

## HANDBOOK ON PARTICIPATORY METHODS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS:

*A Guide for Programmers and Implementers Based on  
the Participatory Action Research Project with Young  
Mothers and their Children in Liberia, Sierra Leone,  
and Northern Uganda*

by Grace Onyango and Miranda Worthen



Please visit [www.pargirlmothers.com](http://www.pargirlmothers.com) for additional material about the PAR Project.

Published November 2010.

This publication may be reproduced for educational or non-profit purposes without permission, providing acknowledgement of the source is made.

We would like to acknowledge our partner agencies, academics, and donors in the PAR Project. In Liberia partners are Save the Children, UK, Touching Humanity in Need of Kindness, and Debey Sayndee at the University of Liberia; in Sierra Leone partners are Christian Brothers, Christian Children's Fund, Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, National Network for Psychosocial Care, and Samuel Beresford Weekes at Fourah Bay College; in Uganda partners are Caritas, Concerned Parents Association, Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, World Vision, and Stella Nema at Makerere University. Without the dedication of these partners, the PAR Project would have been impossible. Our donors were the Oak Foundation, Pro Victimis Foundation, Compton Foundation, and UNICEF West Africa. We also wish to acknowledge the remarkable young mothers who participated in this study, who are too numerous to be thanked individually.

## NOTE TO THE READER

This handbook has been designed to help you learn ways to integrate more participatory methods into programming for vulnerable populations, especially war affected young adults and children. Throughout the handbook, we talk about the Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project with Young Mothers and their Children. The PAR Project took place in Liberia, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda and was implemented through an academic-NGO partnership that brought together a team of ten non-governmental organizations, three in-country academics and four Western academics. The project began in October 2006 and ended in June 2009. Each of the ten NGO partners implemented the program in two field sites. A total of 658 young women, 80% of whom were between 16-24 years of age, together with more than 1,200 of their children participated in the project in the three countries. Although the project was designed to promote the reintegration of young mothers formerly associated with armed forces, in order to prevent excessive targeting of this population, other vulnerable young mothers who had not been associated with armed groups were also included. You can learn more about the PAR Project and its findings in a report titled, "Community-Based Reintegration of War-Affected Young Mothers: Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Liberia, Sierra Leone & Northern Uganda," which is available online at [www.pargirlmothers.com](http://www.pargirlmothers.com).

Throughout this handbook, we hope to highlight the diversity of approaches that partner agencies took towards integrating participatory methods into their work. While all the collaborators in the PAR Project agreed on certain values and approaches that we would all draw upon, we also strove to "let a thousand flowers bloom," recognizing that in each context, the project would be shaped by its participants and thus the PAR Project would not look the same in any two communities.

In this handbook, we offer stories from the PAR Project as examples, but hope that you, the reader, will see the creativity in the methods and develop your own approaches to increasing community participation in your programming or to beginning a new project with participatory methods at its core.

## INTRODUCTION

"Participation" is a word that has been used in child protection and development circles for many years. The term has come to mean everything from a token consultation with a beneficiary group to full-scale participation by affected

communities in program development, implementation, and evaluation. In this handbook, we will be describing methods at this further end of the spectrum – that is, highly participatory approaches.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is one type of participatory methodology that is designed not only to achieve social change for a group or in a community, but also to document and learn from that process through research. PAR actively involves the target participants in a process to improve their situations. Participants become the “program designers” and “researchers” as they identify and implement solutions to the obstacles to achieving full participation in their community. Participants are key actors as evaluators of the project, reflecting on how well the process has helped them reach their stated goals.

This process whereby participants engage in self-reflective inquiry into their own situations, identify problems and possible solutions, implement the solutions, and evaluate the project is an iterative one – as new problems or obstacles are recognized, approaches to addressing the problems are developed and implemented. Unlike traditional program design that is agency-centric where a problem is identified, then a program is implemented, and after implementation, the program is evaluated, PAR offers multiple opportunities to develop and build upon what is learned throughout the process of implementation with the participants taking center stage.

A critical difference between the PAR Project and more traditional agency programming is that the young mother participants themselves identified and prioritized their problems and came up with creative solutions to try to alter their situations. In each of the 20 communities, problems included stigma from the community and family, inability to access health and education resources for themselves and their children, and inability to find sustainable livelihoods. While it is beyond the scope of this handbook to describe all of the social actions that participants engaged in, a more detailed description can be found in the report of the project, available at the website above.

The handbook explains how to use highly participatory approaches, like the techniques used in the PAR Project, in community-based projects for vulnerable youth and children. Practical “how-to” steps are described using examples from the PAR Project. We include a section on critical challenges and approaches used to overcome these challenges in the PAR Project. Boxes throughout the text highlight key decision points for agencies and implementers. We have included excerpts from the young mothers’ conversations and case studies as their voices speak most strongly of all about the benefits of participatory programming.

## *Voices from the PAR Project:*

### *Reflecting on the PAR Project in Uganda*

Six months after the formal end of the PAR Project, participants in the program gathered with community members to reflect on the ways that the PAR Project had impacted their lives. We were interested in learning about the sustainability of the improvements that participants had reported at the end of the program. The discussion below is from a community in northern Uganda where 27 young mothers and four of their children met with community advisors and the research assistant who had been working with them during the PAR Project.

**Chairman of Community Advisory Committee (CAC):** *“This project has made every body very happy in the community. Our desire is that this project develops and does not die as it is helpful to the girls. There is a lot to be heard from the girls.”*

**Young Mother 1:** *“One of the activities we are doing is knitting small table clothes. I am grateful to have this skill of knitting. People in the community don’t laugh at us anymore because we have something to do. For knitting however, the market is a problem.”*

**Young Mother 2:** *“When we knit, we sit, share experiences and ideas. When we have frustrations we talk to friends. Some had suicidal thoughts but we can share in the group.”*

**Young Mother 3:** *“Meeting together has raised my esteem and how people see us. When people see you improve your life they also like you.”*

**Young Mother 4:** *“I am also grateful for the project support in daily incomes. People used to laugh and say ‘Kony’s wives’ and they don’t say that anymore. People are peaceful and the community has accepted us.”*

**Young Mother 5:** *“Before we didn’t have income activity – we were just seated at home.”*

**Young Mother 6:** *“Our children are now helped, and when [our next project,] food vending takes off we will be able to support them.”*

**Facilitator (to CAC member):** *“What changes have you observed in the young mothers involved in the PAR Project?”*

**CAC Member 1:** *“Unity in themselves and sharing of experiences. Bringing together of girls, sharing ideas, asking them to think for themselves and follow up. The girls’ appearance was not good, but this has changed.”*

**Facilitator (to CAC member):** *“To what do you attribute this change?”*

**CAC Member 1:** *“The most important aspect was encouraging the girls to make their own decisions, for example, to do food vending, to help them open their minds and plan.”*

**CAC Member 2:** *“The whole design of the project is what made them change – it brings girls together, says make your own decision, do what you want to do.”*

**Facilitator (to participants):** *“How would you know if being in this project made a difference for you? What things would you see changing?”*

**Young Mother 7:** *“You would know if this project is successful if you get money, and if your child falls sick, you can get treatment for that child.”*

## PART I

### *A Step-By-Step Approach to Launching a Community-Based Participatory Project*

Community-based participatory methods require special engagement with the community and participants right from the beginning. There are many different ways of beginning this process of interacting with the community and participants. We put forward here some steps to consider following in beginning a new participatory program, based on what we learned during the PAR Project. You should be creative about whether there are other strategies that are better suited to your own context.

