

9 LEARNING TO RESPECT: CO-OPERATION WITH RESOURCE USERS

Gudrun Lettmayer

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Knowledge signifies power and ‘learning from resource users’ implies the transfer of knowledge and of power. Problems linked to questions of indigenous knowledge property rights and use of local resource knowledge for economic valorisation are well known. To avoid abuse of this power, the decision to learn from resource users requires external actors to give up the common and comfortable stance of merely observing from a distance and be willing to take the risk of interaction instead. He or she will then have to accept the views, the knowledge and intentions of the indigenous users.

Instead external actors (who may include the scientific community, international development co-operation, and those from within the same culture but who nevertheless represent a western approach) have more commonly decided to recognise the existence of indigenous knowledge because they expect to benefit from it by making available new information about natural resources, techniques of utilisation, management, organisation and distribution, as well as occasionally the ethical and cultural role of resources. It has become evident that approaches to natural resource management in tropical countries that are based exclusively on externally-generated knowledge are inadequate, and that ignorance of indigenous knowledge and perspectives has culminated in the failure of many well-intended projects.

When agreeing on the importance of learning from resource users, do all external actors have the same notion of it? Do external actors really want to learn from resource users or do they simply want to have access to additional information? To analyse this, I begin by considering aspects of the learning process. It is important to remember that learning from other people, especially from other cultures or spheres of knowledge, is a process. The way this process may evolve is strongly influenced by *attitudes* towards the foreign knowledge, *respect* for the other’s perception and the definition of *roles* for interaction between external actors and local resource users.

9.2 ATTITUDES TOWARDS FOREIGN KNOWLEDGE

By the ‘attitude’ of the external actor, I mean the approach or motivation for ‘learning from resource users’. Three common examples and the problems linked to them are discussed here.

Extractive:

This attitude views the learning process as simply a way of gathering information. In this very common approach, external actors see the user’s role as provider of information. This information can be acquired without consideration of the providers’ intentions or background.



Figure 9.1: The "extractive way".

Figure 9.2: The "manipulative way".

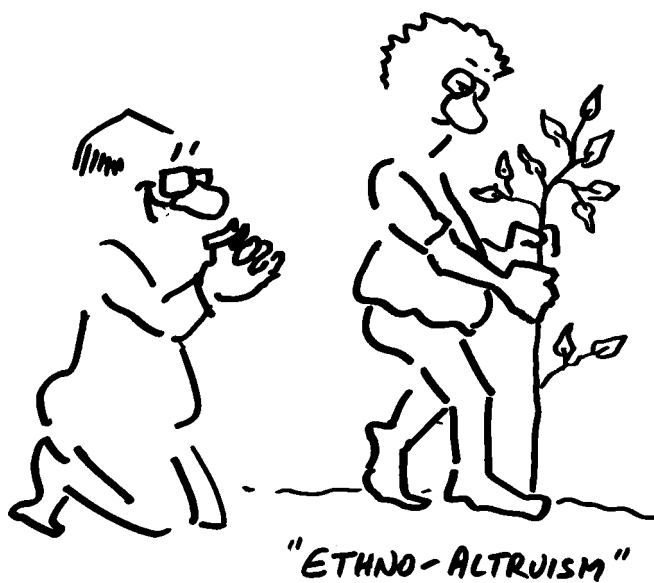
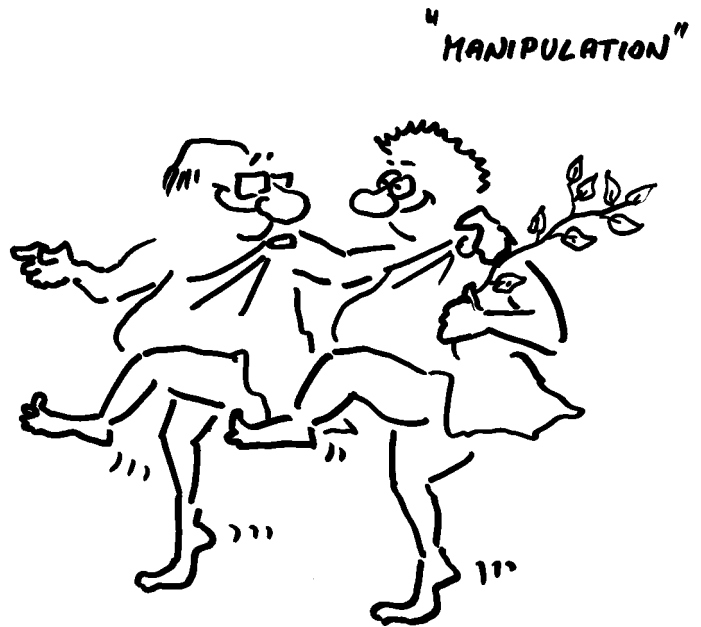


Figure 9.3: The "ethno-altruistic way".

