



LITERATURE REVIEW: FACILITATION

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Purpose

This literature review is part of the Movement for Community-Led Development's (MCLD) ongoing research project. The definitions for and uses of facilitation that emerge from this review may be used by the Collaborative Research Team in order to further their study of facilitation as a process in community-led development. In particular, a better understanding of the term facilitation will contribute to the Community-led Development self-assessment rubric developed by MCLD.

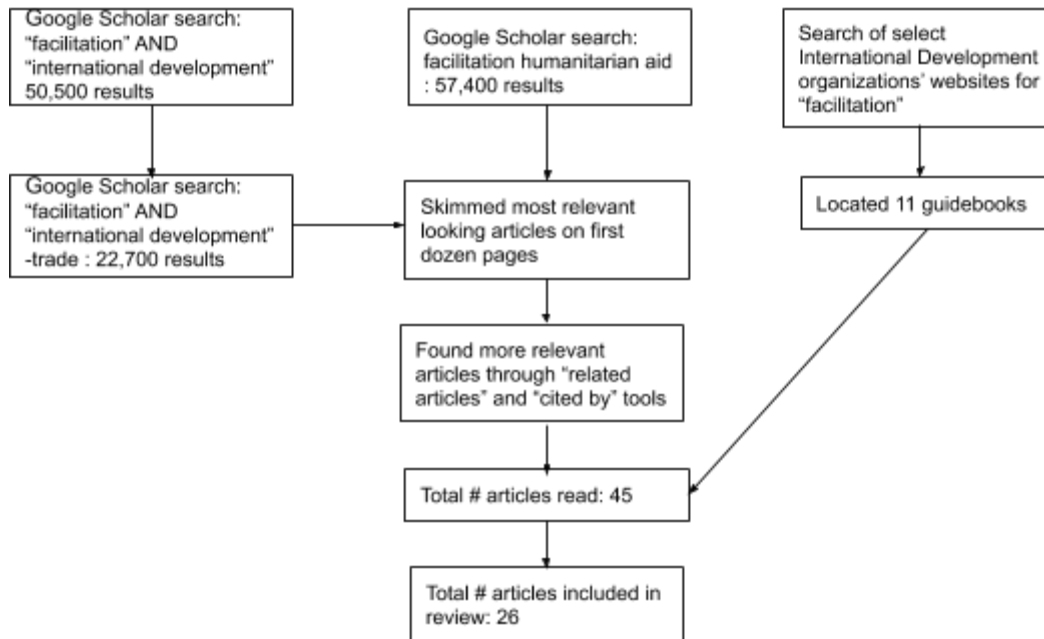
Methodology

This review was focused on articles that looked at facilitation from an international development perspective. It was a challenge to find such articles, as the term "facilitation" is applied to a broad range of disciplines, including but not limited to ecology, evolution, psychology, and economics.

Articles related to international development were found through a series of cursory Google Scholar searches. These searches were: "facilitation" AND "international development," which resulted in 50,500 articles. A secondary search for "facilitation" AND "international development" -trade gained 22,700 results. Few of these results applied to the international development field, and a final search of "Facilitation humanitarian aid" saw 57,400 results. The focus was on identifying a few key relevant articles and using backward citation searching from there to identify other relevant sources. Abstracts were scanned to identify articles that needed to be read.

Since the academic articles found through Google Scholar were limited in their relevance to the field, facilitation guides and other tool kits from international development and humanitarian aid organizations were used.

The following Prisma Flow Diagram depicts the process of finding articles for this literature review:



Defining Facilitation

The concept of facilitation plays a role in all aspects of life, and in every discipline. It is essential to the strong coordination of ideas and the cooperation of large groups. Through facilitation, specific people provide the means for powerful discussions to occur. “Facilitation is concerned with managing situations rather than managing learning processes” (Groot & Maarleveld 2000). As this definition suggests, facilitation is grounded in the notion that learning occurs organically with guidance from a facilitator.