In this section, we present *action steps* that we learned from our experience in the PAR Project or that we think are important for considering during the design and implementation of a participatory program. We set these off with bullets. We also present *tips*, adding context about things to consider when going about the action steps or what we learned in the PAR Project.

#### *Step One:*

*Agency personnel visit the community where you want to begin a participatory program and explain the program to community members and potential participants.*

- A first visit with a community might be appropriate to coordinate with local stakeholders, like district officials or a local child protection committee. These local contacts can be responsible for mobilizing other key stakeholders for a meeting.

*Tip: Stakeholders may include members of child committees, youth representatives, women representatives, opinion leaders, birth attendants, community health workers, teachers, community counselors, church and other faith representatives, and prominent elderly men and women. A sizable committee of between 10- 12 people could have one person from each of these groups.*

- At this first meeting, explain the purpose of the project in detail, including the level of participation that will be expected or desired of the target group and community members. If this is a highly participatory program, this may include their involvement in the initial design of the program, the identification of the target population, facilitation of meetings for the target population or community members, and researching and addressing the problems faced by the target population.

- In an initial visit, describe clearly the population that you want to work with, such as a particular sex, age bracket or kind of vulnerability.
- At this meeting or subsequent meetings, solicit volunteers or have the community appoint an advisory committee to the program. These members can help to identify participants.
- In this meeting, and in subsequent meetings, ethical considerations can be developed and discussed. Community members should be clear that this program is entirely voluntary and that participants will be free to join or not join as they choose. Together with the community, you can develop a set of “Do No Harm” principles that lay the groundwork for engagement with the community and/or target population (*see Box 2*). These principles can be revised and adapted as the program continues.

### *Voices from the PAR Project:*

#### *The First Meeting with an Urban Community in Liberia*

When the PAR Project began in Liberia, agency personnel and organizers visited one of the communities that we thought would be a good fit for the Project. This urban community had been heavily impacted by the war and had a large population of young mothers, including both those who had been formerly associated with armed groups and those who had gotten pregnant living in their community. During the course of the war, the community had gone from a population of 3,500 to 56,000.

At this first meeting, organizers and agency personnel met with the Mayor of the community, school teachers, church leaders, respected elderly community members, and young mothers themselves. The following is a bit of dialogue from that first meeting. We include this case to illustrate how in a first meeting of a new program, community members may be thinking about other programs that have been unsuccessful in the past. As a new program,



especially one consulting the community from the beginning, your agency will have to listen to these concerns and respond openly and honestly.

**Mayor:** *“There are so many people here now, and they’re low income. Parents have been impoverished so the children are too. We are at the peak of the dry season and we have no water. We are named for the water pipe that passes through here but still we have no water. So many are not working.... So many girls have babies but they are not ready for parenting so they are ushered into gardening. If you want the girls to do research, you must empower them. There have been many speeches here, many promises, golden promises. But if the promises that were made were steadfast, we wouldn’t be starting from scratch like we are today. So please do not do this again. Think, think, and do it wisely. Don’t give hand-outs. Empowerment and education prevent pregnancies. If all the girls here brought their babies this morning, the room would be full of the babies. We want to challenge you: make a difference. I do not want you to come again, take notes, get money. If you desire to build from the ashes, we can help you. We can turn the future around.”*

**PAR Organizer:** *“We cannot promise you anything, but that we will work with you and put our efforts beside your own to try and make a difference in the lives of the young women in this community. We do not have substantial funding and we could not build a school and we will not open just another new skills training program. This project will only work if you all put in effort, too. We will help you in that effort, but we will not be telling you what you should be doing. The young mothers in this community will be the ones to identify what they need to alter their situations and we will help garner the resources to support them in whatever efforts they undertake.”*

**Young Mother:** *“Will this process be like DDR, where we will be let down afterwards? I’m asking because DDR said that they would help us in school and they gave us fees for a month but then they left and we couldn’t pay the school fees anymore.”*

**PAR Organizer:** *“We will not promise you things that we cannot do. We probably do not have the funds to pay your school fees. But we will work with you to help you find livelihood options so that if you want to go back to formal school or literacy classes, you will be able to afford that. The choices will be yours.”*

### ***Box 1***

#### ***Decision Point for Agencies: A New Community or A Familiar Community***

When beginning a new, more participatory program, will it be easier for you to work in a community where you already have programs and relationships or to select a new community? Here are some questions to consider:

- What are the expectations of the familiar community about how your agency operates? Will it be hard to shift expectations?
- Do you know leaders who would be excited about working on this new program?
- Are there resources you can link with in the community, like a health clinic or skills training center, where you already have established trust?
- Is the participatory project you are launching based on the community’s identification of priorities, as result of what you have learned from prior work in this community, or is it something new?
- Are there other communities that have a greater need for the particular project that you are implementing?

## *Box 2*

### *Decision Point for Agencies: Formal “Do No Harm” Principles*

“Do no harm” are words that guide the formulation of principles to safeguard and protect human subjects participating in research. We found it useful to have a set of principles that everyone involved in the PAR Project agreed upon to ensure that participants did not experience any harm during the program and to lay out guidelines in advance for how to intervene in case harms were realized. We created our statement of principles right at the beginning of the project.

Brainstorming principles together with agency personnel, community members, and participants can help ensure that each party is on the same page in terms of expectations about the program.

The following are principles that we used in the PAR Project:

*“We understand PAR as research with the intent of community mobilization and distinctly separate from implementation of externally driven programs. We will not conduct research without planning and taking action to address local needs identified in that research. We seek to promote community participation with a focus on young mothers (formerly associated with armed groups) and their children and other vulnerable groups. We will enable the empowerment of young mothers within communities in order to inspire communities to engage in social change which can impact authoritative bodies to positively influence young mothers and, ultimately, the community. We will adhere to international human rights standards. We support community consultation to develop and implement Participation, Action, and Research.”*

“We support:

- Local level committees to assist in respect for culture.
- Strengthening healthy and supportive cultural values but with no acceptance of cultural values that are oppressive to women and children.
- Feedback to communities with regard to research.

- Adherence to informed consent, ethical interviewing, codes of conduct, and confidentiality.
- Awareness of child protection issues and incorporation of child protection strategies.”

