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Adventures in Adjara, confusions with PARTICIPATION or playing football with hands

“What is your experience with participation?” Some of the applicants to a training course answered that their experience consists of being not disturbing in the seminars and conferences. They would not make any trouble for the trainers asking questions. Hmm, pretty much the contrary of what I thought participation was...

It looks like that there could be some serious confusion about what participation could be. Most probably some hundred years ago people would have thought of it as some kind of culinary term. Fact is that the idea of taking part in decision-making processes and the term participation itself are very much connected to our time and the geographical space around the Western countries. Experience in the mountains of Adjara – which go along the border between Turkey and Georgia, in the Caucasus - and dealing with the applications for the training course revealed to me that participation is far away from being universally understood, as I was starting to believe. In this essay I would like to address some of the confusions connected to the idea of participation and share my experience in one village in Georgia.

► Football versus volleyball

Looking at the structure of interaction, participation could be compared with a game – a mindset with certain rules and goals to achieve. But the mindset of participation is less clear and obvious than for example the rules of playing football. Because participation is rather about an attitude and not about a set of rules, it can become a wicked game. Practising participation you might believe that you play football and become angry about people grabbing the ball with their hands. You still think it is football? No, in reality it became actually two sets of volleyball! I want to use this metaphor for participation – exactly the same confusion can happen with participation, only it is less visible. I would like to tell you a tale about my experience in a small Muslim village in the mountains of Adjara in Georgia. And it was just like it – funny and disastrous at the same time, just as confusion of football with volleyball can be.

► How it began

So, what was happening in Adjara? Let me tell you the begin-

ning. Pondering on what would be the best thing to do with my life several years ago I decided to try the way of personal action - independent of any fund givers, just doing with minimum resources what I believed was good and right. So I gave up my normal life, my career as a trainer and set off by bike to go to see the world and find the places where my efforts could possibly make sense. I set off and among other things I went to Gypsy villages in Romania, taught girls to ride a bicycle in Anatolia, celebrated with Kurds their New Year Nevroz on both sides of Ararat, etc. Enjoying the magic of the moments I learned from the people on my way and gave to them what I knew and felt in exchange.

► Adventure

Finally I came to Georgia. One of my expeditions there was hiking in the highlands of Adjara. I did not know at that time that only very few foreigners come there. Even if they would come just once in a decade, they usually would not be a woman on foot carrying nothing except a panduri, a Georgian string instrument, and that was the case with me.

Since there was no precedent for the appearance of someone like me, some men in the mountains decided that I was a spy and arrested me! Children gathered in crowds to see what this «spy» and «bandit» looked like. There was no phone connection to call for help and no way to get out from there.

After several hours of despair and being trapped I took off my long socks. Then I asked for potatoes. Then I put them into the socks and started doing poi. [Poi is a form of juggling invented by Maori, by the way]. It worked. The situation started to change as if by magic. Young people of the village brought the stereo system to the spot and everyone, from very small to very very old was dancing to some techno music surrounded by the peaks of the mountains and clouds. Children said «there is no way she is a bandit if she can swing potatoes in the socks like this...».

Women gave me food and slowly we became friends. I stayed there several days, milking cows occasionally and by doing this giving the people a good laugh. When I was about to leave, the sun was setting and the clouds were coming down to surround the houses, we waved good bye to each other like in a film. And then they said – also like in a film – «don't go away, we will miss you so much». «I will miss you too», I said. «What can I do for you?» «Come, play with us, and teach us English since we don't have a teacher here!» «Ok», I said, «I will come back in winter!»
Violins playing...