In the context of community development, facilitation refers to the growth of a local community’s skills through the help of a discussion mediator or other external contributor. Aside from discussions, there are other things that also involve facilitation, one of which being projects. Project facilitation “is an adaptive and co-created process that incorporates local experience and practice-based knowledge to achieve strategic goals, while utilising recognised project management practices to achieve agreed outcomes” (Lannon & Walsh 2020). Essential to facilitation of this type is the development of skills. As Díaz-Puente et al (2014) explain, “The process of facilitation aims to solve community problems by encouraging the exploitation of skills through different tools implemented by the facilitator.”

Many scholars have endeavored to define facilitation in order to better use the term. Kaner (2014) outlines the history of facilitation as originating from tribes, Quakers, and Gandhi. To Kaner, facilitation is proactive, community-building, and task-oriented. As part of his in-depth analysis of the term, he traces the Latin root of the word facilitate, which means “to enable, to make easy” (Kaner 2014). Berry (2016) delved into the most important aspects of facilitation, and found that

“The essence of facilitation is a willingness to take responsibility for the whole, seeking to enable each individual to contribute as appropriate.”

Academics and international organizations alike conceptualize facilitation as a way for community members to build lasting skills. Facilitation requires a “capacity-building process so that people are capable of identifying and structuring their own problems, according to which they can make suitable decisions in order to solve them” (Díaz-Puente et al 2014). The process that Díaz-Puente et al have researched echoes USAID and other organizations’ descriptions of facilitation. These organizations, versed in implementing durable systems in global communities, all utilize facilitation processes. “The facilitation approach focuses on creating widespread, systemic change without direct intervention in a system. This can enable more resilient and sustainable outcomes as local actors are more likely to take ownership of development efforts and maintain long-term changes in behaviors” (USAID).

Berta et al (2015) conducted an in-depth review of the literature on facilitation. From their study emerges a particularly strong definition for facilitation that includes the key elements that international development strives to accomplish. Berta et al found, “Facilitation drives a purposeful, progressive, or iterative two-way process of change that focuses on building trusting relationships and establishing and sharing common goals between the facilitator and those engaged in making the change.”

Being a Facilitator

“Facilitation is both a *role* (a facilitator) and a *process*” (Berta et al 2015). Facilitators are those who contribute to the achievement of specific goals within a process or a community. Facilitators contribute to the achievement of specific goals. As Singhal (2011) found, the word ‘facilitator’ appears to be used interchangeably with the term ‘outsider.’ This is because it is normally a facilitator who enters a community to enact change. A facilitator is “the man or woman responsible for the management of the change process in the participatory intervention” (Groot & Maarleveld 2000).

Several academics agree on the characteristics of facilitators. A study conducted by Merrill et al (1994) identified some characteristics of successful facilitation in the context of community development. These included wisdom, patience, people-orientation, respect, cultural sensitivity, and flexibility. Facilitators appear to play the role of a mediator within conversations and communities alike. Instead of actively participating in conversations, often facilitators are present to ensure that the right conversations are had. Or, as Gregory & Romm (2001) have described in their own study of facilitation, it is the facilitators role “to refrain from involvement in appraising, refuting, and indeed adding content to the process of group discussion.”

Díaz-Puente et al (2014) outline the different roles that facilitators play: teachers, guides, trainers, leaders. Facilitators must empower communities without imposing too much pressure or too much of their own opinions. “Because researchers/facilitators (as persons) are already situated, i.e. they have their own values and beliefs, it is incumbent on them to be critically aware that those beliefs

and values will make a difference to the way in which the discussion becomes directed” (Gregory & Romm 2001). As these academics all indicate, facilitators play a difficult but essential role in developing community relations and accomplishing goals. The difficulty emerges because, as Gregory and Romm explain, “The tightrope walk between interventionist confrontation, and the development of a process of trust building within the group (with the facilitator being part of the group), cannot be avoided.”