### **Step Two:**

#### **Recruit facilitator(s) and community advisors to work with the participants.**

- Consult with the community about whether there is a local person who can be hired to facilitate the program or whether it makes more sense to bring a person from outside into the community to facilitate the program. If an outside person is requested, consider having him or her reside in the community for the duration of the program.

*Tip: It is usually helpful for a facilitator to be from the same cultural background as the participants and well-versed in the participants' concerns. While a facilitator does not need to be from the community, the community must accept the facilitator and be comfortable with that person's role in the community. The facilitator has the responsibility to get to know the community where he or she is working.*

- Agency personnel and others will need to work with the facilitator intensively at the onset and ongoing through the life of the project to ensure that he or she has a firm grasp of the participatory nature of the program.

*Tip: Participatory programs require a different kind of facilitation than more traditional child protection or development programming. As such, the qualifications for hiring a facilitator may be different than for hiring a programmer for another kind of program. The facilitator needs to be able to establish good rapport with the participants and community members.*

- Recruitment of community advisors can begin soon after the first meeting. While some people may volunteer for the role others can be recommended by community members. Community advisors will form a Community Advisory Committee (CAC), that the participants can consult throughout the project.
- Once participants are recruited, they should determine how to engage

with the CAC members. There are a variety of ways that participants and advisors may interact. In some cases CAC members may join participants for regular meetings. In other cases, CAC members may have their own separate meeting times with participants. The relationship between CAC members and participants can evolve and change over the duration of the program. Similarly, participants can decide whether to bring on new CAC members throughout the program, as other community members demonstrate interest in supporting the participants.

*Voices from the PAR Project:*

*Negotiating with a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) in Northern Uganda*

At an early stakeholder's meeting at one of the sites in northern Uganda, one of the CAC members requested that CAC members be financially compensated for their involvement in the PAR Project. The facilitator said that there was no budget line for compensating CAC members, but said she would consult with the agency. The facilitator and the agency decided that they were unable to pay CAC members, and told the CAC members that they would have to participate voluntarily. Although one CAC member insisted that "there should be payment for the CAC so we do not get demoralized and give up our role," others were happy to continue working on the project because they shared the goals of the program. The all volunteer CAC worked based on trust and a strong desire to support the young mothers and their community. This CAC proved critical during a particularly difficult phase of a new income generating project.

Having an all volunteer CAC meant that it was clear that the members were participating because they cared about the young mothers, not because they wanted financial compensation. The CAC members felt valued for their work, and the young mothers felt cared for by the CAC members.

### *Step Three:*

#### *Identify and recruit participants to the program.*

- In most cases, community advisors and other stakeholders will identify an initial cohort of participants. However, other recruitment strategies should be considered if they are appropriate. For example, if it would not call unwanted attention to the target group, announcements could be made about the program at a church meeting or at a school.
- The facilitator, community advisors, or other agency personnel can meet with each identified person to explain the program and ascertain whether the person is interested in participating or not. This meeting must be done sensitively. It may take multiple meetings to explain the program or for potential participants to decide whether or not to join the program.

*Tip: Facilitators should be patient during recruitment of participants, answering questions that come up and working with the potential participants to help them fully understand the intention of the program. This may take considerable time.*

- This initial group of participants can be encouraged to do outreach among their peers, identifying others who might be interested in and eligible for the program.

*Tip: When dealing with a particularly vulnerable group, it can be hard for people to believe that a program is being designed specifically to help them address their problems. Encountering this skepticism and pessimism can be demoralizing for participants who have already decided to participate in the program. The participants may need extra support and encouragement through this recruitment phase so that they do not get discouraged and opt out of the program.*

- It can be very useful to a facilitator to visit the homes of participants to explain the project in detail and alleviate any concerns or fears that parents or other caretakers may have.

## *Voices from the PAR Project:*

### *Young Mothers Recruiting Participants in Sierra Leone*

In one community in Sierra Leone, a group of five young mothers who were eager to be a part of the PAR Project were initially identified by community members and trained to recruit other young mothers into the project. After the first year of the project, they reflected on what it had been like to recruit their peers. They spoke about how it had been difficult at first as many young mothers didn't believe that a program could have been designed just for them. They shared the following strategies:

**Young Mother 1:** *“When I first talked to some of them [the other young mothers], they refused. They were not willing to be a part of this project because they thought it wasn't necessary. We continued to meet with them to talk about how it could help all of our futures. Then we had our first meeting and all spoke about what happened during the war. We were able to support our colleagues by saying that we all experienced those things and we need to now focus on the future. We are trying to encourage each other not to lose hope and see if there is a future for all of us.”*

**Young Mother 2:** *“One thing I learned was that when I was talking to my colleagues who had suffered like me, you have to put yourself into their shoes and understand the suffering they experienced. If you don't put yourself in their shoes, they may face humiliation. But if you come to the level of the person, that will help her be able to speak to you better. In my own case, I was sharing my experience during the war....”*

**Young Mother 3:** *“During the training, we were given guidelines about how to go about doing the recruiting - like the age bracket of the people we should be recruiting. After the training, we heard that we have to work with the community and the facilitator to recruit others in the community to join the project. Another aspect of*

*the training was not to ask direct questions, like “what happened to you in the war?” But to find a way around and ask indirectly so the person comes up with her own story. They would be shy or embarrassed if they were asked directly. But talking about our own story worked best.”*

### ***Step Four:***

#### ***Strengthen participants’ roles and responsibilities at every stage of the program.***

- During the initial recruitment of participants, facilitators and community advisors may want to emphasize that the participants themselves will be at the center of the decision-making process. This does not mean that they will be alone in the decision-making, but rather that the participants will be guiding the process with the support and help of the facilitator and those they identify to be advisors.
- Participants should be fully informed of how the project is going to run, especially so as to counter potentially unrealistic expectations.

*Tip: Transparency is a key principle of participatory work. When participants and community members understand the constraints of the program, they can be enlisted to help find creative ways to accomplish objectives within the resources available.*

- If you have decided to adopt an informed consent procedure, participants or their parents or caretakers should go through that procedure at the beginning of the process (*see Box 3*).



### *Box 3*

#### *Decision Point for Agencies: Adopting a Informed Consent Procedure*

When you begin your program, you may decide that participants should go through a formal process of agreeing to join. One way of doing this is by implementing an “informed consent” procedure, whereby participants are told about the program and express in writing or verbally whether they wish to participate or not. Here are some considerations in designing an informed consent procedure.

- No participant should be coerced into joining the project.
- If there is a written informed consent document, it should be written or read to the participant in the local language.
- Participants should receive adequate information about the project, be given time to come up with and to ask questions, and be allowed to think through the information given before signing the informed consent, even if it means taking a long time.
- The informed consent should clearly state the purpose of the program, including the group process. For example they should know that they are going to have group meetings where each person is encouraged to contribute. They should know that any personal information that they reveal will be held in confidence by the facilitator and agency personnel, and should agree to hold others’ private information in confidence.
- The informed consent should not be mistaken for a binding agreement to participate for the duration of the project. Individuals should be free to leave the group if they so wish.

