Documenting the Use of Participatory Approaches in IntraHealth's Vistaar Project

March 2009

Table of Contents

Documenting the Use of Participatory Approaches in IntraHealth's Vistaar Project

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In late 2006, IntraHealth International began a USAID-funded project in India, called the Vistaar Project, aimed at assisting the Government to improve maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition. It seeks to take knowledge to practice at a large scale.

Vistaar operates in a complex and changing environment. Major challenges included attracting and retaining strong staff; uniting the staff in tackling a challenging mandate (e.g., working with the Government, at scale); ensuring that the project fostered creativity, leadership and problem solving capacity in its staff; and fostering collaboration with other organizations (even when they sometimes have a disincentive to collaborate). Since its beginning, the project's director and other leaders embraced a participatory approach as their way of working. This approach is anchored in: 1) principle-centered leadership; 2) shared leadership; and 3) faith that the needed wisdom resides within the group.

The team first used participatory approaches to learn about other agencies' work and to help in selecting priority areas. These open consultations, which focused on taking advice from others and building on existing efforts, helped the project gain acceptance and collaborative relationships. The staff and the donor agency also invested the time needed to create a strong foundation for the project, including ensuring clarity about the purpose, primary client and leadership approach.

In addition to laying the foundation for the project, the team used participatory approaches to develop a strategy map (which goes beyond a traditional work plan). As the project began activities, the approaches were used for ongoing planning and management. The team purposefully built participatory approaches into its daily operations and developed an internal culture of consultation that has improved team work, problem solving and the ability to address problems and changes.

The team also began to apply these approaches in its core technical work—for example, in facilitating experts to conduct evidence reviews and in generating ideas about how to address major challenges like improving nutrition in India. The project has experienced several successes, including facilitating consensus on priority recommendations about what knowledge the Government should take into practice and in terms of developing a shared advocacy and leadership agenda in nutrition.

In addition, the project found that its consistent use of participatory approaches set it apart from the many projects working in public health in India and enhanced its "brand" as a team that could facilitate productive meetings, generate creative ideas, solve problems and manage conflict. This paper is intended to document and share IntraHealth's experiences, successes and lessons learned in using these approaches in the Vistaar Project.

Documenting the Use of Participatory Approaches
in IntraHealth's Vistaar Project

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to inform and assist others interested in using participatory leadership and management approaches by documenting and sharing IntraHealth International's experiences with participatory approaches in the Vistaar Project.

BACKGROUND

The Vistaar Project is five-year project focusing on maternal, newborn, and child health and nutrition in India, funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). IntraHealth is leading the implementation of the project, working with international and Indian partner agencies, with the following purpose:

> *To assist the Government of India and State Governments of Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand in taking <u>knowledge to practice</u> in order to improve maternal, newborn, and child health and nutritional status.*

The project design is based on the fact that despite knowledge of numerous simple and proven interventions, maternal, newborn and child health and nutritional status is still very poor in many parts of India. Although many donor-funded health and development projects support small-scale pilots or model approaches, this project has the significant challenge of trying to help the Government of India in taking knowledge to practice <u>at a large scale</u>.

OVERVIEW OF THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

To meet the challenging purpose of this project, IntraHealth adopted participatory approaches in planning and implementing the project work. This approach is anchored in:

- Principle-centered leadership

- Shared leadership

- Faith that the needed wisdom resides in the group.

Principle-centered leadership (sometimes called values-based leadership) is established on the belief and evidence that a successful project (or any endeavor) has leadership directed by a clear and compelling purpose and core values. We believe a project is more successful with a well-defined purpose—agreed to and supported by staff and key stakeholders—and when the project aligns its leadership approach, management (policies and systems) and community (staff and stakeholders) to achieve this purpose. *(Note: For the purpose of this paper, stakeholders are defined as important community members beyond the project staff, such as donor representatives, the Government of India and other agencies working in the health sector in India.)*

Shared leadership is recognizing and promoting leadership among all team members rather than just a few formal leaders. It can greatly increase the efficiency and effectiveness of a project by drawing on the entire team's energy, creativity and productivity. Sharing responsibility can greatly improve results but works best within a commonly understood framework that includes a clear purpose and clear values.

