

Communication & Facilitation

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Communication and facilitation are critical for conducting participatory research. To be a good facilitator one needs to have good communication skills and to be able to communicate well one needs to have facilitation skills.

What is Communication?

How does one talk so that another person listens and understands? How does one listen? How does one know if he has been heard and understood?

Importance of effective communication

As *Researchers* Good communication is necessary to create a climate that will allow researchers and community members to work together effectively. For example, community people and others will rarely participate and contribute, or speak out, unless they feel comfortable and that their contributions are valued. The challenge is even larger in cases of intercultural communication.

The benefits of good communication skills:

- Avoiding confusion and misunderstanding
- Reducing frustration, stress and sickness levels
- Capturing new ideas and initiatives facilitating change
- Gaining an understanding of others perspectives
- Meeting the needs of your audience

Types of communication:

In the context of teaching and research, communication has to be *organized communication*. By organized communication we mean a well-defined procedure (group discussions, presentations, informal surveys, group interviews, transect walk, etc. as well as formal surveys). Organized communication is not an ad-hoc opportunistic event.

Besides this, there is yet another type of differentiation. This is between *one-way communication* and *two-way communication*:

One-way communication is one which is always initiated by one party (by scientists, teachers, researchers) and where the other party (community people, students) respond to the inquiries.

Two-way communication is one which may be initiated by either of the above mentioned parties and the scientists, researchers, teachers make sure that community people, students, etc. understand their opinions and ideas or proposals and objectives, and vice versa.

Communication skills:

The methods and skills required for effective communication in participatory research and teaching are quite different from those which come naturally in every day conversation.

Thus, the skills include the skills to organize and facilitate communication with students and community people, organize and facilitate discussions and meetings, group activities, workshops, field days, interviews and other forms of communication. Therefore, effective communication requires both verbal and non-verbal skills in asking questions, probing and listening.

In other words, effective communication requires good facilitation skills

What is Facilitation?

Facilitation is a process of learning, sharing, and coming to decisions using methods that are participatory and affirming to experiences and knowledge that all bring into the room. It enables a learner-centered approach compared to the more conventional lecture method. Facilitation is learner-centered and it is always a two-way process as this is the only way to get maximum participation from everyone.

Skills for facilitation:

Skills required for facilitation can be both verbal and non-verbal.

The **verbal** skills are:

1. Questioning: Good questioning skills include the following:

Good facilitators use questions to start, focus and deepen the learning of participants. Questions should not be closed but open-ended. They should include why, who, what, when, where and how – to bring out details. Right questions should be asked in the right way and at the right time.

i. Purpose of the questions (Knowledge and clarity)

One should be clear about why you are asking the question. This means, you need to have sound knowledge about the subject matter, and at the same time should also be able to communicate in simple statements and to ask focused questions.

ii. When and how to ask questions

When - One should know when to intervene during discussion and when to stay quiet. They should focus on mobilizing the knowledge/information of the participants and provide guidance when the talks are unclear or when the discussion starts to lose focus.

How - While asking questions one should speak in plain simple language and not use fancy words or jargon.

Questions should not be closed but open-ended. They should include why, who, what, when, where and how – to bring out details. Right questions should be asked in the right way and at the right time.

Difference between closed and open questions		
	Closed question	Open question
Type	A question that can be answered by a simple "yes" or "no"	Starts with <i>who, what, when, where, how, why</i>
Use	These questions are easier to ask and to answer and do not take too much time. Can be used to clarify simple matters.	To get concrete feedback or information. To make people think; quality of discussion will improve as new details are discovered. Good for better understanding and analyzing complex situations.
Risk	Does not allow any new details or information to be discovered. Does not improve the quality of the conversation.	Such questions are more difficult to answer. Questions starting with "why" may be perceived as threatening. If a facilitator cannot build on the responses, usefulness is reduced.
Examples	<i>Did you do go to the field this morning? Do you work in the fields? Do you agree with this conclusion? Is it clear?</i>	<i>Where did you go this morning? What type of work do you do? What do you think about it? Why did this happen? What needs to be changed?</i>

2. Probing

Probing is asking follow-up questions to gain more understanding. Examples:

- Can you explain more?
- Could you put it another way?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- But why, how, who, when, where?
- Anything else?