## *Step Five:*

### *Develop a group process with the participants.*

- The first meeting for a new group of participants should be held at a place identified by the facilitator, members of the advisory committee, or participants. It might be helpful for key agency staff to attend this meeting to help the facilitator explain the project more fully to participants.
- Here is a model for how a first meeting with participants might run:
  - a) Welcome remarks by organization staff and community facilitator.
  - b) Introductions.
  - c) Re-explain the project and emphasize that participants are to take the center stage as they are the owners of all that is going to be done.
  - d) Explain ethical considerations and assure confidentiality of what will be said, written, recorded and done within the group.
  - e) Participants are asked to choose their preferred meeting place and time. This could take some time as the participants deliberate.
  - f) The facilitator asks the participants to set their own rules for meetings. These rules might include being respectful of one another, showing up on time, keeping what is said in the meeting confidential, etc.
  - g) The role of the CAC is explained to the participants including attending the group meetings.
  - h) Participants decide on which other people in their lives they want to attend their meetings whenever it is necessary (e.g. boyfriends, parents, siblings).
  - i) Open a brainstorming session on the reasons for coming together as a group. For example, are there particular challenges that this group faces that are different from challenges faced by others in the community? Be patient if the participants do not readily contribute ideas, as they may not have confidence to speak out. The staff and facilitator may take the lead role to get the discussion started.
  - j) As the reasons for coming together into a group emerge, the facilitator writes these down to review them later with the group.
  - k) Participants are invited to continue talking about the reasons for their coming together and to start thinking about how to overcome problems facing them.

- Permission should be given to participants to contribute to meetings in whatever way they are most comfortable. As more participants contribute, it is likely that they will gain a sense that they are not alone in their struggles. They may develop feelings of sympathy and empathy, which may be manifested in words and actions towards others. Slowly there is a build-up of togetherness in the group.

*Tip: In the first meeting and subsequent gatherings, leaders may naturally emerge within the group. We encourage you to support the natural leadership potential of all participants, giving over responsibilities to the new leaders, while still cultivating the development of leadership qualities in participants who may stand out less.*

- Forming an identity as a group of participants will emerge over the course of several meetings. This process requires cultivation.

*Tip: As particular problems are discussed, the focus should always be on coming up with creative ways of addressing the problems. For example, if lack of funds to pay for medical expenses emerges as a problem, the discussion of the issue should also include strategies to improve income generation or opening up the possibility of negotiating for reduced fees with a nearby health clinic.*

### **Step Six:**

#### **Support participants in learning from each other and in beginning to identify common challenges that can be addressed through the program.**

- Participants in the participatory program may be engaged in formal or informal ways of learning about their situations, gathering the information necessary to begin designing and implementing social actions to address their needs.

*Tip: In the PAR Project, this component of the project was called “re-search,” but other language can be used that is more comfortable to participants, community, facilitator, or agency. What is critical is that group members are engaged in processes whereby they are positioned as the “experts” with respect to their own lives. They are encouraged to identify the challenges that are most pressing to them, learning from one another and engaging in self-reflective inquiry.*

- The facilitator’s role is to skillfully direct this process, while not imposing his or her own meaning on participants’ statements. For example, the

facilitator might lead a process whereby participants brainstorm and then rank the challenges facing them. One method to encourage this approach is as follows:

- a) The facilitator begins a session by asking participants to identify obstacles or challenges in their lives.
- b) Participants then share these, going around in a circle until all have spoken as many times as they want. The facilitator or a note-taker keeps track of the statements made. If the group is illiterate, symbols can also be used to identify particular problems.
- c) Through their sharing the participants will probably find that they identified several common problems.
- d) The facilitator or the CAC members can ask questions about these problems, helping expose more about the way that these challenges impact their lives. If the challenges seem inter-related, the facilitator can help describe this relationship.
- e) At this stage or later, the facilitator can ask the group to rank the problems or challenges in order of their significance as barriers to full participation in the community or to leading as good a life as possible. In a more literate group, ranking can be done on paper, in front of the group. If the group is illiterate, symbols can be used and moved around on the floor. For example, a stick may be labeled “lack of child care” and a stone can be labeled “inability to afford medical care.” The participants can place the stick or the stone higher, depending on which problem they perceive to be more important.
- f) After identifying several issues, the facilitator can then direct the discussion towards what can be done about the issues that have been identified. This discussion should consider how these issues are currently handled. Could they be handled differently? Are there solutions that can be created within the resources currently available to the group or the community? Are there outside resources that are required to address the problem?
- g) Participants take time to discuss potential actions they can take as a group or individually to bring about the desired changes.
- h) At this point, CAC members should be consulted to find out whether there are additional resources that CAC members can help mobilize to support the participants. Also, CAC members might have a sense about how the community may respond to certain kinds of changes.

For example, CAC members may advise the group that they should do a drama to sensitize the community to a proposed change prior to undertaking the social action.

- i) If the social actions that participants propose require new skills, they along with the facilitator and the CAC should work together to find a way to learn these new skills, preferably finding resources within the community rather than bringing in outside “experts.”
- j) If the program has money to support participants in addressing identified problems, enable the decision-making process and actions by supporting participants in building confidence and trust in working together and the community before releasing money for social actions. We suggest transparency about the funds available, but also suggest that the group process be allowed to form and become durable before funds are introduced so as to promote cooperation among participants.
- k) The group should be allowed sufficient time to discuss and decide what they want to do within the constraints of the money available. Guidance on the budget is needed here as they may likely propose multiple solutions that require resources or may have unrealistic plans within the community context.
- l) The CAC and agency staff should work to support the viability of projects and guide decision-making within a framework of supporting the group’s own processes. Community advisors should advise and mediate in problems that participants may develop as they work together on their projects. Community advisors should watch out for problems that may emerge once participants start handling money and improving their lives.

## *Voices from the PAR Project:*

### *Creating a Group Process in Sierra Leone*

A little less than a year into the PAR Project, young mother participants in a community in rural Sierra Leone reflected on what difference the project had made to their lives. The following comments are from this meeting.