The project's formal leaders must genuinely value consultation with others in the organization and beyond and have faith that there is wisdom within the group. This is the essence of a participatory approach and leads to a project culture that invites input and creative thinking from its staff and key stakeholders. Trusting in the wisdom of the group means believing that a group of interested and committed people, working together, is more effective and powerful than one (or a small number of) formal leaders acting alone. Our experience shows that this leads to a project that is more able to develop innovations, solve problems and successfully respond to change.

Participatory approaches seem to be particularly important and effective for certain types of work:

- Work that is by nature mission-oriented and has a strong charitable or social welfare element, such as public health and international development work

- Work that is service- or knowledge-based, where meeting the project (or organizational) purpose depends on staff coming up with new ideas and innovative approaches and practicing creative problem solving

- Work that is complex and/or where the environment is rapidly changing, as these approaches are motivating for the work force, draw on their creativity, encourage synergy within the staff (and stakeholders) and help the team respond successfully to change

- Work that requires a very strong spirit of partnership.

The fact that the work of the Vistaar Project fits into all these categories supported the decision to lead and manage the project with participatory approaches.

Many within the project team, IntraHealth, the donor (USAID), Government of India and other stakeholder groups believe that the participatory approaches used by the project were successful and worth documenting. Therefore, we have categorized and described some specific participatory approaches, activities and tools that the Vistaar Project used, as well as the results we experienced and the lessons learned, with the goal that others may be able to use this information in their work.

Building a Strong Foundation

As we all know, the startup of a project is critical. To get off to a rapid and effective start, we found that a critical first step is to take the time needed to ensure that all staff and stakeholders are united around a <u>purpose</u>. The best purpose statements are both clear and compelling to all staff and stakeholders. We recommend bringing staff and stakeholders together and allowing sufficient time to work on articulating and understanding the purpose.

Even if a donor seems to have defined the purpose in advance, the staff and other stakeholders will need time to discuss and ensure that they understand the purpose. This exercise may reveal that there is not a shared understanding, even among representatives of the donor agency. For the Vistaar Project, once a critical mass of staff were on board (about four months after the official start date), we invested in a workshop to build a strong foundation for the project. At this workshop, the staff along with USAID representatives came up with a stronger purpose statement than the one used during the project bidding stage. This effort to refine the purpose was worthwhile as it has proven over time to be understandable to a wide group, helpful in focusing project efforts and motivating to the staff.

In addition, we found that taking the time to <u>define the primary client</u> for the project is critical. At the project foundation workshop, many of us were surprised at the diversity of opinions about who the client was for the project. Some staff strongly felt the clients were the poor and vulnerable people of India, others felt equally strongly that the client was the Government of India, and still others argued that it was USAID. Although many people had assumed that the client was clear to all, this difference in assumptions could have led to significant misunderstanding and disagreement if it were not addressed and resolved. It took the project staff nearly a full day of debate and discussion to reach agreement. (*Note: We agreed that the*

client for the project is the Government of India). Resolving this issue has been critical for the project's success as it kept the project team on track and focused, especially when challenges arose and difficult decisions had to be made. This clarity increased the team's responsiveness to the Government of India, increased their motivation to try to understand Government challenges and positions, and improved the project's ability to achieve its purpose.

The project also benefited from articulating a <u>leadership approach</u>. This was initially drafted by the entire project team at the startup workshop and has been reviewed (and revised as needed) once or twice a year. The following excerpt is the centerpiece of the project's leadership approach:

The Vistaar Project Leadership approach is:

- *Consultative, taking into account views of others (as individuals and groups) before making significant decisions*

- *Focused on the project purpose*

- *Flexible and adaptive*

- *Designed to create a supportive work environment*

- *Courageous*

- *To encourage, recognize and respect different ideas, work styles and opinions*

- *To delegate responsibility, with authority and accountability*

- *To support everyone taking leadership in their area, towards achieving the purpose*

- *Rooted in the following values: dignity, respect, integrity, learning, and faith in the wisdom of the group.*

This leadership approach has affected many aspects of project implementation such as the extent of official delegation of authority from the project director to other staff, the way annual work plans are prepared, the job descriptions of all staff, the performance management system and the way major decisions are made. For example, consultations are held before major decisions are made, and rewards such as bonuses and performance-based salary increases are linked to staff leadership.

Lessons learned from foundation building include:

- Building a solid foundation benefits from the participation of all staff and a wide range of stakeholders.