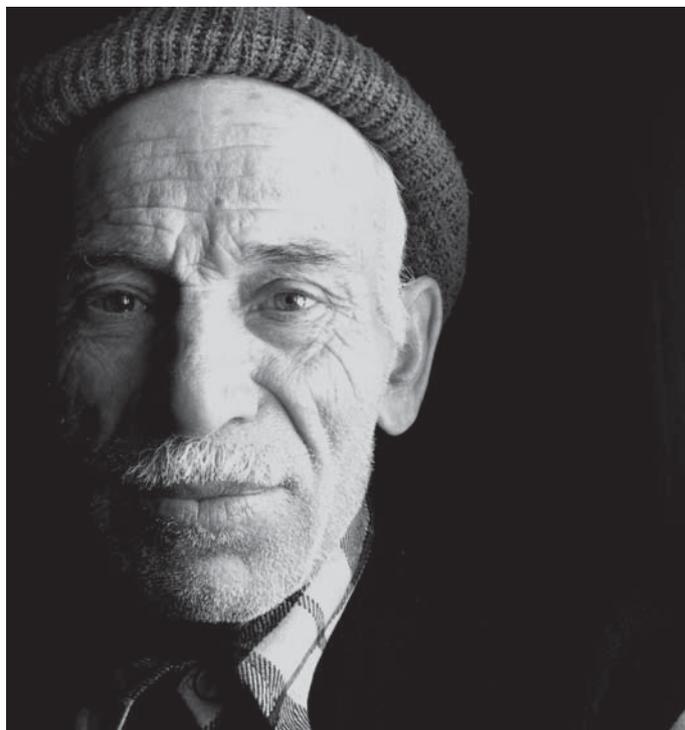
► In the mountains there is time

I knew the winters in the highlands are very hard. Meters of snow lying around and covering the roads, very cold and very little to do. They have time, I thought to myself! Me too – an excellent condition to do things together. Otherwise sometimes I feel like losing my time while working with young people in the cities or in the training courses, because they have so many possibilities, that sometimes they cannot even concentrate on enjoying one. But in the mountains there is time...

When I came later I consulted with the people about the idea of setting up an open house, where young people could come and create their own space - maybe for doing theatre, maybe just to drink tea together or play games. If someone else would come from abroad, young people of the village would have a possibility to learn English. I had in mind an open youth centre and was trying to communicate this idea and bring it to reality there.

► Youth centre and the old men

Everyone seemed to like the idea, since there used to be similar places during the Soviet times – some sort of cultural house. Therefore, people were very eager to get involved and to support the house. As a main carrier of the idea with the help of the people I bought a wooden house there. Young people would come and we would work together, building chairs, making electricity work and at the same time having English and Georgian learning sessions and theatre sessions.



During the cold winter evenings the elder men would come to the house and would play cards. There was no other place in the village like this. I was happy about people using the space, but the problem was that they did not help to work. After they would leave there would be a messy place left. Since there were elder men, children stopped coming. Women would come sometimes to bring me some food, but they would not stay. Their husbands did not allow them to go to the place where men play cards. Some youngsters were afraid of the rather dominant and loud men...

Seeing this, my face would lose colour and would be get a puzzled expression like from the comic books. I asked the men again to help with building the house if they wanted to come. They said yes, but did not do anything. So - I told them not to come, reminding them about the common idea that the house was meant for young people, children and women. "But we are young!" the elder men said and roared laughing. "And our women are proper women; they go to the barn to work and not a place like this."

It was cold outside. The men would meet in the street of the village and would become bored and angry because they could not play cards inside anymore. Then they started saying things, like "You want to spoil our youth!" When some young people would want to come to the house, some old men would say – don't go there, or we will beat you up. I was stuck playing my own football with the youngsters, surrounded by the people who played a different game.

► Horizontal versus vertical

This experience and the question, why we played different games became for me a base for reflections on participation, resulting in some insights. There are many ways to perceive and analyze this story. Here I just want to address one point that became my main insight from this experience.

I realized that in my interaction with the local people there was a pattern. Many times when in Georgia I was trying to act in the way that puts the partners on the same level - some horizontal



line - I got into trouble. If I would propose to clean the dishes while being a guest somewhere in Western Europe, it would be a gesture of appreciation and my offer might be accepted, while in Georgia it would result in an unbreakable resistance. The guest is appreciated so much, but at the same time the guest has to obey the rules set by the host. I could never sit on the floor, or where I would have preferred to – I had to do exactly what the host expected me to do. I realized slowly that most of the interactions here were based on the vertical line – the game about swapping or keeping the superior and subordinate positions. Someone with an expensive mobile phone will be more respected than the one with an old one, someone who drives in a jeep will deserve respect even if the person is nasty.

As a generalisation, I observed in the villages of the Caucasus and in the Middle East in many contexts, that a man whose wife makes decisions in the family will be laughed at as being a loser. Someone who works for the other without taking money does not deserve respect and according to the local opinion is actually to be treated like a slave. Pretty much the contrary from the values that we seem to share and promote in most of the European societies and the ones I was trying to act along while living in the mountains. Now I see that there was a very small possibility that the elder men from the village, who turned out to be the crucial decision makers, would support me, firstly because of the fact that I am a woman and, secondly, because I was working but not charging anything. And even if the people of the village liked the idea of building up a centre together, practically men, women and the young people seemed not to enjoy the idea of being equals in terms of participation. They rather expected clear orders from me and money for the work they would do in the house.



I started asking myself, why I would perceive such a big cultural gap in the values of participation and equality in Europe and beyond? Why an idea of an open youth house is so much more accepted in Europe and so difficult to realize in more traditional societies? Digging among many ideas I stumbled over the sixties.



► Sixties here and there

In the sixth decade of the last century many Western societies went through the specific phase that mentally had an effect going far beyond wearing the funky glasses and long hair. Liberation from norms set by the tradition, religion and generally the establishment, went along with putting individual freedom of choice into the focus. The sixties can be seen as a last wave caused by the volcano of the French revolution putting the individual into the centre and building the base for our current understanding of the civil society.