**Young Mother 1:** *“The meetings we’ve held have created a sense of oneness among us. Now we share the burdens and feel like we are each others’ sisters.”*

**Young Mother 2:** *“Before even getting money [for social actions], we were feeling better. We have been making our own contributions even before the grant arrived. We have been sharing our savings together. We then invest the money together. I bought rice in another village and have been selling it here to earn a profit. I feel fine now. I was just on my way somewhere but came back to the village because I wanted to come to this meeting.”*

**Young Mother 3:** *“Since we began to meet, we have really come together as one. Before we didn’t get together, but now we give each other encouragement. The grant now helps us engage in business. I can take care of myself and my children. We meet in the evening hours in the village and share our stories and experiences and give each other advice, encouragement, and sympathy. One of the problems we talk about is how to care for our children.... Among us, there are those who are more experienced and we turn to them for advice because they can guide us. The chairman of the advisory committee attends our meetings and he can give valuable advice in life.”*

**Young Mother 4:** *“I am now comfortable. Before the program, things were difficult in the community, but now I feel better because we established that we should all love one another. Together [in this group], we play and laugh. Now I do a business and the community respects me more.”*

#### *Box 4*

#### *Decision Point for Agencies: How To Include Participants in Planning a Program*

When you are working with vulnerable populations, it may be difficult to break through the participants' and community members' beliefs that the participants can't do good decision making about their own situations. This pervasive thought may become more challenging if participants are illiterate or are children. How can this population be engaged?

- Emphasize that the participants are the experts in their own lives – no one knows their situations better than they do.
- Reject the idea that only written documentation is valuable – stories told to one another or improvised songs can hold a lot of information.
- Encourage people to work together – if two or three people or a whole group ask questions, each person can learn something from the responses.
- Be clear that there is never one “right” answer – sometimes the most interesting learning happens when there is not a consensus about a situation or what poses the biggest challenge. Use these instances of disagreement to highlight people's different perceptions or different experiences.
- Practice! Have participants practice role play with each other, CAC members, or facilitators before they try to interview someone else not affiliated with the program.
- Accompany! If participants want support, have CAC or the facilitator accompany them when they interview others. Set ground rules for how involved these support people will be beforehand, so that participants know they can ask for help, but can also lead the interactions if they want.

## *Step Seven:*

### *Work with families and the community to mobilize support for the participants.*

- When launching a participatory program with a vulnerable or marginalized group, particularly with young people, you will likely find that lack of family or community support is a critical issue. If participants identify this as a problem, then concerted efforts will need to be made to mobilize community and family support.

*Tip: In the PAR Project, young mothers identified stigma, marginalization, and perceived lack of social support from family and community members as barriers to their reintegration. Winning family and community support became crucial to the success of the project. These kinds of social dynamics are likely to be present if your participatory program targets any marginalized group, whether you are working with disabled youth, orphans, people at risk of HIV/AIDS, or any other vulnerable group in the community. Helping the participants in your program engage the community and mobilize community members to become allies in their efforts to improve their lives is critical.*

- There are many ways that the facilitator can help participants discuss relations with family and community members. We present in the text box below an example of a participatory process that we used in the PAR Project.

#### *Box 5*

##### *Example of a participatory process identifying concerns with the community as an obstacle to reintegration.*

When participants in this community first came together to discuss their problems, they very quickly identified relational issues with their families and community as obstacles to their full participation in their community. Participants decided to split into four small groups to discuss these problems and learn from one another about what they were each experiencing. Through these focus group discussions, four



distinct problems emerged. The participants labeled these problems as follows:

- “Our families hate us”
- “The community calls us derogatory names”
- “At school we are isolated”
- “We are denied access to treatment at health centers”

We created matrices to rank these statements in order of how much they hurt the young mothers’ feelings or created obstacles in their lives, and to prioritize which of these problems the group would try to tackle first.

*Table 1: Matrix: Relational problems hurting participants’ feelings*

<b>Problem Statement</b>	<b>Group One</b>	<b>Group Two</b>	<b>Group Three</b>	<b>Group Four</b>	<b>Total</b>
Hatred in family	1	1	1	1	1
Derogatory names	2	2	2	3	2
Isolated at school	3	4	-	-	4
Denied access to treatment	4	3	3	2	3

**Interpretation:**

The most salient problem that participants faced was hatred in their families. Derogatory name calling in the community was also identified by each group as very important. While isolation at school and the denial of access to treatment were also problematic, they were not as important to each group as the first two issues.

The participants then together formed a statement to express these problems in a personal way. They said: *“Our major problems that hurt our feelings are hatred in our families and name calling by community members. We are also hurt by the denial of access to treatment for*

*medical problems and being isolated by our peers at school.”*

The next step of this process was for participants to brainstorm what might be done to improve the relationships of participants and their families and the broader community. There were three proposals that the participants were excited by: 1) talking with their families, 2) sharing their feelings with the community, and 3) doing social activities that they thought might encourage the community to support them. The participants again crafted a statement to express their solutions in a personal way. They said, *“We believe that we can solve the problems of hatred and name calling by expressing our feelings to those hurting us and by doing social activities that bring us together with the community and encourage the community to support us.”*

- Sensitization of community and family members by participants about their situation can be a delicate matter. Participants will likely require emotional support from CAC members and the facilitator in order to build the confidence to approach families and community members who have been hostile towards them.

*Tip: In the PAR Project, we found that the best first step towards community and family sensitization was for participants to discuss how to go about having these conversations as a group and carefully formulate messages that they wanted to pass on to the community. Participants also role played conversations with family members or community members. When there were particularly supportive family members of some participants, those family members could come to the group and help role play and support the participants with more hostile family members. In some instances, participants requested that CAC members or the parents of a participant who were supportive of the young mothers speak to those family members who were not so supportive. In other instances, young mothers invited their family members to group meetings where they would all share their experiences together and ask the family members to give them another chance. Whatever process the participants used to*

*reach their family members, they discussed it as a group beforehand and identified ways that they could support one another in this effort.*

- Use modalities that are most comfortable and appropriate. It may be hard for participants to have an open conversation with elders, but using songs or drama they may be able to convey messages otherwise impossible to articulate.

*Tip: Dramas were the most common modality that participants felt comfortable with for sensitizing community members about their situations. Participants would practice an improvised drama on their own in order to reach agreement about the critical messages to convey to the community. Then, community members were invited to watch the drama and discuss their thoughts about the drama afterwards with the participants.*

### *Voices from the PAR Project:*

#### *The impact of performing a drama for the community*

One participant in Sierra Leone reflected on the process of doing a drama for the community by saying the following:

**Young Mother 1:** *“We did a drama about what it was like when we came back from the bush and people shied away from us. The drama also reflected the alienation that we felt when we came back. We did our play to the community and they said that they wanted to join us and join in our activities. Before others were shy of us and now they talk upright to us. We used the drama to bring those who were shy of us closer again.”*

## PART II

### *Practical Matters in Creating a Participatory Program and Donor Relations*

Designing a program using participatory methods is different from designing a traditional program. Because participatory programs emerge from the contributions of the participants, participatory programs require different kinds of budgets, evaluation indicators and ways of communicating with donors than traditional development or child protection programs. In this section, we present tips on each of these three aspects of designing and carrying out a participatory program.