In these cases, interaction is not necessary, and the external actors and local users keep a 'safe distance' each other.

Manipulative:

Some external actors study user-specific attitudes and cultural, social and economic background information, in order to create a solid knowledge base, enabling them to manipulate local users, deliberately or not, towards the intentions of the external actors. Although referred to as 'learning', this approach contributes to the systematic misuse of external knowledge about local values and roles in an aim to achieve goals determined by considerations lying outside those local value systems.

It is difficult to define exactly from which point onwards we face this conscious manipulation of values and roles. It cannot be denied that a good part of practical co-operation between users and external actors is based on (mutual) knowledge of resources. There is no doubt that long-term change in values and attitudes happens in all cultures as a consequence of historic influences. "If they are to survive, traditional values must prove themselves useful to each new generation" (Goulet, 1995). Nevertheless, external actors have to be conscious of acting along a fine line that separates learning processes from manipulation.

Ethno-altruistic:

By contrast, we often see a phenomenon which I have termed 'ethno-altruistic', that is, the one-sided glorification and idealisation of indigenous knowledge over western science. As with extractive attitudes, learning becomes a one-way process. The ethno-altruistic attitude may emerge from certain modern philosophical trends such as ecocentrism and post-modernism, and is connected to the search (mainly by western scientists) for a more holistic, possibly also spiritual, notion of 'knowledge' than that provided by western academic tradition. Recent recognition of forms of science that differ from the classic western science schemes can lead to a generalised criticism of western scientific approaches and to the conviction of certain groups of scientists that indigenous knowledge, in its diverse and rich forms, could be the 'philosopher's stone'.

In many cases the resource users are themselves perfectly aware of these different attitudes and react consciously to these external influences by feigning ignorance or passivity. In the long term, they should not be seen as 'victims' of certain attitudes. Nevertheless, the common problem of all three attitudes is that external actors and resource users use divergent strategies towards divergent goals and miss the opportunity to benefit from the others' knowledge. There is no process of common learning.

9.3 RESPECT FOR THE PERCEPTIONS OF OTHERS

Frequently, we face an extremely complex perception of resource values when dealing with local resource users. Resource values and resource problems far exceed their economic significance and include what external actors call 'cultural' value. This holistic perception is based upon the understanding that resources and resource users are equitable parts of the whole, linked in all dimensions of being.

It contrasts with our 'western' dualistic perception, in which we consider ourselves 'observers' of the resource environment.

These differences are illustrated by an experience from the eastern Andes (box 1), where the existence of different perceptions indicates that if we want to enter into a process of co-operative learning, we must respect the users' knowledge and perceptions (even if we do not share them). Mutual respect for points of view creates a basis of trust, which makes both sides more willing to broaden their own knowledge of human-environment relations. And it is important to remember that ultimately decisions about the management of local resources are in the hands of local users, beyond the influence of external interests and knowledge.

Respecting the perspectives of others becomes most problematic in situations where the 'other' - in our case the resource user - adopts attitudes considered, in the western view, fatalistic towards situations or processes that are seen as threats by external actors. It is hard to respect the perspective of others when it does not correspond to the logical system of the external actors. This occurs in situations where, to the external actor, it appears that there has been no planning process, because there is no conviction that nature and resources can be shaped, nor conviction that processes have to be structured; or where there appears to be no thinking in terms of long term development, because of differing perceptions of time, feasibility, security and destiny.

9.4 INTERACTION ROLES BETWEEN EXTERNAL ACTORS AND LOCAL RESOURCE USERS

As already stated, interactions between researchers and resource users become questions of power concession and partnership, making great demands on the ways in which external actors interpret their roles. Usually, the external actor remains the more powerful one, at least in the short term, because of his or her access to financial resources, and ability to implement research. Therefore he or she is the one to decide the position conceded to local users in these kinds of relations. It is evident that this situation may open the door to selective and manipulative utilisation of local knowledge.

There are also external influences on the distribution of roles. Scientific and development projects have their own rules and framework conditions. Lack of time, and pressure to present results rapidly, tend to lead to work without a long process of mutual knowledge exchange. In such cases the role attributed to the users is to furnish complementary information and to be an object of research.