How does Facilitation Work?

Facilitation is not a set in stone process. According to many scholars, it occurs differently depending on context. Essential to the process of facilitation is the encouraging interactions between different levels of community members. Groot & Maarleveld (2000) establish one of the goals of facilitation as a means “to re-define or break down boundaries by managing integrated learning processes, i.e. encouraging networking activities among actors of different hierarchical subsystems.”

Groot and Maarleveld (2000) identify three styles of facilitation in learning:

1. Inside or outside the process: this questions the degree to which facilitators are involved in a change process
2. Reflective vs. problem solving: relates to contextual versus analytical thinking
3. Integrative and distributive mediation style: involves the mediator role that facilitators often play

The most evident difference between the three approaches that Groot and Maarleveld outline is the amount that the facilitator is present throughout discussions. Facilitation can occur through a negotiator or intermediary, or through an established member of a given community. No matter the style, essential to facilitation are the ideas of change, dialogue, and observational reflection.

As previously mentioned, academics highlight the importance of trust and equality in the facilitation process (Lannon & Walsh 2020, Nelson-Nuñez 2019). “It is a competency and trust-based approach that supports strategic learning while devolving decision-making power to project implementers” (Lannon & Walsh 2020). Herein emerges one of the seemingly essential ideas of facilitation: giving community members the tools to have conversations and make decisions without excessive input from outside forces. Facilitators help in giving conversations direction, but are not intended to dominate a discussion. “The facilitative approach allows all participants’ knowledge to be valued equally but differently. In doing so it goes beyond confrontation to transcendence, and provides a basis for addressing the power imbalances that exist in ID partnerships” (Lannon & Walsh 2020). Furthermore, this equality within a conversation is important to the idea of trust, and it is the facilitator’s role to monitor a conversation and ensure that community members know why the conversation is being had. As Groot & Maarleveld (2000) explain, “one of the most important roles of a facilitator is to understand and question the rationale behind a participatory intervention.”

The ability of facilitation processes to endure is also essential to its successful implementation (Díaz-Puente et al 2014, Nelson-Nuñez 2019, USAID). As described in USAID’s guide to facilitation, the presence of a facilitator in a foreign community is most successful through the use of a

“light-touch” in activities, minimizing their presence in the system and reducing the direct provision of material goods or services” (USAID). In minimizing their “touch” in a community, facilitators increase chances of a facilitation process’ sustainability. Díaz-Puente et al (2014) echo USAID’s goals of sustained facilitation, describing that “the success of the facilitation process hinges on whether, when the facilitator leaves, the group can continue and has become autonomous.” Nelson-Nuñez (2019) also claims that an advocacy-based facilitation is the most successful, an opinion which reiterates previous scholars as well.

Vidal (2009) best describes facilitation as “in the grey zone between the scene of objectivity and the scene of subjectivity.” This is an apt characterization for the complex process. Berta et al (2015) also engage in a deeper study of facilitation. These scholars “re-conceptualize facilitation as a meta-routine that specifically supports acquisition of and learning about applying research evidence to improve care processes.” They summarize elements of the facilitation process as follows: “Facilitation assists in defining practice problems and objectives, provides support to teams in achieving objectives, highlights important contextual factors, and assists teams in interpreting data and reaching conclusions about active-outcome relationships.”

NGO Facilitation Programs

International non-governmental organizations play an essential role in the international development facilitation process. They have the resources and skills to facilitate a number of things for international communities.

Nelson-Nuñez (2019) analyzed different studies of the roles of NGOs in influencing political behavior. He concluded that “all types of NGOs facilitate numerous aspects of political participation, although service-oriented NGOs are less impactful than NGOs that expressly focus on social mobilization” (Nelson-Nuñez 2019). He extrapolated two different ways that NGOs contribute to the facilitation of political participation in marginalized areas: “by fostering interactions between citizens and by injecting resources that make political participation easier” (Nelson-Nuñez 2019). This relationship is accomplished because NGOs often have the tools to unite communities with government leaders by fostering communication links.