It can be difficult for donors to support highly participatory programming, as these programs do not fit within the rubrics typically used to evaluate proposals. For example, donors often expect a proposal to include a discussion of the problem to be addressed, the content of any material or psychosocial support to the target beneficiary group, the expected outcomes of the program, and indicators that the agency will use to evaluate whether the program has achieved its stated objectives. A detailed budget is expected with any proposal. With a participatory program, however, the agency proposing the program cannot describe all of these details in advance, as the participants in the program will be given the opportunity to determine together what problems they wish to focus on and what approaches they wish to take to address those problems. The proposal and budget for a participatory program must allow participants this creativity and flexibility.

#### *Tips for writing a participatory budget*

Participatory programs give participants a meaningful voice in deciding what social actions to undertake to improve their situations. In the PAR Project, this meant setting aside a budget line to support the initiatives that each group developed. Writing a budget that includes this flexibility to financially support the group can be difficult, especially when NGOs have expertise in producing precise budgets for traditional programs.

There are two components to writing this budget that we will consider here: first, getting your budget approved by your funder; and second, working with participants to put together their own budget to support their social actions. If your funder understands the participatory nature of your program, it should be clear why there is an open budget line to enable social actions identified by participants. However, it may still be difficult for a funder to accept setting aside funds in this open ended manner. One option is to give a few examples

of what a group may choose to do with the funds. Another option is to discuss with the funder some possible constraints on the funds – for example, you might agree with the funder that money could be used for beginning a micro-credit savings program, but not a direct cash transfer to participants.

It is critical to set aside funds in an open-ended manner so that participants are really able to determine what social actions they want to do with the support of these funds. In terms of working with participants, we found in the PAR Project that it was best to be completely transparent and open with participants and community members about how much money had been set aside and when the funds would be available. Participants need to understand how much money they have access to, as well as any possible constraints on the funds, in order to feel fully empowered to decide how the funds will be used. In the PAR Project, the funds available to participants for their social actions were not large – the average amount of direct support to participants for their social action projects over the course of the nearly three year project was 152 USD. In this manner, we found that it often mattered less how much money was available than that young mothers knew that they were the ones who would decide what to do with the money.

The facilitator and the CAC should help participants develop an appropriate budget for their funds. This process will help them understand whether the actions that they wish to undertake can actually be realized within a limited budget. This process can also help them prioritize what requires funding and what they may be able to attain without funds – e.g. through a donation by someone in the community. If the social action is a livelihood initiative, it may also be useful to model what would happen if different levels of profit are attained. For example, participants and the facilitator could examine a question like, “how much capital would remain if the business was only marginally successful?”

Participants may need to develop relevant basic business skills to enable them carry out their social action if their social actions include a livelihood component. Business skills training can help participants understand how to manage funds, work with each other, and weigh the consequences of potential business decisions. This can help promote sustainability as participants develop their own abilities, rather than relying on the guidance of the facilitator and the CAC.

***How to use “process indicators” rather than specifying “outcome indicators” in the beginning of the program.***

In order to evaluate the PAR project as we went along, while staying true to our aim of having the participants fully develop the content of the program, we

developed two kinds of indicators. The first kind of indicator we called “*process indicators*.” This kind of indicator helped us understand how successful the process of the project was. The following are some examples of process indicators from the PAR Project:

- How many young mothers are regularly attending meetings?
- How many different people speak or share in a meeting?
- Do participants say they find the program useful?
- When asked, what do participants say they are getting out of the program?

Process indicators, as the name implies, were about capturing the process of the program. The critical aspects of the program had to do with the level of involvement that participants had and how they evaluated whether the program was useful for them. Using these indicators yielded more qualitative information that could not be summarized by a number or percentage, but offered richness about the experience of the participants. This richness was appreciated by the partner agencies and by our donors. We used this tool to evaluate the program for the first two years, as the participants were learning about their situations and coming up with their own solutions.

After the young mothers in the PAR project had worked together for some time to understand their situations and what they wanted to do in terms of social actions we developed a second kind of indicator, which we called “*participatory outcome indicators*.” These indicators were more traditional indicators in that they measured an outcome of the program. They were, however, different than usual outcome indicators because they were not developed before the program began. The participants themselves developed these indicators in a participatory manner, facilitated by agency staff people or by our academic partners. We then collated these participatory outcome indicators in a survey administered to all participants to evaluate the overall success of the program in achieving what the participants themselves had identified as outcomes. (For more information on the methods we used to develop the survey, see Appendix IV to the full report at [www.pargirlmothers.com](http://www.pargirlmothers.com))

The following are some examples of participatory outcome indicators from the PAR Project:

- Involvement in the project has made me and my children more liked or loved by my family.
- Through participating in the group, I can now speak in public more easily.
- I am able to be supportive to my family by buying basic necessities.

- I can take better care of my child than I could before I joined the group.

There were several different ways that groups went through the process of developing participatory outcome indicators in the different communities in the PAR Project. Here is one example of how a group developed these indicators:

- a) This process began as one young mother shared her story. She said:

*“My family is ashamed of me because I was raped. They call me names that imply that I am defiled and of no use. The community knows about what happened to me. People talk in whispers while looking at me; I know that they talk bad things about me.”*

- b) Other participants were then asked whether they have experienced similar things. Together, they identified the following common experience, which they generalized in a broad statement:

*“Our families are not supportive. When we are sexually abused they think that is the end of our future and start treating us as though we are useless. The way they behave towards us makes the whole community hate us. People think that we are a bad influence on other young people and yet what happened to us was not our own fault.”*

- c) Participants were next asked to discuss in small groups how such treatment made them feel. Here is what they reported:

- They felt sad
- They felt guilty
- They felt isolated
- They hated themselves

- d) Participants were then asked how they would like to feel. After discussion, they reported the following:

- We would like to feel supported by our families.
- We would like to feel that community members accept us.

- e) These statements became objectives for the group to achieve through the program. As the participants considered the projects that they would undertake, they thought about how to achieve these feelings. These statements were also transformed into participatory outcome indicators that could be used to evaluate how successfully the program was able to achieve these goals. The participatory outcome indicators developed were:

- I feel supported by my family (yes, sometimes, no)
- I feel like I am a full part of the community and that the community accepts me (yes, sometimes, no)

f) There were several activities that participants undertook to try and achieve the goals that they set for themselves. They created a song about what they had experienced that they performed for their families to try and help them see how their actions had impacted them. They also created a drama about their experience for the community and, with the help of the CAC, led a discussion about the impact of the community's treatment on their experience. Apart from these two activities that directly addressed the situation, they decided to do activities that they thought would convince their families and the community that they were not "useless." In this manner, even their income generation activities were directed at achieving the feeling of being supported by their families and accepted by community members because they were demonstrating that they could be productive members of their families and communities.

These two kinds of indicators, *process indicators* and *participatory outcome indicators*, each served a critical role in evaluating the success of the program. If you are considering a participatory program, we recommend that you find similar methods that you can use early on in your program to evaluate how well your process is working, as well as indicators that the participants help identify to evaluate how well the program has achieved its objectives.