Probing can be used for different purposes such as:

- Stimulate thinking
- Clarify questions, inputs and/or opinions
- Create dialogue
- Solve problems

Do's	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen actively • Base the next question on your understanding of the previous answer • Clarify information • Single out the problem or main points 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judge while listening • Jump from one question to another • Make assumptions • Lose track by getting bogged down in details or getting side-tracked.

3. *Paraphrasing:*

Listen carefully and check your understanding by paraphrasing what the participants have said. This clarifies the points and increases understanding

Ask yourself whether participants have asked the right questions. Too often, the correct answer is given - but the wrong question was asked by students/participants and communication fails.

Probing and paraphrasing are very effective techniques to gathering information

Non-verbal skills are:

1. *Listening:* Good Listening skills are

- Empathy - listening for feeling
- Absorbing unpalatable messages
- Appreciation of the other person's point of view.
- Listening, not just hearing

This is called *active listening*.

Hearing is

Passive

Listening is

Active

Paying attention

Searching for meaning

To be able to listen carefully and creatively, to be able to pick out the positive aspects, problems, difficulties and tensions, is the most fundamental skill in effective communication. One needs to show interest in what people have to say, not argue, interrupt, pass judgment quickly or in advance, nor jump to conclusions.

In order to improve our listening skills it is necessary to try and understand the kind of things that prevent proper and supportive listening

Listening barriers

On-off listening: This type of listening habit comes from the fact that most people think about four times faster than the average person can speak. Sometimes he/she uses this extra time to think about her/her own personal affairs and troubles instead of listening to, and trying to understand, what the speaker is saying. This can be overcome by paying attention to not only what is being said, but also by observing body language like expressions, gestures, posture, etc.

Red flag listening: This type of listening is one when speaker uses certain words that upset the listener so much that he/she stops trying to understand what the speaker is trying to say.

Open ears-closed mind listening: This type of listening occurs when the listener decides quite quickly that either the subject or the speaker is boring, and what is being said makes no sense. Often the listener jumps to the conclusion that he/she can predict what the speaker will say and conclude that there is no reason to listen because he/she will hear nothing new.

Glass-eyed listening: This type of listening is one when the listener looks at the speaker intently and seems to be listening, while actually his/her mind may be on other things or far away. The listener gets glass-eyed, and often a dreamy or absent-minded expression appears on the face.

Do's and Don'ts of listening:

When listening we should avoid doing the following:

- Rush the speaker
- Argue
- Interrupt
- Pass judgment too quickly
- Give advice unless it is requested by the other person
- Jump to conclusions
- Let the speaker's emotions affect your own feelings directly

When listening we should try to do the following:

- Show interest
- Be understanding
- Express empathy
- Single out the problem if there is one
- Listen for causes of the problem
- Help the speaker to develop the competence and motivation needed to solve his/her problems
- Cultivate the ability to be silent when silence is necessary

2. Observation

Observing is the ability to –

- see what is happening without judging
- understand non-verbal clues
- monitor group work objectively

It is important to notice group dynamics, including who is speaking and who is not, how various groups of people interact, e.g. women and men or different ethnic groups. This observation can be used to understand how and when different methods must be used to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate.

Things to be observed:

- Use of voice (whispering/soft, shouting/loud)
- Style of communication (statements, questions)
- Facial expressions (yawning, smiling, frowning, etc.)
- Eye-contact (searching or avoiding)
- Gestures (arm and leg movements)
- Posture (how they sit or stand)

Things to focus on (while observing):

- *Who says what? Who does what?*
- *Who looks at who when talking?*
- *Who avoids whom?*
- *Who sits besides whom? Is it always like this?*
- *What is the general level of energy?*
- *What is the overall level of interest?*
- *Are they watching the clock or their watch?*
- *Are they walking in and out? Are they distracted easily?*

3. Eye-contact

Always make direct eye contact with the people while talking and questioning them. This will show your interest and also help in getting their interest.

