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Chapter 5

Territorial facilitator, a profession to be developed and defended: A Tunisian experience

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Territorial facilitators work towards facilitating the dialogue between a wide range of stakeholders (farmers, elected officials, administrators, etc.) with regard to developing a territory. This chapter describes a pilot project in Tunisia in which agents from regional agricultural services were trained and accompanied in implementing their new profession for concerted territorial planning in six rural areas of Tunisia.

The emergence of the concept of participation—in the sense of contribution by citizens to political processes and decisions—in the public sphere dates back to the mid-twentieth century. As a major demand of civil society, within the broader social movement and fight against inequalities of the 1960s and 1970s (Wuhl, 2008), the concept of participation was gradually formalised, institutionalised and integrated at the international level, for example, as a fundamental principle of sustainable development (see the Rio Declaration in 1992) and translated into legislation at the national level (see the French law of 2002 on local democracy). In practice, participatory approaches are now being implemented throughout the world, at various scales and in a multitude of areas (e.g. participatory management mechanisms in companies, participatory budgets in municipalities and regions and, to a lesser extent, citizens' conventions in support of governments).

Spatial planning and natural resource management have not escaped this trend. In areas of public intervention that have to deal with a diversity of actors and interests, faced with issues of social justice and conflict management, participation appears to be a means of making more consensual, and even fairer, decisions concerning local development orientations and strategies, rights and rules for resource use, etc. However, participation cannot just be decreed; it must be “fitted out” with sociotechnical mechanisms (institutions, operating rules, decision-making processes, etc.) that allow for interactions between actors to be organised and which make participatory processes legible. And, in many circumstances, these mechanisms require facilitation. Their implementation and dynamics often depend on the intervention of facilitators in charge of getting the actors to interact, developing or maintaining collective action, without however influencing decisions (Dionnet *et al.*, 2017).

By including participatory democracy as a fundamental principle in its Constitution in 2014, the public authorities of post-revolutionary Tunisia have embarked on this major project. Recently, several ministries involved in land use planning and natural resource management have adopted strategies to promote citizen participation. The national strategy for the development and conservation of agricultural land (2017), in particular, recommends the implementation of a participatory approach (consultation and facilitation) for all rural development projects. It is within this framework that, since 2018, the Climate Change Adaptation Programme for Vulnerable Rural Territories (PACTE¹) has been supporting and training territorial facilitators, called Rural Development Officers (RDO), who are in charge of mobilising various local and regional actors (local communities, municipal councils, civil society, administrations, private sector, etc.) within a territorial planning mechanism.

► The usefulness of training and the role of facilitators in practice: testimonies from the Rural Development Officers

The RDOs themselves testify to the evolution of their skills and their posture. According to them, the acquisition of theoretical knowledge or “*new scientific notions*”, and know-how was facilitated by the frequency of the training sessions (“*Every two weeks, we have the chance to meet together to exchange, discuss and learn together. We have gained a lot of knowledge about group facilitation techniques, it is new knowledge and a new experience*”), as well as their adaptation to the pace of the programme (figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1. Training sessions strengthen the capacities of the facilitators, rural development officers

Another aspect of the training scheme considered important by the RDOs concerns the diversity of participants in the sessions. These sessions “*brought together administrative agents from different 1) specialties, 2) areas and 3) topics, all united to be trained as facilitators for spatial planning*”, as well as researchers from different disciplines. The RDOs

1. PACTE = Programme d’adaptation au changement climatique des territoires ruraux vulnérables

also pointed out the importance of the diversity of shared viewpoints and the originality of the training session set-up (alternating theoretical and practical sessions), as well as the richness and relevance of the interventions. According to them, this sharing of skills and experiences between agents from different specialties (soil, water, forestry, water and soil conservation, etc.) was a great added value in the learning process.

Finally, a study tour to France was cited as a highlight of the training process: *“The study tour to Montpellier, to observe experiences in a different territory and discuss with farmers and researchers from abroad, greatly helped to advance our skills. It is all about discussing with other actors and farmers and learning about other methods and practices. During my discussions with farmers in Bizerte, I can draw on this experience abroad to share targeted and beneficial knowledge”*.