### ***Keeping donors updated on progress and findings***

Keeping donors aware of the progress of the program may be essential to ensuring continued support and funding. Although every donor is different, and how you might interact with a large inter-governmental funder would be different from how you interact with a small family foundation, there are some basics in how to relate with donors when conducting participatory work. Many donors do not know about participatory action research or about highly participatory methods of doing community-based programming. Therefore, it is critical to remain in continual dialogue with your donors about the program and the methods you are using to achieve the program's objectives.

***Expectations:*** Work with your donors from the onset to manage expectations about the time frame within which you anticipate accomplishing certain objectives which, ultimately, will be decided by participants. For example, be up front if you think it may take several months to recruit participants fully into the program. If a donor knows the anticipated time frame from the beginning they can



work with you to establish reporting procedures that are different from traditional benchmarks for a program's success.

***Phased Reporting:*** We would encourage you to keep your donor apprised of progress at all stages along the process of the participatory program. For example, after a series of community meetings, write a short memo to the donor explaining how the meetings went and what the plans are for the next step. Later, case studies can be a useful way of conveying information about the progress of the participatory program.

Donors are accountable to their boards or other funding bodies and they need to know that progress is being made, even if they do not know from the beginning what that progress will look like. Discuss what the expectations are for reporting with your donor from the beginning of your funding relationship.

***Include Donors in Relationships with Participants:*** In a program that lacks traditional output measures, finding alternative methods of facilitating communication with donors about the impact of a program is critical. We recommend that you work closely with your donors to find ways that they can be involved in learning about the program along the way.

In the PAR Project, we were fortunate to have donors who were interested in learning first hand about the program. Representatives from our two main donors, The Oak Foundation and The Pro Victimis Foundation, joined us for annual meetings that brought together program staff and participants from all three countries. The donors were able to hear from the participants in the program themselves about what had occurred in the previous year and how the program had transformed the girls' lives. In another phase of the PAR Project, a representative from one of our donors visited a field site in northern Uganda where the program was being implemented and met with participants and community members to see for herself how the PAR Project had impacted the participants and their community.

## PART III

### *A Few Challenges to Anticipate in Carrying out a Participatory Program*

Highly participatory approaches to working with communities challenge conventional child protection practices as well as the status-quo relationships between researchers, research subjects, agencies and communities. As such, anticipating challenges that will likely arise before a project begins is advisable.

In our experience with the PAR Project, challenges emerged at different stages of the process and we handled each problem as it arose. We found that what often began as a challenge ended up guiding us to enhanced knowledge and the cultivation of better skills in implementing community-based participatory programming. We were fortunate in that we were able to share learnings across many sites and thus could both experiment with different approaches to certain common problems and pilot solutions in multiple communities to see whether they were context-specific or whether there was a generalizable message we could take from one community's approach. In this section we discuss how we dealt with the challenges our program faced and ultimately transformed these challenges into strengths.

#### *Challenges in the beginning of a participatory program.*

Participatory approaches to programming can challenge the leadership and authority structures in a community. Leaders are used to being in charge of programs, sometimes benefiting directly from projects by including their own children or relatives. In a participatory program, the decisions about who comes to the project are in the hands of the participants. This can mean that you meet resistance even at this earliest of stages.

Another challenge at this early stage is that the first cohort of participants may not feel confident about the program, and so may not want to or be able to recruit others into the program. The community may also not yet be in a position to support the participants in recruiting their peers because they may hold a mind-set that vulnerable groups are depleted of resources to help themselves and unable to take responsibility for changing their circumstances.

Facilitation at this stage requires patience, and it is critical not to rush participants or community members. If a facilitator or agency takes a heavy-handed role at the beginning it will be difficult to let go of that role later in the program as participants and community members may always look to the facilitator or agency for guidance. This phase should be thought as more than recruitment – it is about modeling the participatory approaches used in the program. Taking

it slowly and following the lead of the participants and community members is crucial.

*Participants and community members may not understand how participatory, community-based approaches are different from traditional programming.*

Traditional programming brings to the community an already designed project with outcomes and indicators pre-determined. Participatory approaches, on the other hand, let the project evolve and change as participants contribute the information necessary to establish outcomes and indicators of success. This slows progress of the project as both participants and communities try to understand their roles and responsibilities.

While it is critical to take the time to explain the differences between traditional programming and more participatory approaches, people's understanding will grow as they experience the differences. We found that when agency staff and facilitators modeled a more participatory approach, participants and community members quickly caught on to the difference between the PAR Project and more traditional programs.

Community members and participants will likely ask questions about what *you* plan to do in the program. You should feel comfortable saying, "I cannot answer that question. Only you, the participants, will be able to decide the direction of the program." It may feel uncomfortable to say that you do not know the answer to a question or to give up ownership of the program before it even begins, but this is critical to establishing the true participatory nature of the program from the beginning.

Community support for the program is essential to the success of a participatory, community-based project. Establishing Community Advisory Committees made up of supportive community members helped participants in the PAR Project bridge the gap between themselves and the rest of the community. The CAC members not only provide psychosocial support for the participants but also became mentors and advocates for the participants. In many instances in the PAR Project, CAC members garnered resources to support the participants, such as finding land that could be donated to the participants for gardening or opening a group business. The CAC members became invested in the participants' futures and have been critical to the continued sustainability of the positive changes participants experienced even after the PAR Project came to a formal conclusion.

### *Voices from the PAR Project: Community Advisory Committee Members Reflect on the Project*

The following are comments made by CAC members about their role during and after the PAR Project:

**CAC Member 1:** *“The PAR Project has helped them in the home. But if there is any misunderstanding in the home, I will go there and help them create peace again... Sometimes when there is confusion in the community or between themselves, I go and advise them not to be enemies with one another. We need to live in unity.”*

**CAC Member 2:** *“We see a vast difference in the girls now. Before there were many family disputes with parents or boyfriends. Also there were fights in the community because girls would take credit and not pay it back or they would steal. Girls were seen as a threat to families because they would go with married men and snatch husbands. The parents had given up on these girls.... But now they are fully engaged and they are not creating any problems. They are more accepted by parents and community. I see a lot of potential in the girls now. They can meaningfully contribute to this community.”*

**CAC Member 3:** *“We are monitoring what they learn so that they can help others. We’re not going to let the program end. We monitor how the business is going.... ”*

### ***Jealousies may emerge as participants’ lives improve.***

Jealousy of participants by any community member(s) should be treated seriously as soon as it arises. Jealousy has the potential to damage improved relationships between participants and their families and/or the community. Particularly where social actions require the support of the community, jealousy could jeopardize the success of social actions, which could threaten the confidence that participants have built up over time.

