

## *The importance of the facilitator in building learning alliances; reflections on the experience of the CINARA institute*

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### **Introduction**

Developments in information technology have renewed the importance of the person of the facilitator. Facilitation is often mentioned with reference to group discussions on the Internet or to online courses etc. In addition to this may be added the interest of trainers who work with groups of adults, or consultants who wish to use participative techniques in their work. The above has meant that, especially in industrialised countries, a significant amount of courses for training facilitators have appeared.

Although the intention is not to disregard the importance of this type of facilitators, this document is aimed at reflecting on the role of the facilitator in participative development processes and their training background. The starting point for tackling this theme will be the reconstruction of the experience of the Institute for Research and Development in Water Supply, Environmental Sanitation and Water Resource Conservation, Cinara, at the Universidad del Valle in Colombia, with the execution of the National Technology Transfer Programme in Water Supply, TRANSCOL (Quiroga, E; Visscher, J, 1999)<sup>15</sup>.

On reflecting about this experience, this paper aims to sketch the basic characteristics that any facilitator who works in the field of participative development processes should have. In addition, a proposal shall be made about training processes in which only those people who are interested in working should participate, using learning alliances that imply the participation of different local and international institutions, as well as communities, which is based on the experience of TRANSCOL and later processes in which Cinara has taken part.

### **Importance of the Facilitator**

In the 1960s, the figure of the rural extension worker or the 'external agent' (generally a man) was created. This was the person who put large parts of the population in contact with the knowledge developed in research centres and was in charge of diffusion of technology.

In the functional vision of development propagated by modernisation theorists, the external agent's work consisted of transforming traditional society into a modern society through adopting new values, objects and conceptual references, with no consideration for 'traditional' practices and ideas. In order to overcome this vision arose the notion of the facilitator as the opposite of the traditional teacher, the 'keeper of knowledge'. Facilitators should be open to listening, learning and understanding. Those who came up with this proposal were linked to promoting 'people centred development'.

To achieve this purpose, Robert Chambers (1993) stated the need to train a new kind of professional in the development field. These professionals had to be able to put 'the last' (the poor and weak) in the centre of their work, so that they could be those who set the priorities and become the agents of their own development. To complement this, the knowledge of the poor and weak had to be valued by the

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to highlight that the particularities of this programme were interesting for Cinara because, among many other things, the programme meant that the Institute's staff had to perform as promoter of water development in 8 different regions in Colombia. Before this programme, the team had been mainly dedicated to working on technical issues in the laboratory. The experiences that had been carried out in the field were mainly related to validating technology as well as defining operation and maintenance activities.

professionals, who switched their role as teacher to one of student. This concept of a facilitator combats the paternalism and dependence that had previously characterised development projects.

## **CINARA's Experience in Training Development Facilitators Within the Framework of the Transcol Programme**

*"One cannot draw water from a deep well with a short rope"*

*Chinese proverb*

Although it is currently commonplace to admit that most individual and collective learning is carried out in interdisciplinary organisations, and that these organisations produce and apply almost all knowledge and innovation, in Colombia at the beginning of the 1990s, the water and sanitation sector was completely dominated by the discipline of engineering. Engineers were strongly convinced that they had the knowledge needed to solve any water and sanitation problem in the country and were certain that they knew what people needed.

During the Water Decade (1980-90), a research and development group was founded at the Engineering Faculty of the Universidad del Valle in Santiago de Cali, Colombia. The initial work done by this team was geared towards searching for low cost solutions to drinking water treatment in rural communities and marginalised areas in big cities.

From the technological point of view, the group aimed to take advantage of Slow-sand Filtration technology and was able to develop research on Prefilters, which, joined together with Slow-sand Filtration, gave rise to what is currently known as Multi-Stage Filtration. The first plants that were built with this technology awoke great interest, especially among the mayors of small municipalities in Colombia, as in 1987, the administrative decentralisation process had granted them the responsibility for water supply in their jurisdictions. From this work arose the initiative of carrying out a Technology Transfer Programme which found an echo in the work being done by the Netherlands Technical Cooperation and was developed in 8 regions in Colombia between 1991 and 1996.

To carry out the Transfer Programme, the Cinara team had to overcome:

- The situation highlighted by the Water Decade evaluations, which showed the low social influence of the projects carried out during this period, due to lack of user community involvement.
- The predominance in the country of a technical approach which only valued the drinking water technologies based on the use of chemical products.
- The limitations due to the work team being mainly made up of very young engineers who lacked experience in work with communities and training in social aspects. However, the Programme gave them the responsibility for achieving an process of appropriation of MSF technology in the country.