Barber (2009) cites a few different international development and humanitarian aid organizations as part of an article that she wrote for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Her research includes different uses of facilitation without pausing to define the term, however its meanings can be deduced by how Barber incorporates the word into her article. Barber reminds her readers, “The ICRC notes that the obligation to facilitate relief schemes is ‘unconditional.’” Furthermore, she quotes the 1991 General Assembly Guiding Principles. Number Six is the most relevant to this review of facilitation, as it reads: “States whose populations are in need of humanitarian assistance are called upon to facilitate the work of these organizations in implementing humanitarian assistance” (*Resolution on the Strengthening of the Coordination of Humanitarian Emergency Assistance of the United Nations*, quoted in Barber 2009). In these cases, facilitation is viewed as a requirement, and an essential part of humanitarian aid.

Countless international development organizations reference facilitation. CARE International cites facilitation as one of its core duties: “Part of our role as CARE is to facilitate or build bridges between people living in poverty and “formal” institutions” (CARE International 2014). Facilitation also plays a prominent role in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nelson-Nuñez (2019) highlights that because of the global relevance of the SDGs, governments and non-governmental organizations alike are implicated to take action. He argues, “the universality of the SDGs sharpens the focus on government capacity for service delivery and underscores the need to examine the ways in which NGOs can inhibit or facilitate government action when they themselves engage in service delivery” (Nelson-Nuñez 2019).

Within these organizations, facilitation is intended to bolster community involvement and unity. Vidal (2009) labels this as a separate type of facilitation, called “community facilitation.” This subcategory of facilitation is fixated on “organising and mobilising the competencies of the community members with the purpose of enabling them to act on their own behalf” (Vidal 2009). The type of projects that Vidal references with this definition are notably relevant for international development. In particular, the definition of facilitation that Vidal puts forward relates to advocacy and agency. “Giving people the opportunity to communicate directly with decision makers conveys a strong belief in their ability to express themselves, to listen and understand the decision maker’s point of view, to differentiate between the responsible decision maker and the manipulative decision maker, and to respond accordingly” (Vidal 2009).

Case Studies from the Literature

From a preliminary review of academic literature on facilitation, a few relevant case studies have emerged. Three such studies stem from the Province of Cuenca in Spain, Nairobi’s slums, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Díaz-Puente et al (2014) present the case of community development in the Province of Cuenca in Spain. They interpreted collaborative workshops that the community members went through, and carried out questionnaires and interviews as part of their analysis of the facilitator role within this community. They found that once the groups bought into the facilitator’s work, their relationship became more collaborative than hierarchical (Díaz-Puente et al 2014). The results from facilitation work in Cuenca found that important personal skills were mobilized, two of which were problem solving and decision making (Díaz-Puente et al 2014).

Mwiti & Goulding devote their study of community gender issues to a subset of slums in Nairobi. There, the team interviewed marginalized groups, raised discussions with women in these communities, all with the goal of finding out how female members of these communities conceptualized their roles. “Through the facilitation process, we made attempts to refrain from imposing our own ideas and merely raised questions about the ideas of the participants” (Mwiti & Goulding 2018). From their research emerges a few key pieces of advice for facilitators. In particular, the team warns facilitators “not to assume they can be neutral, but to be open about the values and experiences that they bring to the process, allowing participants to challenge them on

their standpoint” (Mwiti & Goulding 2018). This recommendation has compelling implications for the meaning and goals of facilitation.