The RDOs mentioned several situations in which they were able to mobilise the skills they had acquired:

- An RDO from Bizerte recounts negotiations with a farmer. The aim was to get the farmer to give up a 400 m² plot of land for free so that a collective borehole could be dug on the territory: *“I was able to negotiate with a farmer for the common good of the zone by using facilitation techniques and constructive discussion, without being nervous or shy and without the fear of doing something wrong; all this thanks to the comments of the trainers and researchers who accompanied us during the training sessions and the simulations we carried out together during these sessions”*.
- An RDO from Kairouan mentions the ability to facilitate discussions between high-level actors: *“Today, we facilitated a discussion on the territory committee between elected officials, the mayor and the department head at the RCAD². And having followed the fundamentals of facilitation techniques, this meeting was a success. In addition, we also drew up quality minutes written in French”*.
- Another RDO explains that their French writing skills have improved since writing over ten diagnostic reports on small local territories as well as a summary report: *“We have improved our writing as well as our speeches in French following 1) the transcription done during diagnostic 2) the constructive comments in the Word files of reports 3) the close support of the referent researchers”*.

Finally, the RDOs evaluated their own evolution in terms of interpersonal skills over time: *“After participating in PACTE training courses on consultation, conflict management, systemic participatory diagnostic, etc., a change in posture and reaction was noticed”*. They emphasise the importance of honesty and sincerity in facilitating a discussion: *“I am very honest and spontaneous with people, especially farmers. You have to be clear with the locals if you can’t do anything on their land. Sharing accurate information with them is important in creating trust”*.

►► From land planner to territorial facilitator: connecting theory to practice

The work of the territorial facilitators has enabled significant participation of the local population of the intervention zones, in both territorial diagnostic and development plan elaboration. This participation goes far beyond what is usually observed in development programmes of this type in Tunisia (Burte *et al.*, 2017).

2. Regional Commission for Agricultural Development

During the participatory diagnostic phase, over 4,100 residents (out of a total population of approximately 26,000 in 2014 in the six intervention zones) participated in the events organised by the PACTE programme (figure 5.2). Particular attention was paid to the participation of women, who represented about a third of the participants, which is not very common for work in rural Tunisia.

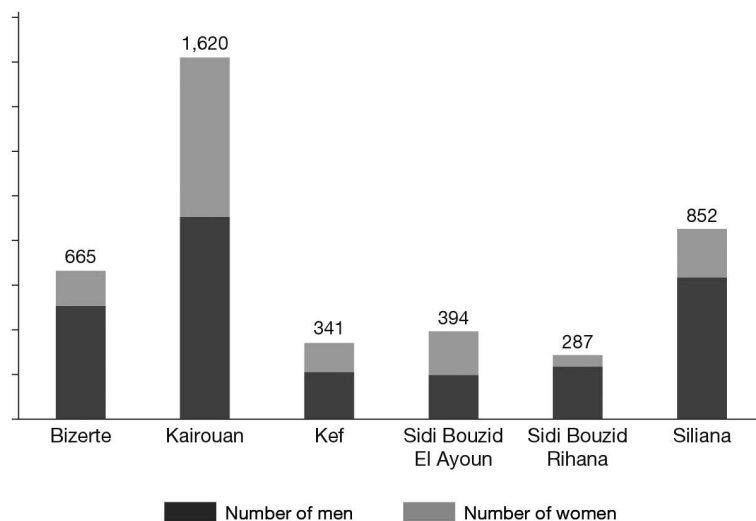


Figure 5.2. Number of participants in the diagnostic feedback sessions organised by the PACTE programme (Total = 4,159)

A series of workshops was organised to present and discuss the diagnostic with the local population (figure 5.2 and 5.3). On this occasion, the participants voted on the development issues they considered most important for their territory (figure 5.4).

During these workshops, the participants indicated what actions they wanted implemented to meet these challenges. Proposals for action were also collected from those who had not been able to participate in the workshops, through forms left with contacts in each territory. In total, around 11,400 proposals for action were collected and entered into a database. This database was used at a later stage by experts and committees representing the local stakeholders as part of the territorial planning framework.

The involvement of territorial facilitators in the programme's approach has profoundly changed their professional practices and, in particular, their attitude towards the local population, as revealed by interviews conducted with them (see previous section) and their work colleagues (Jendoubi *et al.*, 2021). The facilitators are more attentive to the locals than before; they ensure that public policies are consistent with the issues identified with those living in these zones; and they often position themselves as the locals' spokespersons to their colleagues, pending the appointment of territorial representatives.

The impact of the participatory process undertaken within the PACTE framework on the practices of the public servants goes beyond the territorial facilitators. Indeed, throughout the process, the facilitators involved other agents from different departments of the RCAD and beyond; they called upon the knowledge of their colleagues in the programme's target territories to establish contacts with local actors in the



Figure 5.3. Feedback from a diagnostic of the Kairouan action zone

During the diagnostic phase, participatory workshops were organised to report and discuss the results obtained. This initiative aims to strengthen the validity and reliability of the data collected during the diagnostic phase.