- Building a strong foundation requires a time and resource investment, especially at the start of the project (the initial workshop—on topics such as the purpose, client and leadership approach—was three days for the Vistaar Project, and we hired expert facilitators).

- This process results in increased staff expectations and could lead to significant disappointment and unrest if the formal leaders do not model or follow through with the agreed-upon approaches (such as modeling the values or leadership approach).

- The formal leaders must value the diverse input from staff participation, and team work. Without the belief that the end product from such participation has great value, the formal leaders can become impatient or frustrated with participatory processes—and the staff (and other stakeholders) can become distrustful of the leader(s), stop participating and/or become very dissatisfied with the work environment.

- The use of a tool like the Medicine Wheel © (see Annex) is helpful in guiding the group in building a strong foundation (centered on a purpose).

Initial Work Planning and Building Staff Facilitation Skills

Initial Work Planning

Vistaar takes place in an environment where a number of health development organizations each have their own agendas and approaches and compete for funding, which is a challenging environment for collaboration. We realized early on that to achieve its purpose, it was critical to collaborate and partner well with others. Accordingly, we felt it was important to underline carefully introduce the new project. Rather than having a one-way presentation or typical formal launch ceremony to introduce Vistaar (where the sponsor tells the audience what they intend to do), we started with very participatory one-day meetings at national and state levels. The meetings used Whole Person Process Facilitation and some elements of an Open Space Technology meeting. We intended these initial meetings to be consultations. In them, we asked other stakeholders about the work that *they* were doing, what they felt the priority needs were and how we (as a new project) could collaborate and contribute. This approach was genuine and respectful and provided invaluable information to the project team (and others who attended).

It also proved to be very valuable in helping the project team identify its comparative advantage and the priority areas where it could contribute the most. We felt that this approach helped to reduce potential competition and resistance to a new project entering the field.
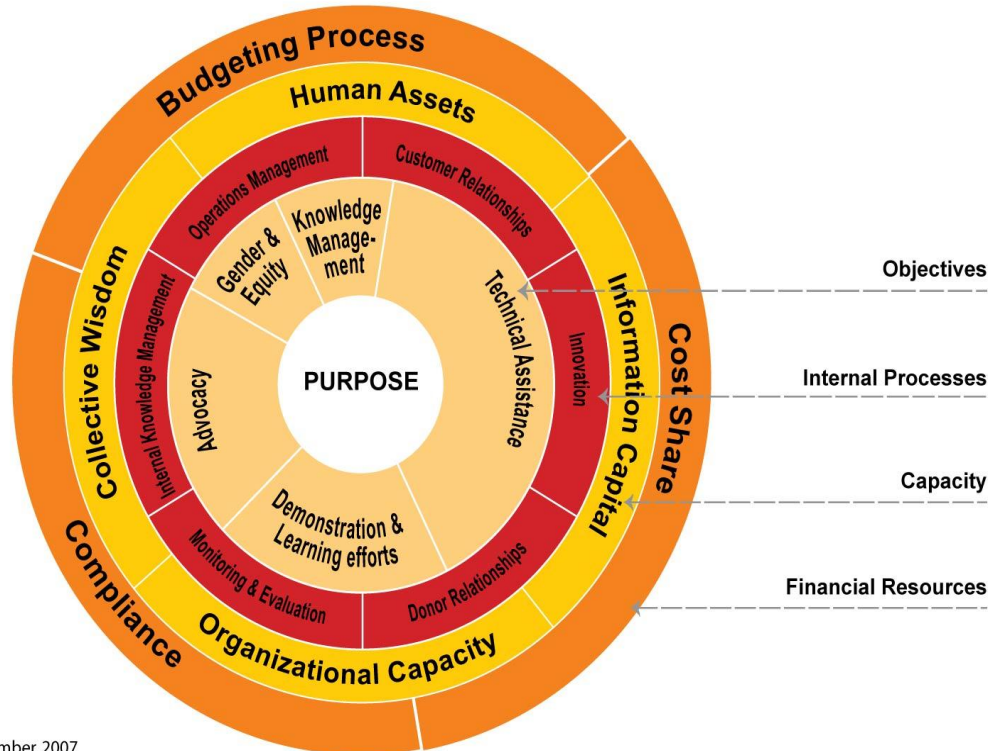
In addition, this process provided valuable inputs for the first annual work plan. Of course we consulted with the Government of India as our primary client, and this clarity about the client also helped us sift through the inputs we received and ensure that we prioritized the Government's needs and requests. The donor, USAID, was very appreciative of these early consultation efforts to identify the priority work areas, reduce duplication of effort and focus on the comparative advantage of the project.