The Water Decade evaluations had recommended forming interdisciplinary teams and this was one of the strategies adopted by Cinara to overcome its limitations. Sociologists, social workers and education workers joined the team, but the new socio-technical team came from a tradition of single discipline study with a bias of undervaluing knowledge different to their own and a total lack of knowledge about communities or groups of people who had never been involved with the formal education system. The new team therefore was not ready to approach the Programme with an integrated vision.

Acquiring the skills necessary to execute the Programme with this vision was not easy. Recourse was made to psychologists to work with them on self-knowledge, and the ability to understand others. Artists were also involved to develop creativity, mental and physical flexibility, and the enthusiasm necessary to face the challenge of working simultaneously in eight different regions of the country, with diverse cultural characteristics and many regional institutions. The capacities developed with this training meant that an environment favourable to learning at various different levels was created, with great potential for strengthening capacities for interdisciplinary and inter-institutional work.

Although the Cinara team was responsible for transferring a specific technology, it could have centred its work on the technology itself, but the concept of ‘people centred development’ (Max-Neef, 1986; Cernea, 1985) saved it from making this error. Instead, this theoretical base allowed the group to consider the technology as a medium and centre the process of transfer on the regional groups (made up of professionals from each section involved in the water and sanitation sector) and on the communities where the intervention was taking place.

As well as centring the process on people, participation became a coordinating axis and the ideas of Freire (1972) were taken up. Freire, with extraordinary clarity, has indicated that adults are not empty vessels and that education is a process where the students teach and the teachers learn. Developments in popular education-communication carried out in Latin America based on Freire’s work also contributed to the team’s training.

Based on this, an intervention method was constructed, in which different themes were dealt with sequentially during the whole project cycle. These themes allowed the regional groups and the communities where the projects were executed to master the guiding principles of Multi-stage Filtration technology. Work was also carried out on the operation and maintenance activities required for this technology, tariffs were defined and the community administration of the water supply systems was organised.

During the Transcol programme, a ‘Women in Development’ approach was used; special emphasis was put on female participation in project development and in regional groups. Although it was not always possible to involve enough women in the regional groups as the institutions mainly had male staff, in the communities, progress was made on involving a good number of women in the 16 administrative boards which were set up to manage an equal number of systems built <sup>16</sup>.

After this experience, it was clear to Cinara that work had to be carried out with a gender approach to achieve better results on equity between men and women. It has also been found that a good part of the work that was done with psychologists and artists corresponds to what is now known as development of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996, 2003). This has allowed for important clarity on what should be the training process of facilitators of participative processes of sustainable human development.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the Transcol experience transformed Cinara into an institution that, as well as carrying out applied research, also works on social development. It allowed for an organisational culture to be consolidated in which research and development are complementary activities, with interdependent relationships. Research is conducted on the problems encountered in practical work and in turn, practical work is enriched by research results.

## Facilitator Characteristics

*“Studying in the solitude of mountains is not worth as much  
as sitting at a crossroads and lending an ear to what people say”  
Confucius*

Centring on the figure of the facilitator of participative development processes makes it difficult to describe this figure without falling into the trap of creating a vision of a semi-magician who solves all problems or an angel blessed with all the virtues in the world. On writing a balance with a group of professionals working at Cinara <sup>17</sup> -some of who were trained during the Transcol Programme and other professionals who joined the Institute later- a consensus was reached on the characteristics that

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<sup>16</sup> In the participative evaluation made by the World Bank-IRC in 1998 in 4 countries in the region (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru) to examine the demand approach, gender and poverty, it was found that in all of the projects in Colombia there were women on the water supply administrative boards.

<sup>17</sup> This article has benefited from conversations held with the following members of the Cinara team: Héctor Pérez, architect, Sandra Bastidas, social worker, Adriana Zamora, economist, Shirley Paola Tamayo, administrator, Luis Alfonso Hurtado, engineer, Aníbal Valencia, sociologist, Alberto Benavides, engineer.

may be considered necessary for making people-centred participative interventions. Each facilitator will have, to a greater or lesser extent, some of the characteristics that are described below as desirable, but it should not be forgotten that the institutional environment, and mandate, in which they work has a great influence.

The facilitator of this type of processes is above all a person with a high awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, able to put his or herself in the place of others, and awake potential in these others in such a way that they strengthen their autonomy for taking decisions and undertaking action.