Box 1: Case study 1

At the beginning of the 1990s, I lived in an East Andean region, working on the issue of soil erosion and agriculture. From my western point of view, the problem could be described as follows. Historic and present land tenure, steep slopes, soil characteristics, types of crops, forms of exploitation and rain characteristics form an interdependent whole that aggravates soil erosion in many sites, especially on the scarce land of poor smallholders. Continuation of traditional fallow systems and the cultivation of untouched, non-eroded sites are heavily limited by population pressure and land tenure. Soil loss is severe and threatens the user's existence in the long term.

By contrast, among the resource users in the Andes the traditional holistic perception of their territory still predominates. This perception is characterised by the principle of mutual, respectful nurturing (giving and taking) between all living elements of this sphere, which include animals, stones, soil, and human beings. The status of these elements in the territory is equitable. The kinship that exists between them is manifested by social reciprocity and, generally, in the cyclical regeneration of all beings.

The Andean resource user knows the soil very well. This profound knowledge is manifested by the many highly complex forms of cultivation historically developed by Andean users (including terraces and irrigation) and the many types of soils distinguished according to criteria such as colour, structure, texture, and suitability for certain crops. The constant communication or nurturing between all elements manifests itself in the user's 'conversations' with soils and plants, for example by observation of plant ripening or soil structure. 'Conversing' with, or observing, the stars and atmospheric signs provides information about what weather to expect. In reaction to this information, the user will choose the appropriate soils for cultivation and determine which soils should rest for a while (Apffel-Marglin, 1998).

The users' position on soil erosion, embedded in their holistic view, was quite different from my external diagnosis. In their view the harmony of elements was sometimes disturbed, because the permanent 'conversation' process had been interrupted. Although these disturbances had to be cured by ritual, in general the whole system is not perceived to show persistent change, because it is regenerating cyclically. In this world of equitable elements there is no concept of evolution or change of the system. Soil erosion is recognised as existing, and as a disturbance, but never as a problem or threat to the agricultural system that might require intervention and change of the resource user's behaviour.

Box 2: Case study 2 - Madagascar

A project designed to conduct research on two agro-ecological systems in Madagascar (the highland and east coast rainforests), was intended to provide sufficient information about the socio-cultural and ecological aspects of those systems to design, in a participatory way with resource users, sustainable scenarios for the future development of those two zones.

The establishment of a sound diagnostic methodology was also a principal goal of the project. Methodology had to be participatory, simple and transferable to the users. The testing and development of teaching tools, suited to facilitation of discussion with users about the agro-ecological systems, was also included in the objectives.

The concept as well as the implementation and interpretation of the research work were exclusively in the hands of the research team, composed of Malgach and European experts, and their respective institutions. In the two zones of research, measurements and observation, and analysis of soils and plants took place, in addition to interviews with local resource users.

The research staff obtained a large amount of information about the different areas of research, enabling a first diagnosis of the situation in the two zones, but the goal of participatory co-operation with resource users during the diagnostic stage and in the development of sustainable scenarios was not effectively realised. At the beginning of the project, presentation of goals and strategies of research to the users happened in a very systematic and complex, western dominated style that probably deterred more than it motivated or explained. Once or twice a year, users were given feedback about the results of experts' research. This feedback came in a one-way instructive way, using written media, although most users were illiterate.

When the project was two years old, and effective co-operation with users had not taken place, a number of user groups participated in teaching exercises conducted by a separate team of teachers contracted especially to elaborate and carry out the teaching.

Despite the intention of conducting participatory research, the research followed a classic approach of external dominated research and observation. Generally, users never knew exactly what the research team was doing and what they were working for. Insecurity and fear towards the presence of the external actors was manifested by rejection, theft and negative rumours about the research team. Resource users never had the impression that they could be an active part of a process of research and development nor that they could benefit from it. Instead of being their process, the project was the action of external scientists in their territory.

The Madagascar case study (box 2) illustrates problems with this approach. In the framework of the overall participatory methodology, it had been intended that the project would inform users about the externally defined goals, and then incorporate local users' knowledge of resources, development of teaching tools with and for users, collaboration with local informants and transfer of research results. However, despite the declared belief in participation, I would describe the research as a mostly extractive process of information gathering for the following reasons:

- on the whole, the role attributed to resource users was that of information source about users' perceptions and resource uses;
- the on-farm research on agroforestry was carried out with the co-operation of a few hired peasants;
- planning and interpretation was conducted by researchers alone;
- information flowed mainly from the user to the researcher and the user was never considered in the role of researcher

Reflecting on this experience, I see two main problem areas that negatively influenced the participatory aspect of the research. Firstly, there were some unfavourable *framework conditions*, and secondly, there was a manifest lack of respect for the knowledge of the local resource users, resulting in a problematic *attribution of roles* to the external actors and to local users.