Another approach we used during the project startup phase was to borrow some techniques from strategy mapping. The strategy map concept was introduced by Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton and is described in their widely read books: *The Strategy-Focused Organization* and *Strategy Maps.* For our project, the most valuable elements of this tool were 1) aligning all project efforts to the agreed-upon purpose and 2) going beyond the listing of major technical objectives and activities that constitute a traditional work plan. With a strategy map, the team delves deeper, asking what needs to be done to support each objective or major activity—creating additional "layers" which have a cause and effect relationship, all leading toward the project purpose.

A typical work plan in our field of international health and development provides guidance only for key technical staff, but a strategy map indicates the roles and priority activities for the entire project team—technical leaders as well as support units, such as the finance and human resources units. In our strategy map, the first layer is the objectives, followed by layers called "internal processes," "capacities needed" and "financial resources." We developed a visual representation of the adapted strategy map used for the Vistaar Project, shown on the following page.

Note that the project purpose is in the center, with concentric layers of supporting activities, which all support achievement of the purpose. The first layer, the objectives, is the traditional work plan, which is submitted to the donor. The other layers are more internal—and are the value added of having a strategy map rather than just a work plan.

Vistaar Project Strategy Map Overview

Budgeting Process
Human Assets
Operations Management
Customer Relationships
Collective Wisdom
Gender & Equity
Knowledge Management
Internal Knowledge Management
Technical Assistance
Information Capital
Cost Share
Advocacy
Innovation
PURPOSE
Compliance
Monitoring & Evaluation
Demonstration & Learning efforts
Donor Relationships
Organizational Capacity

Objectives

Internal Processes

Capacity

Financial Resources

10th December, 2007

PURPOSE :
To assist the Government of India and State Governments of Uttar Pradesh and
Jharkhand in taking knowledge to practice in order to improve maternal, newborn, and child health and nutritional status

Credit: This version of a strategy map was adapted from the work of Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton (*Strategy Maps: Converting Intangible Assets into Tangible Outcomes* by Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton, Harvard Business School Press; 2004.)

For example, a key objective in the project work plan was "to develop technical assistance plans collaboratively with district officials." While preparing the strategy map, we realized that to accomplish this objective, we needed to build capacity in participatory methods within our staff, and this became an activity in the strategy map section on "capacities needed." In addition, the strategy map provided an opportunity to include activities to help the project "live" its commitment to shared leadership. For example, the year one strategy map included activities such as developing a pay-for-performance system (even when the larger organization did not have such a system in place) and ensuring that there was a simple, clear process for staff to raise policy concerns or suggestions and resolve them. These activities were included in the "internal processes" layer. Other activities that appeared on the strategy map but not in the traditional work plan have proven to be important for the project's success, such as developing

strong internal knowledge management systems (especially a web-based project team site) and prioritizing internal communication mechanisms like staff meetings and technical team meetings.

Building Staff Facilitation Skills

We realized that our staff would need knowledge and skills about participatory approaches and chose to use and build on the Whole Person Process Facilitation (WPPF) method mentioned earlier. This method was developed by Birgitt and Ward Williams of Dalar International Consultancy based in Raleigh, NC, USA and is a part of their *Genuine Contact ™ Program*. It is a participatory meeting and training methodology that produces results by tapping into the creativity and collective wisdom of a group of people. It refers to the "whole person" because it helps to access both intuitive and intellectual knowledge.

The project invested in training almost all staff in this facilitation method and, over the first two years of the project, has adapted and applied aspects of this methodology in many situations—from planning workshops to multi-stakeholder task force meetings—and found that this methodology consistently resulted in meetings and consultations that were more inspiring, creative and effective. When, for various reasons, we felt we had to use traditional, hierarchical (non-participatory) methods, our team almost always felt the results were not as good compared to similar events using Whole Person Process Facilitation or other participatory approaches.

Lessons learned from project planning and skills building include:

- Taking the time to gather inputs from the primary client and other key stakeholders strengthens a project's focus and work planning.

