

Chapter 4 Approaching the community inhabitants

4.1 Objectives and procedural outline

Approaching the people of a community is the first step toward bringing people interested in participatory activities to join the process of community development and watershed management, which is described in the following chapters. In this sense, establishing basic human relationships of trust with the inhabitants of the target area is very important for being able to carry out activities in their community.

This chapter explains the focus, attitudes, and relationship qualities that are needed when contacting the communities. It is recommended that the people involved in this process reflect once again upon their focus, and to involve the people of the community in a participatory manner from day one. It should also be remembered that each project should give an induction program to their personnel (extension workers) before beginning its activities.

4.2 Role of “outside actors” in the community development process

In the participatory method, the people of a rural community can be the owners and/or active actors of a participatory community development project and the solutions to their own problems. The function of the “outside actors”, meaning all those from outside the rural community who are in direct contact with it, is not to bring a prepared package of projects or “solutions” to the communities. Rather, their purpose is to support or “facilitate” the process of community development all the while respecting the initiative of the inhabitants.

The work of a facilitator is to bring about change through educational methods and through promoting communication and exchange of information and experiences among the community inhabitants. This “change” does not happen by laws or orders enforced by the authorities or by the free disbursement of material or financial subsidies. Rather, a positive change can occur when people think for themselves, understand the cause, and decide to act. The outside actors should give advice and help this process of positive change. When the people who received such assistance take a step for a change, those who facilitated the change must be there to guide them to the next step and to continue the same process to solve other problems that appear further along.

The outside actors normally do not know the human relationships and internal situations of the communities. However, this can be an advantage for observing the communities objectively and discovering their problems without interfering in their internal relationships. Furthermore, the outside actors have the ability to obtain and bring information and knowledge to the community, which would be difficult for the inhabitants to obtain on

their own. In fact, it could be said that the most essential purpose of the interventions by outside actors in the activities is to promote this positive “change” in the inhabitants.

4.3 Appropriate behavior when communicating with people in rural communities

The people who make the initial contact with a rural community must always maintain a friendly and courteous manner, be communicative and sincere with the people, keep adequately dressed, and have ID of the institution or organization which they represent. The appropriate behavior for communicating with the rural communities is explained below.

4.3.1 Proper way to speak in home visits and meetings

1) Try to create a relaxed atmosphere

When speaking with a person for the first time, it is best to try to help him/her feel relaxed. People from the countryside may feel shy or nervous about meeting new people. You can present yourself, explain the purpose of the visit and talk about some daily subject with a friendly attitude and showing respect to the other people. One needs to spend a sufficient amount of time to give a clear explanation of the points that need to be covered and to win their trust.

2) Use simple language

People who live in the countryside are not accustomed to hearing the technical words and abstract ideas used by office personnel. When talking with them or giving explanations in front of a group, you need to use simple and concrete words that are easy for them to understand.

3) Explain the project using real examples of similar communities that had a positive experience

In general, human beings have a hard time believing anything they are told if they have no previous knowledge or experience with it. The positive experiences of other similar communities can draw the interest of the people you are speaking to and motivate them to achieve the same results.

4) Frame your questions from the viewpoint of the rural person

People who live in the countryside do not see their life in the same way that people do in the city. When you ask them questions, you need to think in concrete terms taking into account the reality of their life. For example, the farmers generally will not know their monthly or annual income because they do not receive a monthly or

biweekly salary. Therefore, when asking their farm income, you may need to make a crop calendar and ask their income for each crop to help them understand the question better.

- 5) Let a person express the opinion in his/her own words

When speaking with the local people, do not lead their answers with your own words. Don't dominate the conversation: it is better to show your response by nodding your head or in some other manner, or to ask, "Why is that?" If a person doesn't respond clearly, you can use other words or manner of expression and try to stimulate the person to speak his/her own thought. Don't control the opinion of the other person, rather, encourage them in the process.

4.3.2 Proper way to listen in home visits and meetings

- 1) Place yourself on the same level as the inhabitants

You should not look down on the communities due to the condition they are in. When speaking with members of a community, always show that you are interested in learning about the community and understanding any new developments in the community.

- 2) Eliminate the idea that "I already know that" and/or "I know what you're saying"

Most people who give assistance to a community come from another place. What they learned and experienced in other places may not always be the same in the target area. It is better to start your work with the attitude that "I still don't know this area well," and "I don't understand completely". Always reconfirm the facts stated or acts done by the people of the communities, and take reference from documented and/or analyzed information that may be available.

- 3) Help everyone to express his or her opinion

When speaking in a meeting, pay attention to those who are talking. If there are any who don't speak up, you might try asking them something directly, or ask the participants to change their seating location. Also, when visiting the homes, instead of speaking only with the head of the house, you could also speak with other members of the family, like the wife or children.

- 4) Be prepared to listen to complaints and bad experiences in the past with government institutions and other organizations.

If the people of a community have had bad experiences in the past with other projects or institutions, it will be

hard to establish trust quickly. When they complain about the public services that aren't functioning well, let them continue to express themselves. It is a good opportunity to hear why other projects did not succeed and to learn some lessons that could be applied to future activities (see the Annex 9 for experiences from Alhajuela Project).

4.3.3 Other important behavior for establishing trust

1) Show your intention to include a variety of persons

Take interest in the people who stay in the community every day, without making distinction of sex, age, religion or political affiliation. Show your intention to include a variety of people in the project, people who can really work for the community. If you keep communicating with various types of people with diverse viewpoints, you will be able to see the community's situation with more impartiality.