The dominant factor affected by the framework conditions was time. The project was expected to elaborate scientifically-sound studies of the natural sphere and the human sphere, within a time limit of three years and in two different eco-zones. At the same time, the project was expected to start up a dynamic participation process with resource users, leading to formulation of development scenarios. These goals were too ambitious and put the project team under time pressure. Participatory approaches in research and development need time, so when time is scarce, quickly realisable top-down research is given priority instead. Another unfavourable framework condition was the ethnic composition of the research team. None of the researchers came from the traditionally underprivileged ethnic groups of the rainforest zone, where part of the research was done. Researchers were either members of the two privileged Malgach highland ethnic groups, or Europeans.

Nevertheless, at the core of the project's problems lies the researchers' attitudes towards their own role and the role they attributed to the resource users. Basically, the scientific demands of the project determined the interpretation of roles by the scientific staff. They saw their role as the elaborators, in little time and under pressure, of scientifically sound results. They were responsible for providing those results, and furthermore such results could enhance their professional reputations. Their role was to plan, to act, to implement and to know. By contrast, the role attributed to the resource users was to be an *object* of research into specific resource-use strategies and practices, and the suppliers of complementary information.

In this project, participatory processes were a defined project goal that was never achieved. Indigenous knowledge *per se* was considered neither a rich potential source of information nor a guide to further development strategies. In principle, the position of researchers towards users was a distant and sometimes contemptuous one. Researchers and users were not working for the same objectives. It seems that participatory projects

need to include the long and sometimes difficult path of interaction with indigenous knowledge, explicitly formulated as a project goal.

9.5 CONCLUSIONS

This paper highlights ethical aspects of the learning process and behaviour between resource users and so-called external actors. The key points mentioned here (respect, fair and open attitudes, and clarification of roles) are not only intrinsic values but also indispensable preconditions needed to reach sustainable results in the process.

Knowledge and values are always products of their environment. Learning from local resource users therefore should be an attempt to recognise and to understand 'other's' knowledge and values emerging from their context; it implies learning about perceptions, attitudes, ways of thinking and socio-economic backgrounds.

Forestry and agriculture are directly and intensely linked with natural resources and therefore occupy key positions in the food production, energy, culture and religion of each society. This is especially true for the South, where these sectors have a decisive role in the economy. Forestry, as a science, should pay more attention to the multiple functionality of forests.

But in discussing natural resources, it is not only objective 'hard' facts which count. The relationships between human beings and their forests and certain forms of utilisation have emotional or religious roots, which should not be trivialised. This is one of the lessons learnt both from development projects in the South, and from environmental conflict in Europe. We have to respect the existence of different ways of understanding and forms of knowledge. None of these forms should be discriminated against *a priori*. This means that we need to go beyond learning facts about different 'ways of utilisation', and enhance our knowledge about different *perceptions* of natural resources, and respect for the points of view of others. To undertake this process we have to go far beyond pure knowledge accumulation; we need a long term communication process (about hard facts and about soft facts, or beliefs and cultural context) between different cultural perspectives. Real learning from resource users is also learning with resource users. As researchers, we need a new reciprocity in the transfer of technical and social knowledge during this interaction.

We face the fact that there is, for economic or political reasons, inequality of power between the different groups of resource users and many external actors. Even participatory methods (essential in today's interactions between resource users and external actors) may be nothing more than obligatory efforts and be used as tools of manipulation. On their own, they do not guarantee fair, respectful partnership in mutual behaviour. Instead, this respect requires an overall re-orientation of the roles of researchers and developers, who must move from 'making knowledge' to 'contributing to knowledge' and to be willing to take the risk of interaction that might lead to unexpected results. Do we have the courage and the time to try to develop a common acceptable way from these possibly diverging perspectives, for future development?

REFERENCES

- Apffel-Marglin, F. (1998). *The spirit of regeneration. Andean culture confronting western notions of development*. Zed Books, London, New York.
- Goulet, D. (1995). *Development Ethics: A guide to theory and practice*. Zed Books, London.
- Lettmayer, G. (1993). *Bodenerosion in der Kulturlandschaft von Ayopaya (Cochabamba), Bolivien. Quantitative und qualitative Untersuchungen. - Soil erosion in the agricultural region of Ayopaya (Cochabamba), Bolivia. Quantitative and qualitative research*. Unpublished thesis. Post graduate studies. University of Göttingen, Germany.