- It is important to include the donor in initial planning so that they understand and support any changes from their original expectations or assumptions. It may also be wise to document any inputs or findings that lead to changes in plans.

- Having a strategy map that includes critical support activities is helpful in ensuring that these activities are visible, prioritized and that they get done. A strategy map can be helpful and motivating to all staff (especially non-technical staff such as finance, administration, procurement and human resources) since it clearly indicates how their work contributes to the project purpose.

- A strategy map can become long and complex. In year one we found developing the strategy map to be fairly challenging work and time-consuming (requiring two sessions with almost all staff, taking about five days of large group work and several days of follow-up work by a small group). We also found that we listed too many "ideal" activities, which we would *like* to do, but that we did not have sufficient resources (mainly staff time) to implement all of them. This led to some disappointment with the process. In response, we believe that more careful prioritizing and realistic work assignments are important.

- We found that formal leaders and most staff will prioritize the core technical work (the more visible activities for which the donor holds the project accountable—those listed in the "objectives" or work plan layer of the strategy map), and this work will take precedence over the internal support activities (such as work listed in the "internal processes" layer). This reveals a need to be realistic and prioritize the work within the other layers of the strategy map (rather than include an unrealistic amount of work in those layers) as well as a need to ensure that the formal leaders are committed or motivated to keep some focus on the other (more distal or underlying) layers of the strategy map.

- Investing in building staff skills in participatory methods is critical, but it can also be challenging to find appropriate and good quality training. Most staff highly valued the training we were able to provide as a professional development opportunity and found it very useful in their work.

- Although we often met resistance to trying something new initially, our experiences in using participatory methods were so positive that it gave our team confidence to continue pressing for expanded use of these approaches. Once they experienced it, many people felt that these new methods actually mirrored traditional methods of decision making and problem solving that Indian cultures had used at the village level for generations.

Overall, we found that the participatory approaches used to build a strong foundation and help with initial project planning were very helpful for the project to get off to a good start and earn a good reputation with our donor, primary client and stakeholders.

Ongoing Project Planning and Management

In order to implement the project effectively and achieve its purpose, the team purposefully built participatory approaches into its daily operations. This includes periodic review of the foundation systems, regular consultations about major decisions, joint problem solving and staff training in participatory methods.

The team keeps the foundation elements at the center of its operations, sharing these agreements with new staff as a part of their orientation and gathering as a full team to review them periodically (at least once per year). We update and expand the foundation elements as needed and agreed by the team. We have not expected the project purpose to change over the life of the project, but toward the end of year one, we found a need to slightly change the wording of our purpose to refer to the Government of India, rather than to a specific Government program. We have also expanded and refined our approaches to project leadership and management over time.

We have developed an internal culture of consultation, which has both improved the feeling of team work and participatory decision making. The project has faced significant challenges, and the reliance on team work to address these problems has been critical. For example, the full team worked together to reach clarity about a donor request (in the original project design) to conduct "demonstration and learning" efforts. There was considerable debate and diversity of opinion about what this meant and how to do it, and if only an individual or small group had tried to resolve this, it probably would not have resulted in as many helpful, new ideas or the same level of shared understanding or support for the chosen approach.

Perhaps most importantly for our project, the collaboration and participation have helped foster in the team a strong collective ability to solve problems and adapt to change. In our experience, ensuring that the expanded team is involved and has a voice seems to increase their willingness to engage in problem solving and identify ways to cope with challenges and changes. Our project has experienced a number of changes in the environment and challenges, especially in terms of working with the Government system, that could have been very discouraging, but the staff have generally been able to respond very positively and creatively.

Lessons learned from ongoing planning and management include:

- In work that centers on generating knowledge and solutions, it is beneficial to use participatory approaches that allow the project to draw the best from its human resources. Many projects or organizations really only have their technical knowledge

and ideas to "sell," yet they do not pay much attention to approaches to get the best from their people, including developing creative solutions.

- Consultations and participatory mechanisms need to be ongoing and integrated into the culture—not just one-time events. As noted before, formal leaders should believe in—and see the value of—consultation for the ongoing work, or a true culture of participation and shared leadership will not develop. Staff may become disillusioned if they feel that decision making is really centralized and that their input is not sincerely wanted and considered.

