitators' exit strategy, allowing for the sustainability of development efforts by phasing out nonlocal stakeholders.

## **CRITICISM OF PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT**

Bessette's (2004) model portrays an ideal framework for the manner in which participatory development should occur. These efforts are not always completely inclusive in practice, thereby failing to address the diversity and knowledge of a community (Sanderson & Kinson, 2004). Even more

debilitating is the tokenism, with which participation is sometimes utilized to quell opposition to development (Makuwira, 2004). Democratic language is sometimes co-opted, and that discourse can be used as a way of forcing local groups to align their perceived needs with pre-existing, externally-developed plans (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). While these may occur in isolated cases, some development scholars and practitioners have voiced the opinion that these problems are common—that participatory development is “tyranny” (Cleaver, 2003; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). More understated concerns include the question of whether participatory development truly increases the sustainability of development efforts.

All of these criticisms stem from a disparity between the ideals comprising participatory development's theoretical foundation and the negative experiences anecdotally associated with its practical implementation. In other words, somewhere between Bessette's (2004) model and the field, something goes awry. Heeks (1999) researched the problems associated with the implementation of participatory development and divides the issues along lines of ignorance: ignored context, ignored participation, ignored reality, and other ignored factors. It seems that imbalanced power, ineffective discourse, and insufficient knowledge building are at the root of the problems prompting each of the above critiques and concerns. Even those who label participation “tyrannical” cite the discourse as the source of potential exertion of inequitable power (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). If knowledge building is a sign of effective, equitable dialog, it is hypothesized that participatory development's success can be evaluated by assessing the knowledge building that occurs in the process. The following analysis presents a means of examining the hypothesized association between knowledge building and the success/sustainability of participatory development efforts.

### METHODOLOGY

In order to evaluate the knowledge building, which occurs in the course of a particular participatory development effort, Bessette's (2004) model has been adapted to present the knowledge building opportunities, which exist in the process (See Figure 2). This is partially reflective of Foucault's (1989, in Sanderson & Kindon, 2004) differentiation between knowledge (*savoir*) and the possibility of knowledge (*connaissance*). The adapted framework iterates the potential for knowledge building by describing the generation of knowledge and the opportunities for discourse in each of the four key processes of participatory development:

1. *Diagnosis* involves stakeholders' developing relationships, thereby setting the stage for the entire development effort. Power relationships are established and constituents must be certain to maintain balance. All parties must make efforts to expand their cultural lenses to better understand the viewpoints of their counterparts. In assessing the assets and needs of the community and determining a course of action, stakeholders must synthesize

technical and traditional perceptions to create a comprehensive evaluation.

