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Global Position on the Participatory Approach



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Introduction

At ETP, we aim for our projects to be locally led and built on the foundations of a 'participatory approach'. This means consulting communities and ensuring they have influence over the type and scope of projects in their region, and over the decisions and resources that affect them.

The participatory approach is centred on the idea that meaningful change can only be achieved if the people affected by an issue can participate in deciding how it is addressed and are empowered to take ownership of the development process.

Beyond just listening to stakeholders, we ensure that their voices are heard; and that they help shape our projects and their outcomes. With our global and local level expertise, we convene the right mix of partners on the ground to help projects deliver lasting change.

This document covers ETP's position on the participatory approach. It highlights why we use a participatory approach, factors we consider when using it, and how we employ this across our initiatives.



How does ETP define a participatory approach?

The participatory approach refers to a way of undertaking development that engages local communities and stakeholders in designing, implementing, and evaluating the projects and processes meant to benefit them.

While there is no universal definition of what a participatory approach entails, for ETP, it's about recognising the expertise of local populations and ensuring they can play an influential role in the decisions that impact their lives.



Why do we use a participatory approach?

In our Strategy2030, we committed to prioritising a participatory approach in our work. This meant shifting away from conventional development practices, where solutions are devised in the global north, and instead ensuring that regional stakeholders have more decision-making power in development choices.

This decision formalised ETP's strategic intention, alongside its members, to collaborate in a pre-competitive environment to focus on the needs and livelihoods of communities and workers, prioritising these over individual business interests. While doing this, we aim to achieve a balance between ensuring the needs of communities are met and ensuring the sector remains financially viable to support those who depend on it.

Using a participatory approach presents several advantages which lead to better development outcomes for people in tea. These include:

Improved project effectiveness

Farmers', workers', and communities' involvement is essential to ensure ETP's projects are responsive to contextual factors and deliver outcomes that meet their needs and expectations. By looking to local knowledge and expertise to guide us, and consulting a diverse range of stakeholders, participatory approaches mean we can better understand what works and what doesn't, anticipate challenges and maximise our impact on the ground.

Inclusivity

Those with the most power in communities have traditionally had more influence over decisions regarding development programmes. Participatory approaches are a way of shifting power dynamics; they involve creating platforms and processes that amplify the voices of marginalised groups – such as women and young people – and ensure they are directly involved in deciding how issues are addressed.

Empowerment

By ensuring communities have access to the resources necessary for change, participatory approaches can facilitate empowerment among project participants – enabling them to be able to decide and act for themselves. Participation, especially in monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), encourages localised ownership of decision-making processes. As a result, communities are better equipped to deal with future challenges and are more likely to have a stake in maintaining the structures and processes that benefit them. Importantly, this increases the likelihood of change to being long term and sustainable.



Factors we consider when using participatory approaches

Participatory approaches mean engaging a wider group of stakeholders during project planning and implementation, which tends to be more costly, time consuming and requires greater thought and planning. Therefore, for participatory initiatives to succeed, we must consider several factors at the beginning of the process.

Participant costs and commitments

We recognise that participation comes with associated costs for participants, particularly for communities facing poverty, as it requires at least some degree of time investment in our projects. This means a person's ability to participate fully depends on their economic status, employment situation, and family responsibilities.

Our initiatives take this into account and are designed to be as inclusive as possible. We aim to ensure that the benefits of participation, such as increased empowerment and improved social and economic outcomes, outweigh the cost it involves. We aim to be clear in our communication about the advantages of participation to rights holders, and for us to be mindful of participants' circumstances when designing our projects.

Resource requirements

When implementing projects, ETP is committed to continuously improving our understanding of local issues and rethinking conventional approaches to driving change. This means dedicating a significant amount of time and resources to building our knowledge and ensuring our projects are benefitting participants rather than unintentionally disempowering them.

We also acknowledge that community members will not always have access to the resources needed for participation and this requires additional efforts on our part to understand how to improve access to these resources and approach initiatives differently to enable participation for everyone. Because of this, initiatives that prioritise high levels of participation generally demand more resources, both in terms of time and financial investment.

The importance of inclusivity

A participatory approach that is not inclusive is not a good participatory approach. Initiatives should not seek to change communities so they are able to participate; instead, they require adaptability to ensure that every community member can participate – including those who may be illiterate or have a disability. This means carefully considering how we share information and data. Using only numbers, graphs, or text might not be suitable for everyone and could exclude some from fully engaging in our projects.

For initiatives to be truly inclusive, they require careful planning, and should include elements such as risk assessments, safeguarding measures, and referral systems for managing sensitive discussions.

Acknowledging power dynamics

To ensure a high degree of participation, ETP must consider the power dynamics at play during participatory initiatives, as this can affect levels of engagement. It is essential that we work with project facilitators who are trusted by participants and that we create spaces that are conducive to participation, ensuring that women, youth, and other marginalised groups can freely express their opinions and experiences.