Finally, a study of gender in agricultural work in Sub-Saharan Africa conducted by Farnworth & Colverson (2015) demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of the facilitation process. The facilitation system “emphasizes not only the creation of knowledge products for dissemination to end users, but also the process of creating knowledge with those users” (Farnworth & Colverson 2015). Here emerges another important aspect of facilitation put into practice: the idea that facilitators are not intended to simply control a dialogue, but to ensure that the conversation teaches communities the tools to continue to have such interventions. In other words, part of their facilitation goal was putting “behavioral change processes” in place (Farnworth & Colverson 2015). Moreover, this research has shown how facilitation needs to have a goal, especially when it occurs from an outside organization, but this goal needs to be unbiased. As Farnworth & Colverson illustrate, “Unbiased facilitation is required to ensure that actors (with often very divergent interests) can be persuaded to work together to create a “win-win” situation for all.”

Hierarchies of Facilitation

Facilitation occurs through different levels of leaders and community members. It involves cooperation from the grassroots level and the organizational level alike. This unity of different systems has implications for the results on all levels as well. “Facilitation in participatory interventions can catalyse the learning of actors operating in the same or different subsystems to achieve desired outcomes” (Groot & Maarleveld 2000). Academics are quick to divulge that process is not without its obstacles. Lannon & Walsh (2020) highlight the potential pitfalls in facilitation while also showing its multifaceted implications. They explain, “Project facilitation acknowledges the tensions between the recursive and adaptive characteristics of projects, programmes and institutions, while also paying attention to the interplay between micro and macro contextual levels and the challenges and tensions therein.”

Vidal (2009) details the different levels in community facilitation: “The community facilitation process acknowledges the many layers and forms of leadership existing in the community. While it strives to allow the opinion leaders to emerge, it does not ignore or circumvent the formal leaders, such as council members, mayors, etc.” According to Vidal, facilitators have the power to choose the level of their authority. This is accomplished through deciding whether to be in control of discussions or to delegate responsibility within the group or community.

Goals of Facilitator

The process of facilitation comes hand-in-hand with many goals. Since the process is so multifaceted, these goals are not always the same. According to Cameron et al (2010), a facilitator’s goal is to “guide the group through a series of key questions to delve deeper into the story.” The dialogue that ensues from a facilitator’s probing is not always the most lucrative, thus it is the facilitator’s role to direct discussions without imposing his or her opinion too overtly. “Experience also suggests that skilled facilitation is an important contributor to the success of this kind of

community engagement. The key to the process is ensuring that the diverse voices of the community are heard” (Cameron et al 2010). This research team wrote of an activity conducted in a community in West Bengal, where community members were able to learn their own facilitation skills from the experience of this activity.

Several pointers on effective discussions are printed in a guidebook circulated by the Child Resilience Alliance in 2018. Therein, the authors describe, “To enable inclusive dialogue, skilled facilitators use a social justice lens, observing who is participating and who is not participating in different kinds of discussions and analyzing the power dynamics that could help to explain the varied levels of participation.” This tip is important for an understanding of facilitation, as it demonstrates the different threats to facilitation that could emerge in different contexts. Or, as Lannon & Walsh (2020) describe, “Tensions and challenges still exist, but by facilitating rather than managing projects, adaptability and learning are supported.”

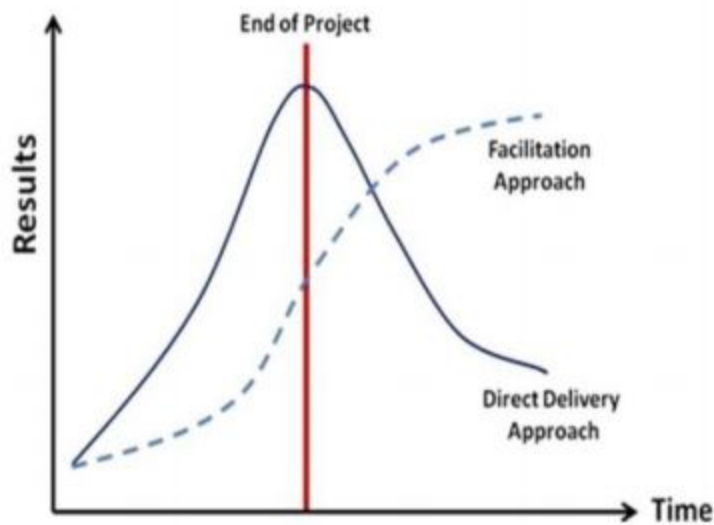
USAID and the Child Resilience Alliance both discuss the role of effective facilitation. USAID uses the term “implementers” interchangeably with facilitators. They state that “implementers must have a high level of engagement with stakeholders to understand what the incentives for change may be and how they can be used” (USAID). The same goes for facilitators, however. The Child Resilience Alliance describes what effective facilitation looks like. “Effective facilitators do not hide from or downplay conflict. In fact, they learn to view conflict as a potentially constructive force that can stir creative thinking and enable a full exploration of the strengths and weaknesses of different views” (Child Resilience Alliance 2018).