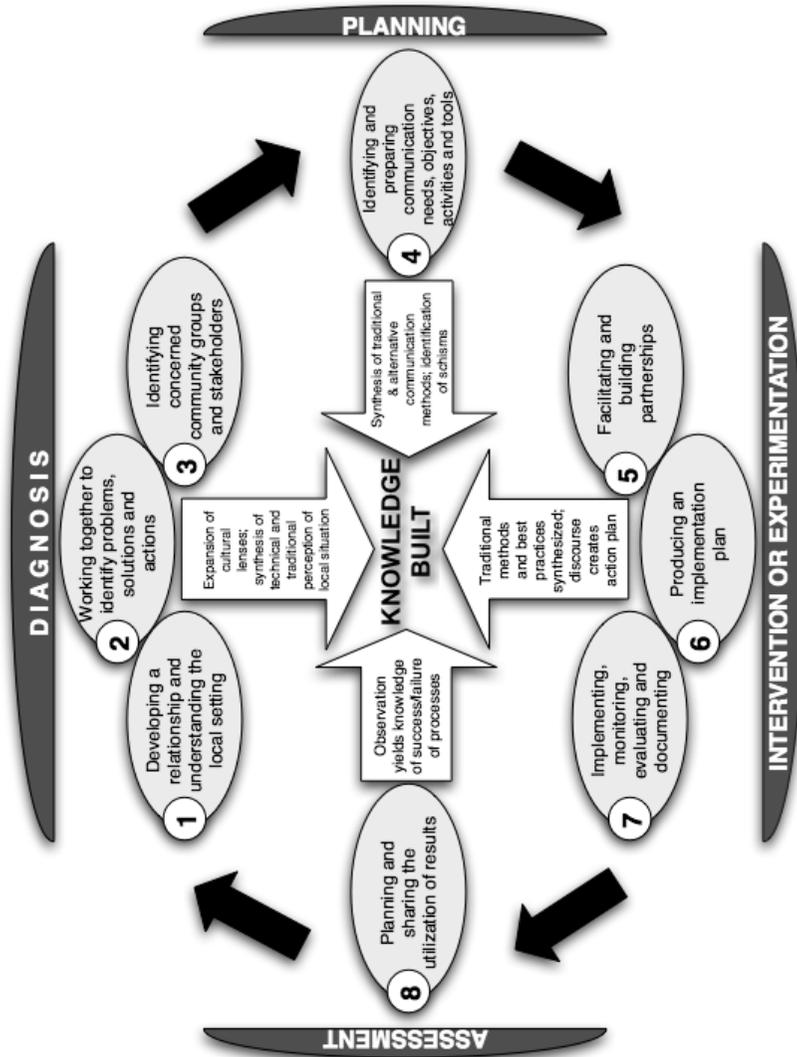


Figure 2: Sources of knowledge building in the participatory development process (adapted from Bessette, 2004).

2. *Planning* involves the identification of communication methods. Effective planning demands the synthesis of traditional and alternative means of communication so that major differences in communication styles do not hamper future discourse.

3. *Intervention/Experimentation* allows for the blending of traditional and external technical knowledge. Best practices can be tested, adapted, and improved. Discourse during this process ensures incremental improvement of effectiveness.

4. *Assessment* is the formal and informal critical and analytical discourse that takes place constantly throughout the entire development effort. Observations and the discussion thereof build knowledge of the effectiveness of specific plans. Knowledge derived from this dialog works to inform the future replication or evolution of the development effort.

When a development effort is examined utilizing this framework, the success and sustainability of the effort can be seen as a function of the knowledge built through the discourse, thereby making the relationship between the level of knowledge building and the overall effectiveness more apparent. This paper tests the framework by analyzing secondary data from four case studies of participatory development efforts<sup>1</sup>. The content of the cases was analyzed, looking for cues that knowledge was built or that the discourse surrounding the effort was inclusive and conducive to knowledge building. The analysis used both implicit and explicit cues:

*Implicit cues* depend upon the language used by the author or cited stakeholders. Words like “agency-led” used in describing a phase of the development process suggests a lack of participation, while “facilitated” would suggest inclusivity. Language which suggests executive or collaborative action also indicates a low or high level of participation, respectively (for instance, “we provide them” versus “we work with them”). Makuwira (2004) distinguishes this by stating that local stake holders must be “subjects” not “objects” of development (p. 119). Discussion of the development effort’s continuing and spreading beyond the influence of an external organization also hints at knowledge building because the process is not reliant upon the ongoing maintenance of external/local relationships.

*Explicit cues* are direct explication by the author indicating real participation or knowledge building occurred. This often occurs as a direct citation of a stakeholder’s opinion on the development effort. The case by Makuwira (2004) includes many such cues because he presents a critical analysis of the participatory development process itself, while the other authors discuss the foci of the development efforts: forestry (Hubbard, 2003), health (Smith-Nonini, 1997), and sanitation (Hadi, 2000).