In terms of mass psychology the societies that stirred up in the sixties developed the concept of society as one based on the egalitarian relations of individuals. My hypothesis is that the countries that practice now democracy but did not have the movement of the sixties do not have the naturally grown “intrinsic” understanding of democracy. Many of the new democracies were “top down” ones, requiring from the population that they practice something they have not “inside”. Regarding the development of EU and its neighbours I would say it is the case with most of the post-Soviet region and Turkey. These societies were forced to be egalitarian and in a way are still in a phase of resisting that force. Therefore the revival of nationalism and the authority of religious institutions in many of those countries can be observed.

In many cases resistance goes along with the recollection of the old, already tried out values. In Georgia it is the clinging to the tradition that has proved to be the successful strategy for the small state in the Caucasus to survive. The perception of relations therefore are probably unconsciously influenced by the classical vertical line of superior and subordinate positions - host and the guest, the man and the woman, the old and the young, the employer and the employee, the rich and the poor. The balance in the society is being kept through the mutual interdependence of both poles. The rich can be only if there are poor; the woman can survive only with the support of the man, etc. Thus both states are justified.

▶ Participation or football with hands?

Understanding of society in the countries that went through the movements of the sixties seem to be more based on the individual freedom and sharing the space and resources. The idea stated from the French revolution that the freedom of the individual ends up where the freedom of the other starts seems to be a base for the concept of the civil society.

We could be proud of this. If it would correspond to reality. But, despite the fact that the values are being supported by the institutions of the EU and the fact that you read this issue of Coyote, there is still a question of how much the concepts of participation are implemented in our daily lives? No, in many cases we don't have the problem with authoritarian hierarchical understanding. The traps in western societies for participation to become a practiced value lie in a different spot.

▶ Participation starts with simple things

What about looking at participation from a more basic perspective? It is obviously not only about sharing opinions in decision-making, but also sharing in practical things - the space in the bus, the time you speak in the group, the attention that you give to TV or internet instead of people around you, the money that you might give for a corporation or rather a small local producer makes a difference to the general balance of resources. It is difficult to expect to share ideas on an equal basis if people do not share the resources in a fair way. It will remain difficult to make major ideas work without having solved basic questions of sharing the social, economical and ecological resources. And it seems that every single personal action counts... Your personal small resources – attention, time, money – can make a huge difference and foster participation values every day if used consciously and deliberately supporting the fair balance.

To act along PARTICIPATION values one does not need to be involved in the project or wear a sticker with big words. It seems that it is much more about the sensitivity concerning the balance of resources, about fairly taking your share and giving space to take for the others. Asking yourself might help to track back your personal impact: Do I get involved enough concerning the decisions in my local environment? Do I let others enough room to speak up? Do I contribute to the economical and ecological imbalance by buying products from big corporations instead of local producers? What do I promote that cultivates a life style that uses up immense amounts of earth resources?

The inhabitants of Europe could be proud to be from the continent that has developed an advanced concept of participation based on the equality of individuals. Europe state programmes and NGOs contribute to its realization. But on the basic level ... reality there is a lot of confusion with the value of participation. If the resources are distributed unfairly and we are contributing to the imbalance – talking of participation becomes pretending to play football, while individually and on the state level we still grab the ball with our hands.

The idea of participation is very much connected to the history of Europe. We might be able to “seduce” other cultures to practice it as well, as I was trying it in the Adjarian mountains, but first it seems to be more crucial to be consistent in our own actions, reflecting not the mere aspect of sharing the decisions, but keeping in mind that the vision of the world based on partnership and equality can work only if there is a fair balance of social, economical and ecological resources around the globe.

What do YOU do to contribute to the equality and participation in your everyday life?

Examples of playing football with hands – some ideas to think about:

- *Buying Coca-Cola products means contributing to the international corporation that is accused of committing crimes, like killing trade unionists in South America. At the same time it means not giving the chance for the local lemonade producer. If you in addition work in a social programme for unemployed – you might be in a perfect paradox, playing football with hands!*
- *Listening to Britney Spears or Robbie Williams could mean that you are not giving your attention to the potential local star just on the other side of the street. Turning on mp3 on your cell phone loudly means than someone who could otherwise sing - will not. Maybe you work in a project to support local cultures or fighting for the rights of natives somewhere? Well, if you and your surroundings do not regard it as crazy, it still might be...*
- *Flying to a training course about the human rights in a remote place you are definitely using more ecological resources than it would be enough for everyone on Earth if we would have to share equally living this way. Are you also engaged in an ecological initiative? You must be crazy. Calculate your own ecological footprint here: www.myfootprint.org*

We pretend to play football, but individually and on the state level we still grab the ball with our hands.

Are you?

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