Facilitation in Community-led Development

According to the literature consulted, facilitators do not initially come from within the community. Outside forces, like humanitarian aid workers, act as facilitators in order to initiate conversations and spark reflection processes. As stated in the research conducted by Merrill et al (1994), these conversations promote structural change. “As communities become more interculturally complex, so does the task of the facilitator” (Merrill et al 1994). Participation is extremely important in community development. Facilitators can play the role of augmenting participation.

Several academics focus on how to make facilitation sustainable (Díaz-Puente et al 2014, USAID, Child Resilience Alliance, Berta et al 2015). In order to ensure that facilitation endures, the facilitator role needs to be transferred to members of the community at some point during the facilitation process (Díaz-Puente et al 2014). Since the target of facilitation is community development, “The emphasis from the beginning of an activity should be understanding and working through local actors and existing processes” (USAID).

USAID demonstrates the systemic change that can be achieved through facilitation (Dunn et al, USAID 2014).



This graph speaks to the sustainability aspect of facilitation previously described. Berta et al (2015) describe that “facilitation is expected to impart embedded and sustained practice change.” This explanation is particularly valid in the community-led development context, where the facilitator aims to impact the habits of communities by sharing knowledge and building tools through conversations and actions. The description offered by Berta et al also supports the graph that USAID presents, comparing the facilitation approach to a direct delivery approach. These two interpretations are in agreement over the idea that facilitation creates lasting changes.

In a guide produced by the Child Resilience Alliance (2018), it was explained that facilitators are not present in discussions to lead communities. Instead, “the facilitator is there to learn, ask questions, invite dialogue among people who are positioned in very different ways, and to support the conditions conducive to full community participation.” CRA’s example is particularly applicable to community-led development because their goal is to bolster community agency. In their approach to facilitation, communities “gain a strong sense of ownership about the issues to be addressed and the actions to be taken. These high levels of ownership spark community empowerment and animate processes and actions that are more likely to be sustainable than outsider-led projects” (Child Resilience Alliance 2018). The type of facilitation that CRA references requires facilitators with different skills than a more hierarchical facilitation. “Rather than inspiring, sensitizing, counseling, mobilizing, or guiding, a good facilitator first and foremost accompanies the community in its own journey of learning, self-mobilization, and action on behalf of vulnerable children” (Child Resilience Alliance 2018). The Child Resilience Act guide also goes into the details of how to respectfully approach facilitation in communities with different customs and power dynamics than facilitators are used to. This begins with a facilitator who “recognizes how little we know about community perspectives in all their varieties” (Child Resilience Alliance 2018).

Facilitation Manuals by International Development Agencies

Countless International Development agencies use facilitation in their international advocacy programs. Many of these have published manuals on facilitation in order to better inform their employees on the power of effective facilitation.