Failing to recognise and account for these dynamics risks limiting the input of marginalised voices, and subsequently, the initiatives' ability to benefit them.

How we employ a participatory approach in our programmes

At ETP, we often refer to the spectrum below to assess the level of participation in our projects. We aim for shared leadership across our projects – where participants are empowered to be involved in all aspects of a project, including monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) processes, and have the agency to decide and act on outcomes from project data.



Our involvement varies depending on a project's scope and need but our most common roles are supporting project management and convening the skills of other expert stakeholders.

The overall aim is for our projects to live on beyond our intervention: from the outset, we build responsible exit strategies and ensure communities have the tools they need to sustain the activities once we leave.

Building our own capacity

Managing participatory initiatives requires an in-depth understanding of the interconnected challenges which communities face. Whether an initiative is a success depends on a range of complex factors that differ from one region to another – cultural norms, government institutions and historical influences all play an important part in determining the type of solution needed.

Acknowledging this, we have developed a Shared Learning strategy to ensure we can build our capacity internally and continue supporting communities in the most effective and appropriate ways. This sets out our internal learning framework and includes activities such as regular After Action Review workshops for key project milestones and organisation-wide discussions for our on the ground teams to share their experiences. It allows us to stay flexible and responsive, acknowledging that progress is rarely linear and requires adaptability throughout a project's duration.

Increasing access to resources that enable empowerment

We want people working in tea to have the agency to address the issues that impact them; however, tea workers, farmers and communities often have limited access to the resources and information that enable self-empowerment. We collaborate with project participants to better understand their needs and offer the right support to enable them to resolve the challenges the face.

One example is how we are working with women tea workers to transform leadership models within the sector. We facilitate access to vital resources such as mentorship programmes and childcare assistance, enabling women to participate in decision-making forums at their workplaces and work towards attaining leadership roles.

The types of support we offer and the topics we focus on address the challenges that project participants identify themselves, and we encourage them to share what they learn with others in their community to achieve long term impact.

Building platforms for voices to be heard

Once communities have access to the resources needed for empowerment, it is essential that there are platforms and structures in place for them to influence the decisions that impact their lives. These platforms must be inclusive, ensuring that voices from marginalised groups, such as women and young people, are heard.

We facilitate this by organising community consultations, participatory project design workshops, and by supporting the formation of locally led groups and forums that give communities a platform to raise concerns. For example, our Plantation Community Empowerment Programme (PCEP) uses Care International's innovative Community Development Forum (CDF) approach to bring tea estate management, workers, and the wider community together to resolve issues jointly and improve their lives.

Embedding Participation in monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL)

Monitoring and measuring our projects' impact – and sharing this learning – is vital. It keeps us accountable to everybody in tea, allows us to learn and improve our initiatives, and ignites partner support. We use a participatory approach in our MEL processes to help us avoid extractive data collection and instead enable participants to share their perspectives and be involved in data collection and analysis; this makes them able to use a project's findings in their daily lives beyond a project's lifespan.

As a minimum standard in our projects, we ensure all primary stakeholders are aware of the project's aims, how data will be collected, and that we share project data and consult participants throughout a project's course.

Several of our projects work directly with communities to jointly establish monitoring tools and analyse data together to determine the next steps. We always make sure enumerators are from the community itself or are closely connected to it and we ensure enumerators are of the same gender. This helps establish trust when collecting data on sensitive issues.

We also aim to make sure information is shared in a format that is accessible to all members of the community.

Participation in other areas of our work

Aside from our projects, we aim to use a participatory approach in other aspects of our work, including in our policy activities, private sector engagement, and when collaborating with other organisations. Where possible, we aim to prioritise the voices of farmers, workers, and communities, and we request our partners to do the same. We refer to this as the 'worker' or 'farmer voice,' highlighting the importance of consulting those with lived experiences.

For example, in our policy work, we conduct interviews and focus group discussions with farmers and workers to understand how national policy initiatives benefit them and assess whether government schemes are having their intended impact.

Similarly, we are working with our members to establish due diligence processes that involve engaging with suppliers, farmers, and workers in their supply chains to identify and mitigate potential human rights and environmental impacts.

We understand that we do not have all the answers and that ETP alone cannot offer solutions for challenges far removed from our own experiences. That's why in all our work, we aim to seek guidance from local experts and individuals experiencing these challenges firsthand.

Conclusion

Through taking a participatory approach, ETP aims to ensure farmers, workers, and communities are included in development processes and have the agency to address the issues they face. Although taking a participatory approach in our work requires additional resources, we believe that for initiatives to be successful, it is essential that we recognise local expertise and ensure that the perspectives of marginalised groups are listened to, as this leads to more effective and sustainable outcomes for participants.

Where possible, ETP aims to take a participatory approach in all our programme activities. This requires developing our own capacity by sharing learnings internally, improving access to the resources that enable empowerment and creating spaces for voices to be heard.

We also aim to ensure primary stakeholders are involved in other aspects of our work, including in our research and when collecting and analysing project data.



Resources

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