- Decision making authority should be clear, and decision makers should not allow excessive consultation to delay decisions in a way that inhibits project progress and results. Inappropriate consultation can slow down the work and frustrate staff.

- It can be challenging to foster shared leadership in cultures which are generally hierarchical. The consultation process can be interpreted by staff or others as a sign of weakness or uncertainty in the formal leaders. This makes it important for formal leaders to share (and reinforce) the logic and value for the consultative approach—and for the responsible decision makers to establish limits to consultation so that consultation is used appropriately (e.g., where there is a real choice and openness to new ideas in a way that does not slow down needed decisions excessively).

- We have found a need for the team to review and update the foundation elements at least once a year. This was due to new needs from more mature and larger projects and due to changes in the environment.

Using Participatory Approaches in Technical Work

The project team initially felt that they would use participatory processes primarily internally, such as developing work plans or a strategy map. However, we soon learned that there was a great need to use participatory methods in the project's more technical, external work. This section describes how we used participatory techniques in several project activities.

In order to achieve its purpose, the project needed to <u>facilitate collaboration </u>such as supporting coalitions among diverse players. We found participatory approaches to be very helpful in this area, helping the group to identify a shared, compelling purpose for the collaboration, acknowledge and appreciate past work and successes, and explore differences of opinion and find sufficient agreement (a common ground) needed to move forward.

13

Coalition Building

One example of success in using participatory methods emerged in the project's work to improve maternal and child nutrition. The team realized that the nutrition field was characterized by a great degree of disagreement and a lack of coordination among the major players and that making a difference in this challenging area would require significant collaborative effort. They identified a few key stakeholders to support a consultation. The consultation used a very participatory process called "Open Space Technology" to generate ideas from a diverse group of experts in response to the question: "*A Nutrition Secure India: How do we get there*?" This consultation, with over 100 experts attending, generated significant energy and a surprising degree of consensus and resulted in agreement to form a coalition (the Coalition for Sustainable Nutrition Security in India). The Coalition formed task forces that worked together to prepare a *Leadership Agenda for Action*, a collaborative effort that is unprecedented in the field of nutrition in India.

> *"The Vistaar Project, funded by USAID, has served as the Secretariat for the Coalition for a Sustainable Nutrition Secure India with dedication and distinction. The project team has the capacity to get diverse experts and organizations to work together, which is critical to reach our goal of a nutrition-secure India."*
>
> —Professor MS Swaminathan. Chairperson
> Coalition for Sustainable Nutrition Security in India
> Member of Parliament (Upper House)
> Chairman, MS Swaminathan Research Foundation

The team used a number of techniques to support the Coalition. First, we worked to ensure a clear purpose statement for the overall Coalition and each task force. Although this sometimes took several hours of heated discussion, it united the group and prevented misunderstandings that could have ended the collaboration. We also used meeting methodologies—mostly based on Whole Person Process Facilitation—that broke down hierarchy, addressed different learning and communication styles and maximized the opportunity for each participant to use his or her voice and provide inputs. This included techniques such as sharing information in ways that work for different learning and work preferences; having the participants sit in a circle; and using small group exercises. Information was shared before the meetings (for those who need time to prepare in advance), provided in handouts (for those who need to see written reference materials) and discussed in small groups (for those who need to talk about ideas to absorb them).

Evidence reviews

In addition to the advocacy work, the project used participatory approaches in the very important work area of facilitating evidence reviews. The project was mandated by the donor to provide technical assistance to the Government of India to help take "knowledge into practice." Perhaps due to the participatory approach taken by the team in the startup phase, we realized that there was significant diversity of opinion within the Government and stakeholder community about the knowledge base and about what was a proven or best practice that should be taken to scale. We knew that we would need more input and consensus on what these proven or best practices really were or our technical assistance efforts might be built on false or disputed assumptions. This led to the development of an evidence review process, which was very informative and highly appreciated by a wide range of stakeholders.