CARE International's Facilitation Guide outlines the role of facilitation teams in educating communities. The manual demonstrates how facilitation fits into CARE's Framework for Action, which comprises four elements of teams: Representation, Trust, Learning, and Accountability. "Facilitators play an important role by modeling behaviors that create a learning environment" (CARE International). The most relevant section of CARE's guide for this review's purposes is a section on "Identifying an External Facilitator." Within this section emerge key qualities of facilitators: "inclusive and participatory" work styles, skills in "conflict resolution, decision-making, problem-solving, teamwork, coaching, management and leadership" (CARE International).

The Sweden branch of Save The Children produced a guide entitled *From Participation to Empowerment*, in which they outlined steps to implementing successful empowerment tools. References of facilitators are scattered throughout this guide. In one such mention, the guide describes challenges to ensuring participation in conversations. One way to encourage participation from females, especially children, is to have equal numbers of male and female facilitators. To ensure that girls participate, "you need to focus on the importance of their voices being heard" (Save the Children 2016). This is best done by having a female facilitator as an example.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has published several documents that mention facilitation. In one such document - a collaboration between UNHCR and the World Food Programme - they reference a joint goal with the government of Uganda and the World Bank in order to increase self-reliance among refugees and host communities. This project works in a "self-reliance and resilience strategic framework for refugee and host communities, which aims to facilitate the gradual transition from humanitarian to development programming in refugee-impacted districts" (UNHCR & WFP 2020).

In other guides by UNHCR lie valuable advice about facilitation in the international development realm. UNHCR's *Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations* cites "facilitating discussions" as step five of their assessment. Within this tool there is valuable advice on the process of facilitation: "A facilitator needs to remember that there is no right answer to a given question and that the discussion and disagreements among participants are as valuable and informative as the answers of particular individuals" (UNHCR 2006). This guide also emphasizes the importance of even the appearance of equality, urging the facilitator to sit in a circle during discussions as a precaution to avoid appearing superior to any other member of the conversation. In another guide on *Economic Inclusion*, the organization emphasizes the importance of facilitation. They express, "To the extent possible, UNHCR's priority should be to play a facilitation and advocacy role, enabling and convening relevant stakeholders to include refugees in services/programmes" (UNHCR 2019). Finally, in a guide on *community-based development*, the organization affirms the importance of equality throughout facilitation: "When organizing capacity building activities, be sure that the

selected facilitators are sensitive to age, gender and diversity issues and the promotion of a rights- and community-based approach” (UNHCR 2008).

Challenges to Facilitation

USAID outlines potential challenges to facilitation approaches.

- “Local actors may be reluctant to trust their fellow stakeholders”
- Tracking results can be misleading: “indirect impacts of an intervention within a system make it challenging to identify and track all beneficiaries”
- “Staff must become communicators, relationship builders, systems analysts, coaches, and innovators rather than agents of service delivery”
- “Striking a balance between existing accountability structures and more flexible options is an important compromise when managing facilitated activities”

Initiating and maintaining a relationship with different governments can also be problematic, depending on their level of willingness to cooperate. Campbell et al (2019) describe their challenges that different types of governments may pose: “Given the focus of many development INGOs on advocacy and rights-based project implementation, democratic governments may be more likely to share the INGOs’ values and collaborate directly with them, in turn reinforcing the government’s bureaucratic capacity.” They point to the challenge in non-democratic countries, where advocacy is difficult even through facilitation because of the nonresponsive reactions of the governments.

The difficulty of quantifying and evaluating facilitation is also a challenge that scholars bring to attention (Berta et al 2015, Henao & Franco 2014). Henao & Franco identify what is called “the facilitator effect,” which calls to attention how much of an impact is the result of a facilitation project, and how much was accomplished by the community itself. This is extremely difficult to judge. Berta et al (2015) echo this difficulty: “Facilitation, and the facilitator’s role are conceptualized and operationalized inconsistently, and effectiveness is variously defined and measured. Consequently, we have little truly generalizable knowledge about how to construct facilitation processes to optimize research utilization, how to instruct the behaviours of facilitators, and how to appropriately set the degree of facilitation.”

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