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THE USE OF THE TECHNOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION (ICA) in MALI

By Rachel Stoler¹

The last thing the staff of Mali's National Centre for Health Education (CНИЕCS) expected was to do a five-part strategic planning workshop. The Centre Director Dr. Mamadou Kante paved the way by suggesting we hold bi-weekly "technical meetings." I threw out the idea of the workshop methods I had learned through work with ICA Chicago, Foundation Course '89, and Winning through Participation, to see if anyone would pick up on it. The director did pick up on the idea, and then continued to remind me until I actually had to do something about it. So I scheduled Session #1, Practical Visions.

The first step asked of everyone to imagine what he or she would like to be able to say about CНИЕCS in five years. Of what could we be proud? We had to be creative...to try to go beyond what we normally hope for (in the case of Malian government agencies the scope of creativity is pretty limited). I reminded the group that all ideas were valuable, even those that might seem far out or impossible--usually those are the best ones!

First everyone wrote down their own ideas individually. Then we formed teams of two people each to select the best ideas and write them on sheets of paper to be posted at the front of the room. Each team wrote down at least five ideas. I avoided setting strict limits for the numbers of ideas chosen for any given exercise, since I did not want people to feel either limited or pushed to create more than what came naturally. They sent forward the sheets in waves, according to characteristics I chose randomly, such as Most Unusual, Clearest, Most Futuristic, etc. When all the ideas were taped to the wall (up until this point in no particular order), we began to look for elements that tied certain ideas together. Eventually we had established groupings of sheets. Before naming the groups we checked to see if ideas had not been exposed, or if there were any modifications to be made. A few slight changes, and each cluster got a name. Another quick review and everyone was satisfied with our work.

The first session had gone well, and had maintained peoples' interest, but they were still not sure where all of this was supposed to go. A few people complained about the amount of time it had taken. But they agreed to continue on to the next session which occurred the following week.

Session #2, the Underlying Contradictions, began with a review of what we had done the previous week. Then I asked everyone to think about what it was that was blocking the achievement of these visions. Each participant wrote down at least one obstacle for each vision. Again we formed teams, which in turn were to choose five ideas to present to the group on sheets of paper. I asked them to present the obstacles in a positive manner so as not to adopt accusing tones. Everyone complied with this request, and sent the sheets up to the front, again in waves based on random designations. Again we grouped ideas together in clusters, but did not name them until we had assured that no ideas had been ignored. We added a few more things, then named the clusters. By the end of the session, we had a pretty discouraging sight in front of us: All those obstacles staring down at us like a big wall. No wonder the next session was poorly attended.

¹The National Centre for Health Information, Education and Communication in Bamako, Mali, is a technical unit of the country's Ministry of health. The Centre produces educational support materials such as flipcharts for health talks, creates radio programs on health, provides training to health workers, organizes seminars and serves as a resource centre for health issues. Its target areas presently are AIDS and family planning, nutrition, water and sanitation, and guinea worm with activities reaching into many other areas as well. CНИЕCS collaborates with other government services, NGO's and outside funding bodies to execute many of its programmes. The staff of 20 includes a wide variety of professionals, among which are community development technicians, state nurses, artists and teachers.

Peace Corps, Mali has provided a volunteer to work with CНИЕCS as a general counsellor on many different aspects of the Center's work. Rachel Stoler is the third volunteer to hold this position. Rachel has spent two years as a volunteer in Douentza, Mali, doing wells and other water-related work such as guinea worm education. Before going to Mali in 1990, she participated in the Institute of Cultural Affairs Foundation Course in Brussels, in September 1989. She had worked several months with the ICA Chicago helping with the inception of the 20-20 Center. She had also work with the YMCA in Kenya, Sweden, Taiwan, HongKong and Japan as group leader for international youth exchange programmes, and in Botswana with Operation Crossroads Africa. Her current role at CНИЕCS includes working on radio programs, the establishment of a documentation system, involvement in a nutrition communication project, and institution-building exercises using ICA methods. She has been in Mali for 3 years and is extending her contract for the 4th year.

Maybe it was just that everyone was busy with other activities, but only five people showed up for Session #3, Strategic Directions. I as the facilitator did not see it as my role to dictate regarding attendance, but I was a bit disappointed. Dr. Kante, however, did see it as his role to say something. He suggested that we accord two full days to the completion of the workshop, where no one would have other commitments or be interrupted. I had not required this from the beginning since I was trying to "sell" the process and the staff had not officially "bought" it, so I was thrilled when the doctor made this proposal, and even more thrilled when everyone else accepted. So we scheduled our two days for the 23rd and 24th of September.

The third session was by far the most arduous, but also, in my opinion, the most interesting. We started off by reviewing what had happened during the first two sessions. Then everyone got to work to come up with proposals to address the contradictions of the previous session. Each participant had to try to propose two solutions for each group of obstacles. The ideas could either attack the obstacle head on, or find a way around it. The individual brainstorming session seemed to take forever, but finally we were able to break into teams to select the best ideas and write them on paper to be posted on the wall. I participated in this session not only as facilitator but as staff member as well, contributing my ideas along with everyone else. This may be a little unorthodox in the realm of consulting, but I do work full time at this centre and am implicated in the everyday programming, so I wanted to get in my two cents' worth. No one seemed to be bothered by this.

I encouraged everyone to be as daring as possible in their suggestions, and they were. By the time we finished clustering the ideas, naming them, and reviewing what we had done, we were all exhausted. I promised that the next day would be easier.

And it was. Session #4, the Systematic Actions flowed quite easily. This time we started right out in teams, each team responsible for three strategic directions from the previous day. (There were three teams.) The teams were asked to come up with two or three independent actions for each strategic direction which, once combined would set us well on the road to achievement of these directions. The group did not have much trouble citing specific actions to address each direction. We grouped the actions together under activity headings.

The next step, the Implementation Timeline, exposed an interesting preoccupation of this particular group. It was not difficult to decide what activities we wanted to tackle in the next three months. We decided on: the selection of an exterior relations agent from among the staff to facilitate our activities which are so often impeded by bureaucratic red tape, the establishment of a system of motivation, namely the "Employee of the Month" award, and the organization of the 1993 operating plan. But, when it came time for everyone to volunteer for the activity that interested him or her, everyone balked. "We can't do that," they said. The director has to assign us to our tasks. At that point the director had stepped out for a moment, so I said that it was my understanding all along that the whole point of this exercise was to follow it through to the end to see what the outcome would be. The director had given the go ahead for the whole thing, so I didn't see why he would say no to the volunteer system. But when he came back into the room, I asked him, being careful to say that I did not want to undermine his authority. He responded in support of what I had been saying, that he wanted to see the staff take more responsibility for decisions, and that of course he expected that they would be able to volunteer for the tasks they themselves had selected as important. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, and the committees were formed. As of today, all three committees have mobilized and have done at least part of what they elaborated in their programs.

At the end of the workshop, I asked everyone what they thought of the process. Everyone gave their thumbs up, and said they were really pleased to have been exposed to such a tool. But what struck me even more were the unsolicited positive comments I received over the course of the next few days. The director was particularly pleased and asked me to write up a report for all the participants, which would include not only the charts drawn up at each session, but a description of the process as well. He also agreed to print up certificates of participation for each staff member who took part in the workshop. So it seems as though my efforts to "sell" the process paid off. Not only did the CНИЕCS "buy" it, but they are interested in becoming regular customers.

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