This process used participatory methods to bring together a group of technical experts to review the existing evidence on a priority topic and to make recommendations to our client, the Government of India. The project team took a facilitative role rather than a directive role, which was very appropriate and appreciated by the Government of India and our donor. The techniques used were selected to achieve the following: break down hierarchy, foster an exchange of ideas, allow all participants an opportunity to speak and contribute, and encourage the identification of priority recommendations that all (or at least the majority) of the group of experts could endorse. As noted earlier, the Vistaar Project chose to use specific techniques from the Whole Person Process method of facilitation, which we found very useful. Specific techniques we used for the evidence reviews included:

- Limiting ceremony at the evidence reviews (which lead to competition and division about who is the most important—and take up precious time)

- Limiting one-way presentations (which also lead to divisions and hierarchy, do not foster communication, take up significant time and do not address the preferred learning style for many adults)

- Sitting in a circle to foster communication and send a message of unity and equality

- Using small group exercises to offer more opportunity for all participants to share their experience and expertise

- Capturing inputs in a transparent way (such as on flip charts and cards posted on the wall—not through one powerful note taker who controls what is recorded and/or may not capture the comments correctly)

- Building consensus and selecting priorities through transparent methods such as voting and open discussion

- Using a combination of easy-to-use tools that helped accommodate different learning styles of participants.

Lessons learned from use of participatory methods for technical work include:

- Participatory consultations with a wide range of stakeholders can be a rapid way to get valuable inputs and initiate positive relationships. The Open Space Technology method is quite useful in some situations, such as in addressing a challenging question.

- A successful consultation allows participants to feel that they had an opportunity to share their expertise and experiences—and that they were heard.

- Many areas where consultation is most needed are also those that are sensitive and divisive, so you will need skilled facilitators and a repertoire of techniques to foster participation as well as manage disagreement or even conflict. It is important to invest in building the facilitation skills of staff or identify experts in participatory methods.

- We encountered some resistance to these participatory approaches, particularly in the Government environment, where they differ significantly from the dominant meeting style (which can be hierarchical, dominated by ceremony and primary rely on one-way communication, such as lectures or speeches). We found that sometimes it was challenging to identify an open-minded meeting sponsor (e.g., Government officials) who would allow us to try a participatory approach but that we were often able to build their trust over time so that even some Government counterparts appreciated the approach.

- The facilitators need to distance themselves from the outcomes and take a sincere approach to trusting that the wisdom is in the group (rather than trying to control the outcomes). The facilitators need to be willing to take a humble approach and create an environment for active listening and sharing.

Although the participatory approaches we describe may seem simple and to have obvious merit, it was very interesting for us to observe how seldom such approaches are used, even in the private, non-profit sector where there is more interest and openness to these approaches. There seems to be a great need for capacity building in participatory approaches—to understanding the essence or basic principles as well as developing skills in using specific techniques.

We have been very pleased to find that the use of participatory approaches has not only helped us internally with work planning and management but also externally in building alliances and producing strong project results. This made our investment in learning about participatory approaches well worth it. The benefits to the project have been many: a quick startup, focus on a clear purpose, and the development of a good reputation for team work and productivity (which helped us to attract high-quality staff). Our programmatic work has been strengthened as evidenced by an innovative evidence review process which resulted in experts agreeing on key programmatic recommendations for the Government of India, several strong alliances that are unifying efforts and offering badly needed leadership, and successful joint planning and work with our primary client, the Government of India.

> *"There is something special about the approaches that the Vistaar Project took, from day one, and this project stands out among our portfolio of projects as a high achiever. They excel in 'leading from behind.'"*
>
> —Dr. Rajiv Tandon, Division Chief Maternal and Child Health, Nutrition and Urban Health Unit, USAID /India

Although it was completely unintentional, embracing participatory approaches set the project apart, even among the many projects working in public health in India, and provided us with a positive brand image as a team that could facilitate productive meetings, generate creative ideas, solve problems and manage conflict—and actually have fun while doing it. This approach was so successful and interesting to others that many stakeholders, and even our donor, asked us to sponsor some training courses in the first year of the project on the participatory methods that we were using.

CONCLUSIONS

The Vistaar Project used participatory approaches for project startup (establishing a strong foundation for the project team), for work planning and in its technical work, such as facilitating expert evidence reviews and building effective coalitions. The use of participatory processes has had many benefits, both in terms of internal leadership and management and programmatic

results. It has enabled the project to learn from others, stay more focused, develop a unique identify and good reputation, be more responsive and adaptive in a challenging environment, and generate creative ideas and higher quality products and solutions.

We feel that our experiences reinforce the benefits that public service projects (or organizations) can gain from using participatory approaches. We feel this approach is anchored in:

- Basing work on clear principles and a purpose (or mission)

- Shared leadership

- Trusting in the wisdom of the group.