As participants in the program experience a shift in their roles in the community, moving from a position of marginalization to one of empowerment, others in the community may begin to be jealous of the participants' changed situation. As people once considered highly vulnerable demonstrate that they are capable of changing their lives and achieving success, they may even encounter people who attempt to sabotage the achievements gained. These jealousies may arise in families, among peers, or in the broader community. In several cases in the PAR Project, young mothers experienced particular criticism from boys in the community and young women who were not a part of the PAR Project.

In the PAR Project, participants employed several different approaches to deal with jealousy. Here are some examples:

- When a boyfriend expressed jealousy or criticism, he was invited to come to a group meeting. Rather than exclude him or push him further away, he was engaged as a key player and made to feel invested in the success of the program because he himself could benefit through having a girlfriend who was doing better.
- Another approach with boyfriends was to have a small group of participants, or another participant and her boyfriend, visit the home and talk with the boyfriend. If there is another male partner in the group who is very supportive, he can act as an outreach person to other males.
- When participants were concerned about jealousy in the community at large, they often did activities to try to “give back” to the community for the support that they were getting. For example, in one community, participants arranged to clean the community well every week and sponsored monthly community clean-ups where they worked alongside other community members to sweep and clear up trash. In another community, the participants sponsored a party for the entire community, clearing a field for the event and hiring musicians. Community members reported that they felt that the participants had brought the entire community together and were appreciative of their dedication.
- Another approach to mitigating community jealousy was to tackle it head-on through conducting a drama. Participants enacted what it felt like to be criticized and asked the community to continue to support them.
- Jealousy in the family was often handled through the support of the CAC. A CAC member would conduct a home visit and talk with all members of the family about the project and try to find a way for the family to work

together to support the continued success of the participants' ventures. In some cases, participants began sharing profits with the family or included siblings in business activities.

### *Changing agency staff mind-set may be difficult.*

Agency staff members have a lot of experience in doing child protection or community development work. However, they do not usually have experience with highly participatory approaches. Because staff people likely see themselves as experts they may have a hard time letting go of their expectations and giving over control of decision-making.

Agency staff people must struggle with the temptation to tell the participants what to do. Participants need to come to their own decisions about how the program will work. In traditional programming agency staff people pass knowledge to participants but in more participatory approaches staff people learn from the participants about what the most important issues facing them are and what they think will improve their situation.

One approach that we recommend is intensive mentoring of agency staff involved at all levels of the participatory program. The communities where the PAR Project evolved most smoothly were communities where the agencies involved understood the PAR approach at all levels, from the director of the agency to the field worker. Staff people sometimes experienced derision from others within the agency who did not understand participatory approaches. For example, a direct supervisor of the field implementer may not understand why the reporting on the participatory program looks so different from other field reports and may accuse the field implementer of doing poor quality work. In these kinds of situations, it is crucial that the field implementer find others within the agency to help support him or her in explaining how the reporting from a participatory program *should* look different from reporting from a traditional program and to help educate the supervisor about the participatory approach being implemented.

The challenge for implementers of participatory programming is to always keep the participants at the center of the program. This can be difficult when facing criticism from within the agency, from community members who want a more top-down approach, or from participants who do not understand how participatory programs differ from traditional programs. In the PAR Project, we had a mantra that we would often repeat to help ourselves to remember to keep the decision-making firmly in the hands of the young mother participants: "If it doesn't come from the young mothers, it's not PAR."

*Voices from the PAR Project:*

*Agency Personnel Learn to Accompany Participants, Not Make Decisions For Them*

In one community in Sierra Leone, participants decided they wanted to rear goats as a group livelihood project. They spoke with the community elders and gained their support for this project. However, soon after the goats arrived, trouble began. Although others in the community let their goats roam free, many young men in the community objected to the young mothers letting their goats roam. They complained to the community elders and said that the goats were a nuisance. The community elders asked the participants to get rid of their goats.

Agency staff were at first demoralized. They had helped the participants come to their decision about rearing goats and felt that the community members had gone back on their word. They did not want to cause conflict in the community and their first instinct was to pull the goats out of the community and identify an alternative livelihood plan.

However the participants were adamant about their right to rear the goats. Rather than follow their own instinct, the agency personnel listened to the participants about what they wanted to do. They decided that as a short term measure, they would move the goats to a neighboring village and house them with a supportive community member there. Then the participants, with the support of the facilitator and agency staff, held a meeting with the community elders. At the meeting, the participants explained why they thought they should be allowed to let their goats roam free. The agency staff member spoke only when the participants asked her to advocate for them.

It took several more meetings, but finally the participants were allowed to keep their goats and have them roam free. In this case, the participants were up to the challenge of countering the community. The agency staff members had to listen to and follow what the participants wanted, as opposed to following their own instincts.

## CONCLUSION

Participatory programs are always a work in progress. As you go about planning and implementing your participatory program, you will no doubt encounter challenges that go beyond what we have addressed in this handbook. However, we hope that this handbook helps you get started with your community-based participatory program or think ahead to some of what you may encounter when you begin more highly participatory work.

The material in this guide is by no means exhaustive, but we have tried to highlight some of the critical areas that must be considered for a new program using highly participatory methods to be a success. In particular, we hoped to draw attention to the areas in participatory programming that we found to be most distinct from traditional programming approaches.

If you would like to access more information about the PAR Project, you can find it on our website, [www.pargirlmothers.com](http://www.pargirlmothers.com), and in the final report of the project. We have also put together a short list of resources, below, on participatory action research and participatory methods in community-based work.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bessette, Guy. *Involving the Community: A Guide to Participatory Development Communication*. International Development Research Centre, 2004. <http://www.idrc.ca>

Chambers, Robert. *Ideas for Development*. Sussex: Institute for Development Studies, 2005.

Geilfus, Frans. *80 Tools for Participatory Development: Appraisal, Planning, Follow-up and Evaluation*. Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture, 2008. <http://www.iica.int>.

Jennings, Ray. *Participatory Development as New Paradigm: The Transition of Development Professionalism*. Paper prepared for the “Community Based Reintegration and Rehabilitation in Post-Conflict Settings” Conference, Washington, DC. 2000. [http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/cross-cutting\\_programs/transition\\_initiatives/pubs.html](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/transition_initiatives/pubs.html)

McTaggart, Robin. *Participatory Action Research: International Contexts and Consequences*. Albany: State University of New York, 1997.

Minkler, Meredith and Wallerstein, Nina. *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health*, 2nd Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008.

Wagner, Estair Van, Moody, Robynn & Dumond, Camille. *Participatory Action Research with Young People: A Leader’s Manual (A work in progress)*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2004. [www.heartwood.ns.ca/downloads/par\\_manual.pdf](http://www.heartwood.ns.ca/downloads/par_manual.pdf)

Wessells, Michael. *What are we learning about community-based child protection mechanisms? An Inter-Agency Review of the evidence from humanitarian and development settings*. London: Save the Children, 2009.