4. Smile

Smile with the people while talking to them. This will build rapport and trust.

5. Flexibility

One should respond to the needs of the participants and be willing to adapt or change methods, tools and questions in order to do so.

6. Be Well Organized

Good facilitators should be well organized. All necessary materials and logistics should be prepared before hand so that the participants' time should not be wasted or lost. The facilitator should keep the overall objective in mind through out the entire process.

7. Keeping notes

Always keep notes about what have been discussed and decisions (if any) have been made and why. A quick review before seeing participants/students again will help in recalling specific details. This is an important way to demonstrate your interest in your participants/students as individuals.

Additional Skills:

Ability to involve everyone

It is important to **ensure encourage participation of everyone** – women, men, young, old, rich, poor, powerful and disadvantaged. Many times the process gets dominated by a few individuals, (in community - usually the most powerful, most vocal, most wealthy - all of whom are usually men) and it is important to avoid this. Contributions from members of disadvantaged groups and the silent ones may need to especially sought. There are various methods – verbal as well as non-verbal - to encourage their participation are:

Some **verbal** methods are:

- Make it a point to involve the quiet ones – If there are any persons hanging back, not saying anything, give them a stick or other object and ask them to indicate something they would like to see on the map or diagram, or discreetly ask them whether or not they think the placement of a particular feature is accurate. If they disagree with the placement, invite them to indicate its proper position.
- Ask a particularly dominant participant specific questions – e.g. about the community. By encouraging this person in conversation away from the group, his or her influence over the process can be lessened.

Some **non-verbal** methods are:

- Choose a place that is accessible to everybody – for women who suffer mobility constraints it may be best if meetings take place fairly close to home. For socio-economically disadvantaged groups it is important to avoid places that are restricted to them, such as holy site of the predominant religious groups, or the grounds around the water point of a high caste group. Public places enjoyed by everyone, such as the school or sports field may be best.
- Schedule the meetings/activities for when the people have time to participate. This means avoiding both the seasonal and daily periods of peak labor demands, such as harvesting time and meal preparation hours. It may even be necessary, for e.g., to work with men in the morning and women in the afternoon, or with market vendors at mid-day and landless laborers in the evening.
- Ensure that every group/person has a chance to present their views. One way to do this is to form separate groups (in community - by gender, socio-economic groups, age, etc.) to make their own presentations, maps or diagrams or charts. If the groups choose to further divide or to organize themselves differently, mixing by institutional membership for example, they should be supported in their decision. The findings of the different groups can be contrasted to provide useful information about each group's perceptions and priorities.

Some effective and popular methods:

1. Role Play
2. Group and general Discussions
3. Presentations
4. Small group activities or work

The Facilitator

The facilitator is a neutral person who does not offer personal opinions and does not get drawn into the discussions. Should the facilitator want to engage in the workshop process, this is possible if the facilitator “steps out of the role of the facilitator” to make a comment.

Roles:

- A facilitator is there to ensure that the discussion stays on topic and is progressing.
- S/he is also a timekeeper.
- S/he is there to ensure that everyone is able to engage in the workshop process, that all opinions are heard and respected, and that workshop participants are able to function as a group.

Requirements:

- Facilitation requires attitudes of acceptance, understanding, trust and care and respect.
- Humor is also an asset. Good facilitation is critical for enabling participants to feel comfortable to speak on the issues of sharing power and decision-making that are crucial to address in the areas of gender, access to water and poverty eradication.
- It is important for a facilitator to be aware of her/his personal prejudices and biases. These would include personal values, beliefs and attitudes about women and men, girls and boys, poor and rich, sexual orientation (gays and lesbians), different professions, different religions, as well as cultures other than your own. These will have an impact on how you facilitate a group and your use of language, jokes and examples. A facilitator will need to consciously and constantly examine her/his biases and how these affect her/his role as a facilitator.
- Before you facilitate, be clear about the goals of the group, the expectations of the facilitator, and the people you will be working with.

While facilitation skills can be learned, much of this learning is through observation, practice, experience, mistakes and good and bad meetings.

(Adapted from various sources on participatory research published by the CGIAR organizations, IDRC, IDS and others)