A facilitator will also have a capacity for generating the conditions for participants to express their thoughts and feelings with no pressure, without eliciting answers, as there is only freedom of thought when new, different paths are generated. However, in order for this to happen, it is essential to create trust among participants, which will allow them to freely express their opinions. A facilitator will also have an ethical attitude that will allow him/her to avoid imposing opinions and lead to help the participants in building a shared vision.

A facilitator should establish horizontal relationships. Establishing this type of relationships is not very easy, due to many interfering factors, such as professional, economic, social, political, or age-related status that could mean that participants keep their distance. The great skill of the facilitator is in overcoming these barriers and generating a friendly environment where differences are respected.

A facilitator should have in-depth knowledge about the socio-economic, cultural and political context in which the project is being developed, the project's objectives and expected results, but at the same time, be open to change the direction in any given moment, when they consider that the conditions merit it.

Another basic characteristic of facilitators is that, above all, they should try to affect the conscience and feelings of the participants, stimulate affection and creation of shared values. This is essential because, in the majority of cases, it is emotion that drives action and not rational discourse.

Learning to listen is a key aspect because only when people know what the others think, feel and do, are they able to work jointly. Knowing how to listen leads to understanding the diverse processes that are included in project execution and to accepting that only by understanding diversity can there be a process of communication. The great success of a facilitator is an ability to promote dialogue, because data, information and knowledge are part of all of the participants and do not just come from the texts that they have studied.

The facilitator also permanently systematises his/her work; they are a person who has to record daily events with their notes.

It is important to stress that the facilitator is a simple person, without the pretension of possessing the truth. It is also vital that they use language that is easy to understand for the different participants. For this, the use of metaphors and stories is key for illustrating their thoughts.

Finally, it should be noted that even a person with many of the characteristics above will have many difficulties in getting people to participate if they do not have a genuine commitment to the people with whom they are working.

### **What Cultural Tradition can Support the Training of Facilitators for Learning Alliances?**

Cinara's experience shows aspects that could be taken up in polyphonic environments, such as those that characterise learning alliances. However it should be taken into account that each alliance is developed in a particular environment, which to a great extent determines the tone in which concrete projects should be developed. For this reason, it is essential to recognise that the project is the space par excellence in which learning processes happen and for this to be achieved, there must an attitude open to facilitating processes.

Within the Western cultural tradition, it is important to take up the contributions developed from different analytical perspectives in the second half of the last century by Carl Rogers (1902-1987), the North American psychologist founder of humanist psychology, who was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Peace in the year of his death, and Paulo Freire (1921-2003), the Brazilian educator and promoter of popular education, who, among many other distinctions, was awarded the UNESCO Education for Peace Prize in 1986.

Rogers proposed centring psychological practice on the person consulting, who he named the 'client', in opposition to the term 'patient'. In 1975, he published the work "Freedom to Learn", in which he records his thoughts on education and considers that in the ever-changing world of today, a teacher should transform his or herself into a facilitator who supports development of thought as well as critical and creative capacities in their students. Rogers saw the fundamental characteristics of this facilitator as follows:

#### **FACILITATOR QUALITIES** according to Carl Rogers

**REALNESS** "When the facilitator is a real person being what he is, entering into a relationship with the learner without presenting a front or facade, he is much more likely to be effective. ... It means that he comes into a direct personal encounter with the learner, meeting him on a person-to-person basis."

**PRIZING, ACCEPTANCE AND TRUST.** "This means prizing the learner, prizing his feelings, his opinions, his person. It is a caring for the learner, but a non-possessive caring. It is an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, having worth in his own right. It is a basic trust, a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy."

**EMPATHETIC UNDERSTANDING.** "When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reaction from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seems to the student, then again the likelihood of significant learning is increased."

Rogers, C.; Freiberg, H. J. (1996)

In turn, Paulo Freire in his fight against the dictatorship in Brazil and his experience in exile between 1964 and 1979; he had the opportunity to take part in alphabetisation processes with adults in Brazil and Chile and also in Tanzania, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. This Christian intellectual, whose work has its roots in the thought of Hegel and Marx, made a criticism of 'banking education', which is possibly the best guide to what a facilitator should not do.

#### **FREIRE'S CRITICISM OF 'BANKING EDUCATION'**

- a) The teacher teaches and the students are taught.
- b) The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing.
- c) The teacher thinks and the students are thought about.
- d) The teacher talks and the students listen meekly.
- e) The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.
- f) The teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply.
- g) The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher.
- h) The teacher chooses the programme content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it.
- i) The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which they set in opposition to the freedom of the students. The students are those who should adapt to the teacher's decisions.
- j) The teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects."