In addition to the lessons learned reported throughout this document, we did find that there are some pitfalls to be aware of:

- Some stakeholders or even project team members may resist something new or different; others will not have the needed knowledge or skills to facilitate participatory methods.

- Some team members may feel frustration if these methods seem to take longer (for example, compared to one formal leader making a decision without any consultation).

- This approach will get concerns and issues out into the open, which can be a very good thing as long as the formal leaders are prepared to hear these and find ways to address them.

- The entire approach may be derailed or backfire if staff feel that the formal leaders are not truly open to consultation and participation.

Too much consultation can sometimes hamper the desired outcomes; finding the right balance is important.

However, we believe these approaches yielded many positive results. It helped the project to retain good staff, create a positive and enabling work environment, enhance staff productivity and job satisfaction, build collaborative relationships and cope with the many changes and challenges of the technical work. Overall, it helped us to get the most from our main resource: our people. These approaches helped us to make excellent progress toward our important

project purpose, even in a challenging environment. We look forward to continued learning and the opportunity to share this learning with others.

> *"The Vistaar Project has been able to respond to the needs of our system—not just their own agenda. We are happy to work with their high quality staff and they have made a contribution to our programs."*
>
> — Ms. Nidhi Khare, Special Secretary
> Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, State of Jharkhand

1. Whole Person Process Facilitation

Whole Person Process Facilitation is an effective tool to:

- Find solutions to complex problems

- Explore options and generate ideas

- Develop an understanding of new strategies

- Build commitment

- Work on dealing with change and organizational transformation

- Work where collaboration and participation are important for success.

2. Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology is meeting methodology, developed by Harrison Owen in the USA, that invites participants to consider a critical question or issue, set the agenda and identify the best way forward. Much of the meeting is spent in small group work with participants having maximum freedom and choice about which groups to participate in. The meeting (including the small group work) operates with four principles and one law. The four principles are:

- *Whoever comes are the right people.* This encourages participants to have faith that the wisdom to achieve solutions is present and the group should not to worry about who is or is not present.

- *Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.* This keeps the attention on the best possible effort in the present, not wasting effort worrying about what we should have done or could have done.

- *Whenever it starts is the right time.* This reminds people that creativity and problem solving cannot be held to a strict agenda or time frame.

- *When it's over, it's over.* This encourages the participants to continue their discussion as long as there is the energy for it. This may result in a session not filling the entire time estimated for it, or it may result in a session extending beyond the time anticipated.

The law is called *The Law of Mobility*. This allows people to enter or leave large or small group sessions as they choose. If the session is not meeting your needs for either contributing or learning, you are free to go to another one. This keeps engagement and participation levels high and also recognizes the value of participants who serve a cross-fertilizing role, moving around and participating in multiple sessions for shorter periods.

Resource: http://www.dalarinternational.com/

3. Medicine Wheel Tool©

The Medicine Wheel Tool© is useful in building a strong foundation for a project or even an organization. It is based on the medicine wheel which was used by indigenous peoples in the Americas and other parts of the world. The wheel was originally adapted by Harrison Owen in 1992 as a reflection tool and then later adapted for use by Dalar International Consultancy in building a strong foundation for organizations. The wheel begins with <u>Purpose</u> in the center, indicating that a clear purpose is the starting point. It advocates for discussing and clarifying four key elements needed to achieve that purpose: leadership, vision, community and management.

Note: This version of the Medicine Wheel is adapted from the tool used within the *Genuine Contact ™ Program* developed by Birgitt and Ward Williams of Dalar International Consultancy based in Raleigh, NC, USA.

The tool is useful to help the team address issues such as:

- Purpose: Is the purpose clearly communicated and understood?

- Leadership: What is the organization's leadership approach? Are the formal leaders actually following it?

- Vision: Does the group have a clear and focused vision for the future? Is the vision inspiring?

- Community: Does the organization have a defined community and work with that community? Does the project promote a healthy internal work community?

- Management: Does the organization have strong systems for managing resources and provide the resources required to get the job done? Does management remove barriers to help achieve the purpose?

To learn more:

http://www.intrahealth.org

http://www.intrahealth.org/projects/20

http://www.usaid.gov/in/our_work/activities/Health/health_vistaar.htm

http://www.dalarinternational.com

http://www.openspaceworld.com