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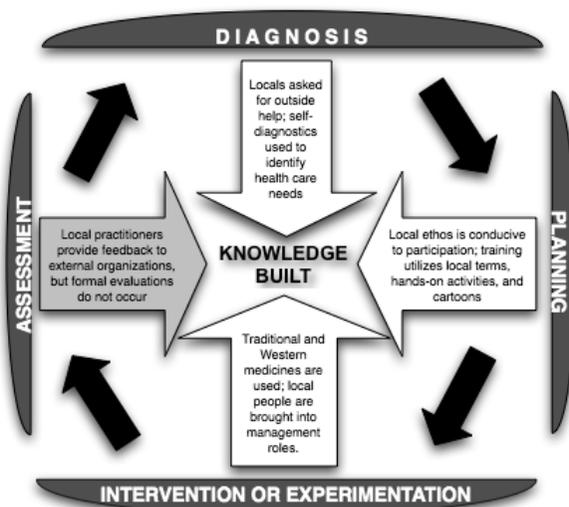
<sup>1</sup> The four cases utilized come from Angkor, Cambodia (Hubbard, 2003), Bangladesh (Hadi, 2000), Chalatenango, El Salvador (Smith-Nonini, 1997), and Malawi (Makuwira, 2004). Please see Appendix for a brief description of each case.

## FINDINGS

The following sections, organized according to the four development phases set forth by Bessette (2004), compare the results of each of the analyses. Abbreviated visual representations of the adapted framework are utilized to depict the level of knowledge building, with white arrows indicating high levels of knowledge building, black arrows suggesting a lack thereof, and gray arrows designating instances when knowledge building occurred but fell short of its potential. A summary of the overall sustainability and effectiveness of the participatory development efforts follows the results.

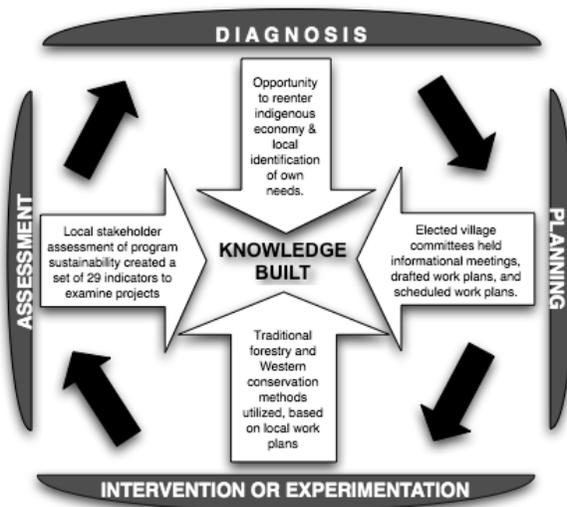
### *Diagnosis*

The discourse surrounding each of the four cases was distinctive. A major reason for this was that the relationships between stakeholders and the initiations of dialog varied greatly. Knowledge building in the diagnosis stage occurs when a local group is determined to undertake participatory development and asks outside organizations to be involved or when such agencies approach the community under the premise of balanced power. The peoples of Chalatenango, El Salvador were self-empowered and began the diagnosis process, thus initiating knowledge building through community dialog. They identified their needs and established a discussion with an external body (the Catholic Church) to begin to identify methods of addressing those needs (See Figure 3).



*Figure 3: Evaluation of participatory development in Chalatenango, El Salvador (information from Smith-Nonini, 1997).*

Hubbard (2003) describes a positive diagnosis phase in Angkor, as well. Cambodian forestry laws had detrimentally affected the local economies. United Nations facilitators worked to build rapport with the local communities. Villagers “identify[ied] and address[ed] their forest and livelihood needs” (Hubbard, 2003, n.p.). Issues of concern were addressed and potential solutions were identified, as the external stakeholders worked to help their local counterparts regain control of their own resources and to manage them in a sustainable manner. The community members expressed their traditional assets and methods, a knowledge that was synthesized with techniques from ecologists and foresters to create a new body of knowledge (See Figure 4).