Freire, Paulo (1971)

These two thinkers did not have direct contact; they developed in different places and put emphasis on different aspects, Rogers on the personal dimension and Freire on the social. However, they moved along similar paths, O'Hara<sup>18</sup> mentions in the work by Gadotti and Torres (2001) that Rogers in his text "Personal Power" dedicates a chapter to the similarities that he found between his notions centred on the person and Freire's pedagogy. They are both a source of inspiration for structuring training programmes for facilitators in development processes.

Other important elements in facilitator training are the concepts derived from the practice of the "active school". In this approach, the concern is neuralgic because the learning process happens through action. Learning becomes doing, because as a Chinese proverb says, "a wise man who knows everything is not worth as much as someone who has done something with their own hands".

It is also necessary to be aware that in the so-called Third World countries, learning alliances generally are constructed in spaces in which international cooperation entities, State institutions, the private sector, academia and communities participate. These are complex spaces with a multiplicity of interests at play, where rather than a dialogue between equals, a process of negotiation of objectives, targets and products is what actually happens.

In the Transcol experience, international technical cooperation behaved as Cinara's ally, jointly discussed the decisions and gave the institute great freedom to structure the work methods. However, this situation is not typical of this type of relationships. The domination processes that can occur in this sort of alliance should not be disregarded, and therefore conditions should be created to empower marginalised groups and to generate strategies that favour a peer relationship. This is even more key considering the huge differences between rich and poor countries, which in some cases have become more acute in this globalised world in which we live.

This international environment in which many alliances are developed means that the work carried out by the Swiss Commission for Scientific Partnership with Developing Countries (KFPE) becomes relevant (García et al, 2003). The eleven principles (see table) worked out by KFPE could be a reference point to support the reflection on North-South and South-South relationships that could happen through the alliances.

#### **ELEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS**

- Decide on research objectives together
- Build up mutual trust
- Share information; develop networks
- Share responsibility
- Promote transparency
- Monitor and evaluate the collaboration
- Disseminate the results
- Apply the results
- Share profits equitably
- Increase research capacity
- Build on the achievements

KFPE (1998)

## **Final Reflections**

The construction of learning alliances as a strategy to carry out innovation processes on a wide scale means that the discussion on the type of professional needed to work on participative development processes becomes more relevant. Cinara's experience illustrates that the professionals currently studying at universities should become part of re-learning processes that allow them to understand their roles as facilitators of development processes.

<sup>18</sup> Mauren O'Hara, lecturer and researcher at the Centre for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, California; USA

However, any training process will be unsuccessful if it is not centred on the participants and on the work on problems in the local area. Knowledge of the personal history of each participant, recognition of their ancestors' contribution and the marks left by their childhood should be the starting point. Being at peace with the past creates a great sense of calm and trust in one's own abilities.

The facilitator needs to be aware of their abilities, limitations and responsibilities because they cannot look for someone to blame – “they didn't understand me, this community is very disorganised, I'm working with people who don't know what they're doing”. The discoveries in the field of emotional intelligence, supported to a great extent by the information exchange between the East and the West (see Goleman, 2003) along with the development of the life skills approach make work on the personal dimension much easier and allow for a practical and simple application of the concepts.

In addition, the sense of calm that comes from self-knowledge and the feeling that teamwork will lead to finding a better solution for the participants both generate conditions so that the projects develop with a high probability of being efficient.

Work on a concept of sustainable human development and the notion of 'the public' will give the facilitator great clarity to direct collective action. The legacy of participative research methodology with a gender perspective is that it will provide the tools necessary for female and male participants in the alliances to express themselves and to try to build more equitable societies.

Finally, it could be said that the facilitator of development processes is someone who combines the traits of a charismatic leader (Goleman et al, 2003), with good knowledge of the social and technical aspects involved in the project in which they are working, and who has a great respect for the local knowledge and culture of the participants in a learning alliance. The enthusiasm required to analyse problems and find solutions that are emotionally pleasing for the participants as well as to live each project as a marvellous learning adventure, is a very desirable characteristic in facilitators.

It is desirable for all staff of organisations that work in development to have the characteristics of development process facilitators described above. However, there is a very strong tradition in the organisations in the water supply and sanitation sector of allowing the technical approach to dominate, with little guidance in interdisciplinary learning and knowledge dialogue. Building this type of alliance will be favoured if the institutions who have the most experience of this approach act as facilitators. Unfortunately, the importance of this work is not always understood and generally this type of intervention is difficult to find funding for as financial resources are mainly directed towards paying for technical work. Changing this mentality is one of the many challenges faced by those who are convinced of the validity of learning alliances.

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