Figure 5.4. Voting on territorial issues in the Kairouan zone

The participants engaged in a process of selecting the territorial challenges by means of a vote. This participatory approach enabled the participants to prioritise and determine the issues they considered to be the most crucial for their area.

diagnostic preparation phase. They also involved them in carrying out individual and group interviews with local residents during the diagnostic phase and in facilitating feedback workshops with the population. In addition, exchanges between the different departments of the RCAD and with departments of other sectors (e.g. health, education, environment, equipment...) took place during the meetings of the programme's Operational Monitoring Committees in each intervention zone. Finally, experts from different fields were called upon to discuss and supplement the proposals for action made by members of local communities.

This wider involvement of the public administration in the territorial planning approach has enabled the territorial facilitators to transfer tools and methods acquired during their training to other colleagues, some of which (such as “participatory maps”³) they are ready to use in other circumstances.

The emergence of the territorial facilitator, a new profession, has also led to changes in the professional network of the agents involved. Indeed, connections within the teams of facilitators have been strengthened in each intervention zone as a result of working together almost daily on the PACTE programme. New connections were also created between facilitators from different zones thanks to the training courses they attended together and the sharing of experiences between sessions. Other connections were created between facilitators and agents of the agricultural administration at different levels:

- Local (agents from the Territorial extension units),
- Regional (agents from other RCAD departments, the Agricultural Land Agency or the Livestock and Grazing Office),
- National (agents from the General Directorate for the Development and Conservation of Agricultural Land).

In the end, the professional network of territorial facilitators has been extended to other administrative sectors outside the agricultural sphere, in line with the PACTE programme's objective of integrated and multisectoral planning (Jendoubi *et al.*, 2021).

Finally, the perception of many agents of Tunisian agricultural administration has evolved thanks to the emergence of this new role of territorial facilitator. Most of the colleagues involved in the participatory approach appreciated it. They emphasised the trust created between the facilitators and the local population and the in-depth knowledge of the territories provided by the local population, which will help facilitate the implementation of the actions and the sustainability of PACTE programme investments. However, some believe that it will be difficult to generalise this approach without more fundamental changes in the way the Tunisian administration intervenes in order to reduce procedural constraints, time and cost of implementation.

► Conclusion

Facilitating a participatory approach to territorial development cannot be improvised. It requires the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, know-how and interpersonal skills. A training cycle combining theoretical knowledge, simulations, practical application in the field and shared reflective analysis between participants was designed

3. This tool was used to help farmers delimit their territory, highlight the distribution of key resources (water, vegetation, relief, etc.) and share their understanding of its current situation and evolution.

and implemented for two years in Tunisia as part of the PACTE programme. This experience represents a first step in the creation of the new profession of territorial facilitator, an essential link in the implementation of a concerted territorial planning process in rural areas. The continuation and extension of this experience to all rural areas of Tunisia faces a number of challenges.

The first challenge is to formalise and simplify the training curricula of future territorial facilitators without altering what makes it rich. These training courses should encourage the construction of composite expertise that integrates, beyond conventional technical knowledge, knowledge of human and social sciences (i.e. principles of the participatory approach and integrated rural development, consultation engineering, communication, and conflict management) and an apprenticeship in appropriate postures. The second challenge is to create favourable conditions for networking, which helps to put into practice the theoretical knowledge and skills acquired in training through exchanges of experience with peers, experts and scientists. The third challenge consists in raising awareness (or even training) facilitators' colleagues and hierarchy, as well as the elected officials of the territories where they work, in the principles of the participatory approach so that they can contribute together to the co-construction of action programmes in consultation with the population and to the development of ad hoc public policies. The fourth challenge is to formally recognise this new profession within the Tunisian public administration, which implies defining the required levels of competence and the specific position of the profession in the structural hierarchy. This also raises the issue of RDOs' affiliation with the agricultural administration (RCAD and Territorial extension units). The fifth and final challenge is to provide the logistical means for facilitators to carry out their activities.

These challenges are not only present in Tunisia; they are in fact favourable conditions for the implementation of territorial facilitation, whatever the territory. Ultimately, the institutionalisation and formalisation of the profession raises the question of its generalisation, as it is a profession which, by its very nature, relies on the personal and creative capacities of the individuals who embody it. This implies that even with an equivalent level of training, certain profiles would not be suitable for this position.

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