*Figure 4: Evaluation of participatory development efforts in Angkor, Cambodia (information from Hubbard, 2003).*

The cases from Malawi and Bangladesh, in contrast to those mentioned above, exemplify diagnosis phases with zero and minimal knowledge building, respectively. The official documents of Malawi’s Tigali Literacy Project (TLP) describe the use of participatory diagnostic measures, but in reality, officials approached local community members with a proposed program for girls, which the people accepted without additional dialog (See Figure 5). “The intended beneficiaries had little or no influence in the establishment of...the project” (Makuwira, 2004, p. 117). Hadi (2000) describes limited potential knowledge building in the Bangladeshi diagnosis phase because literacy efforts may have had the tangential effect of creating the capacity to learn about alternative sanitation methods (See Figure 6). Local input was not sought in identifying the focus of the development effort; Hadi (2000) states that the nongovernment organizations (NGOs) designed the projects and then created demand for their

services. This is neither participatory nor organic but more of a marketing paradigm.

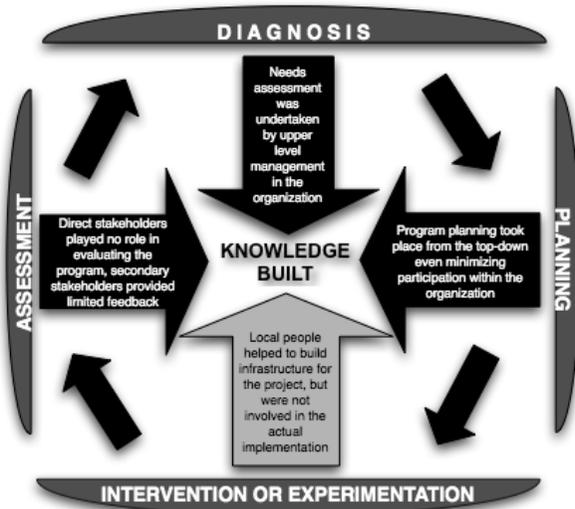


Figure 5: Evaluation of participatory development in Malawi (information from Makuwira, 2004).

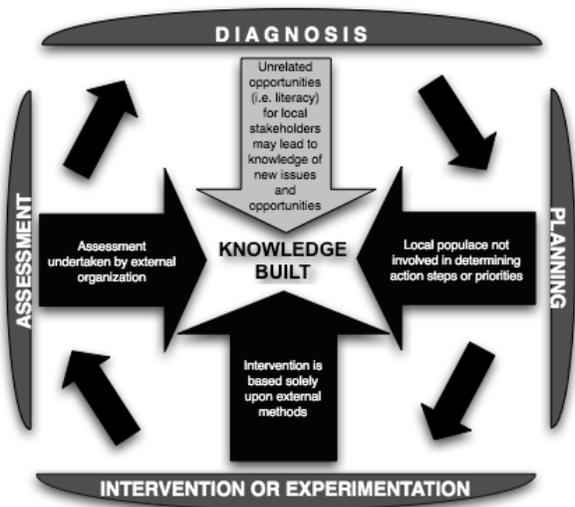


Figure 6: Evaluation of participatory development in Bangladesh (information from Hadi, 2000).

### *Planning*

The planning phase of participatory development requires stakeholders to identify methods of communication which can be used in the development effort. Smith-Nonini (1997) discusses how Salvadoran medical experts trained local health care practitioners by using local terms for medical issues. This helped to maintain equitable power because foreign, technical terminology may have been intimidating and, therefore, may have jeopardized the training. Such inclusive language allows the community to play a more active part in the development process because many local individuals are likely to be familiar with common health problems. Health trainers utilized a wide variety of communication methods including pictures by local artists and hands-on, practical exercises. The combination of these factors resulted in high levels of knowledge building.

The Cambodian case involved individuals elected by the community to undertake the planning process in partnership with United Nations staff. While this committee system is not entirely participatory because it can fail to address certain power imbalances in the community, it is superior to exclusionary planning. Lines of communication were kept open both inside the community and between groups of constituents. Together, the stakeholders drafted work plans and informed all community members of the decisions being made.