2) Do not create false expectations

You should not commit yourself to something that you are not certain that you can fulfill. It is not bad to say that you need to consult with the project team and give an answer at a later date. Avoid causing the people of the community to feel that they were "fooled" or "let down" by unfulfilled expectations, which could make you lose their trust.

3) Have patience

Most of the "outside actors" should be prepared to walk long distances and to explain the project's orientation in large meetings and/or door to door. It may also be that the people you speak to in a community may not be able to respond well or answer clearly the questions you ask. However, do not let this irritate you.

4) Consider the life of the community

The "outside actors" should not speak to a community centered on their own interests. The activities that are to be implemented in the communities should be based on the needs of "rural community life." In other words, the knowledge, techniques and work methods that are transferred to the rural community need to be incorporated into the peoples' lives in response to a real need.

4.4 How to find key people and community groups

1) Steps to finding key people and community groups

In order to promote your project or offer specific services in a place that you are unfamiliar with, you should first get to know the key people or community groups that can become collaborators in the future activities.

Such key people may be any of the following:

- People who know the area well,
- People who are popular or trusted in the community,
- People who communicate well with those from outside,
- People who organize the meetings in the community,
- Diligent farmers,
- People who can function as interpreter with the members and leaders of indigenous territories.

There are various opportunities for meeting such people or groups. Before visiting the community, you could ask the authorities or public institutions working in the area to introduce you to the people, farmer groups, community committees or groups that they assist in the community. Such institutions may also know some NGO's that work in the same area. These NGO's could give you information about the groups they work with. The church father (or parish priest) that visits the community chapels may also be able to help the communities and may know those who participate well in community activities.

It is good to visit some public facilities, such as the school, health center (health post), chapel or community center. The teachers, nurses and health promoters of the community might know the person who leads the parents' organization of the school, the health committee or the rural water-supply administrative committee. Also, you could meet people of the community who come to the school to prepare the school lunch, or who come to the health post for medical attention.

If you do not find anyone when visiting such public facilities, you can visit the houses nearby to ask for advice and to ask who is in charge of the activities of those public facilities.

While conversing with such people you can discover who are the key people in the community and any groups that exist in the community. You can also learn about the dates for upcoming meetings and/or community events where people will be gathered. That would be a good opportunity to explain the activities that the project proposes for the community and also to become acquainted with more people from the area. Through such contacts you may find collaborative people, or groups, with whom to begin to coordinate the activities that the project wishes to carry out in the community.

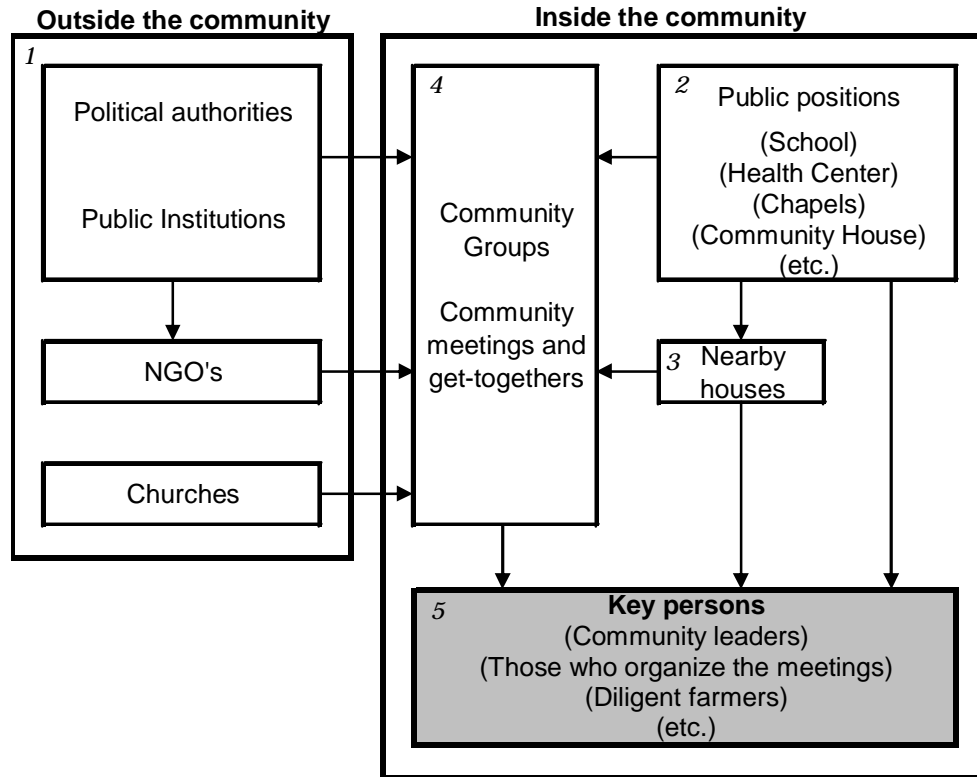


Figure 4-1 Approach to a community to identify key people and community groups

2) Points to consider when visiting a community

You should be very careful when searching for or approaching community leaders for the first time. Some leaders may think that they can use the project to expand their own influence in the area. You should also be aware that a representative of a community may belong to a certain social level and cannot represent the interests and opinions of all the members of that community.

Normally when people visit a community they tend to stay to the main roads or streets where the public institutions are concentrated, and they have little opportunity to go to areas inaccessible by vehicle. People who live in areas with better access generally have a better standard of living or economic conditions. The poor or socially disadvantaged population generally lives further away where they are invisible. In order to take such people into consideration, it will be necessary to organize a visit, or meeting, specifically designed for speaking with them.