Nonparticipatory methods continued into the planning phases Makuwira (2004) and Hadi (2000) describe. TLP executives in Malawi excluded not only local stakeholders but also the agency's own program staff from this phase. The curriculum used to teach the girls was developed completely exclusive of local input. Neither beneficiaries nor practitioners were involved in the discourse prior to the implementation of this development effort. One of the community stakeholders commented that TLP made no emphasis of creating a local body of knowledge to make the project sustainable. The programs in the case from Bangladesh were designed by NGOs, adding micro-financing to sanitation provision programs based on externally-imposed development models.

### *Intervention/Experimentation*

The implementation of a development plan is the phase which may come to mind most immediately when considering participatory development, as one may envision external and local practitioners laboring together. In this stage, stakeholders continue to build collective knowledge as the methods used by individuals are shared, imitated, and combined. Salvadoran health care workers put their newly acquired knowledge to work and expanded and adjusted it to serve the local needs of the communities. Trainees synthesized external technical knowledge with traditional knowledge regarding diagnosis and healing. Many of the lay health workers were mothers and could draw upon their experiences caring for their children. The knowledge grew further as elders' traditional medicines were used in conjunction with pharmaceuticals. Hubbard (2003) states that stakeholders implemented collectively designed work

plans by combining Western reforestation and development methodologies with traditional Cambodian forestry practices, allowing for high levels of knowledge building.

True participatory intervention did not take place in the Malawi case, in which the local populace helped to build schools but were not involved in developing programs or teaching their daughters' classes. Participation in the actual development activity was, therefore, minimal and tokenistic. Hadi (2000) has presented a misconstrued idea of participatory development as simple involvement in the externally-based credit program. No discourse surrounded this phase in Bangladesh, and no knowledge was built.

### *Assessment*

Assessment creates an important opportunity for knowledge building, since it involves examining the other phases (the intervention/experimentation phase, in particular) in order to identify ways to improve the development effort. The Cambodian case was the most remarkable in this phase. Local stakeholders, representing the community's broad internal diversity, along with United Nations' facilitators worked for three months to create 29 indicators, which community members would use to evaluate the sustainability and effectiveness of their efforts. "Participation, capacity building, education and community well-being reverberate throughout the indicator set and reflect the local values and expected roles and responsibilities for all [community] members" (Hubbard, 2003, n.p.). In this process, the United Nations also implemented its exit strategy as the local populace expanded its collective knowledge base and gradually became the sole stakeholders in the intervention.

The level of knowledge building was much less in the assessment phases of the other three cases. Chalatenango medical practitioners could act as advocates for their communities by providing trainers and the NGOs with feedback which was used to improve the system, but there was no formal system in place to evaluate the training or the health care system itself. These methods, while not preferable, do allow for the programs to adjust to local needs. Conversely, TLP students were occasionally asked for feedback, but they saw no changes to the curriculum or teaching methods based upon their input. Teacher involvement in the assessment phase was also limited in the Malawi case. In fact, TLP documents barely mention beneficiary involvement in evaluation. The Bangladeshi case makes no mention of evaluation except for Hadi's (2000) own analysis.

### *Discussion*

The above analyses and figures clearly show a distinction between two cases (Cambodia and El Salvador) of participatory development that exemplify knowledge building throughout all four stages of the process and two cases (Bangladesh and Malawi) of efforts that provided little or no opportunity for knowledge building. To completely address this paper's hypothesis, the success of participatory development in each case must be examined. The differences

between these two groups of cases carries over to the overall effectiveness and sustainability of the development efforts they describe.

The cases with the highest level of knowledge building also exhibited the greatest effectiveness and sustainability. The training of Chhalatenango medical practitioners has proven effective at both providing for basic the basic health care as well as addressing the specific needs of each community. Local people advance into training and administrative roles in the external NGO, suggesting the efforts are sustainable, since discourse will continue to include local voices at even the highest levels. Angkor's program continues to function with empowered local practitioners continually assessing themselves against their self-imposed benchmarks—standards created through knowledge building. The effectiveness of the Cambodian efforts is great, as evidenced by the expansion of these programs to other communities.

The two cases with minimal knowledge building suggest limited sustainability. Local stakeholders were not involved in planning or implementing the projects, and power was not balanced. The local communities, therefore, cannot take control of the development efforts in the longterm. These efforts were project-based and externally-imposed; they were not participatory except nominally or tokenistically. Assuming that the external agencies would not be able to continue to be involved in the projects forever, these would not be sustainable.

While these case studies are few in number, they tend to support the hypothesis that a tokenistic discourse or a lack of knowledge building can cause participatory development efforts to be unsustainable or even to verge on the “tyrannical”. It is not surprising that when a community feels that external development agencies are imposing unfelt needs upon them, they will not become actively involved. As Freire (1970) points out, this type of action without discourse takes no steps to negotiate power and, hence, is oppressive.

## CONCLUSION

Participatory development may be the only true type of sustainable development, as suggested by Bessette (2004). The manner, in which participatory methods are employed, however, must become more focused and better understood. One of the reasons that criticism of participation continues to proliferate is that practitioners like Tigali Literacy Project (Makuwira, 2004) and scholars like Hadi (2000) do not yet have a clear understanding of the processes, which must exist if an approach is to be called “participatory development.” Development continues to ignore crucial aspects of the participatory process (Heeks, 1999). NGOs and other development entities must be educated in the methods of equitably sharing power, effectively carrying on open dialogs, and ultimately building knowledge, all of which are inextricably integral to sustainable participatory development. This will mean a revision of the policies, structures, and methods employed by international development agencies. For participatory development to redeem itself in the eyes of one of its staunchest

opponents, “requires a wedge be driven between the two words, 'participatory development'; and the former should be turned against the institutions and ideologies of the latter” (Cooke, 2004, p. 53). Increasing participation at all levels requires constant discourse, founded in truly balanced power, and the building of collective knowledge at every phase of the development effort.

## **APPENDIX: BACKGROUND OF CASE STUDIES**

Angkor, Cambodia (Hubbard, 2003)

War and political turmoil envelop the past few decades of Cambodia's history. A 1994 Cambodian government prohibition on utilizing forest resources posed a notable problem for local communities, dependent upon such materials for their livelihoods. The United Nations' Community Participation in Protected Areas Project came to the Angkor region to undertake a participatory development effort to address the needs of the local population and re-involve them in the decision-making process regarding the forest ecology.

Bangladesh (Hadi, 2000)

Bangladesh is one of the poorest nations in the world, and its sanitation infrastructure reflects this. Several NGOs have created integrated methods of development, which combine income-generating, micro-enterprise or credit approaches with other facets of development (like education and health care). The drive behind this is the hope that a direct economic benefit is more desirable than the subtler aspects of development, like sanitation, which are received with minimal local enthusiasm. One of the major foci is encouraging local families to use those financial structures to fund the construction of their own latrines.

Chalatenango, El Salvador (Smith-Nonini, 1997)

Refugee Salvadorans, returning to their homes after having fled the war of recent decades, began to examine their needs as they attempted to resume their lives. Identifying the lack of health care as an issue, communities asked the Catholic Church for medical training assistance. Through a nongovernmental organization (NGO), lay health practitioners received training and returned to serve their communities. This process continued, with many local practitioners becoming trainers.

Malawi (Makuwira, 2004)

The democratization of Malawi in the mid-1990s made the political climate more conducive to development work. The African AIDS epidemic and gender inequalities in literacy rates have come to the forefront as issues of national importance. The Tigali Literacy Project (TLP) is an NGO, which provides literacy training to adolescent girls and incorporates health topics (nutrition, HIV/AIDS, and other reproductive health topics of concern) into its curriculum. It touts its development practices as participatory.

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