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# *Integrating Participation into Research and Consultancy: A Conservation Example from Arabia*

**Dawn Chatty**

## Abstract

*Conservation projects in the Middle East have recently focused on reintroducing extinct mammals into their former grazing lands. The indigenous human populations in these areas—mainly nomadic pastoralists—have been, until very recently, excluded from any part of the information gathering, planning, implementation and management of such schemes. This intellectual and physical exclusion has resulted in hostility, distrust and occasionally sabotage. To succeed, many conservation efforts have had to rethink and redesign their activity. The key concept underlying this restructuring is "participation". The term, however, means many things to the various actors involved in conservation research and consultancy and care must be taken to identify its uses and meanings. Looking at recent Syrian government efforts to reintroduce the Arabian oryx into the desert as an example, I examine the major pseudo-scientific assumptions which have underpinned most projects and consultancies in the semi-arid lands of Syria. These positions, I show, have led to an untenable "no-win" situation for the nomadic pastoralists. Finally I examine the way in which an effort to introduce the concept of participation through a series of consultancies has resulted in some encouraging collaboration between the indigenous human population, the conservation experts, the local government technocrats and higher authorities.*

## Keywords

*International research; Cultural diversity; Participation; Collaboration; Indigenous populations*

Conservation in the Arabian Peninsula does not have a long historical dimension. In other parts of the world, ideas and policies of "preservation of nature" and the conservation of plant and animal species were exported in the early twentieth century with the colonial administrations of mainly France and Great Britain (Bell 1987). The Arabian Peninsula, however, was never a "colony" of a Western power. Furthermore, it had limited species of large mammals, making it unattractive for ecotourism development of wildlife reserves. Hence, conservation and ecotourism was largely irrelevant in the Arabian Peninsula for most of the twentieth century. Only as the millennium began to draw to a close did an interest in a particular form of conservation manifest itself in the region—animal reintroductions.

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First in Oman, then Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and Syria projects were set up in the late 1970s and 1980s to reintroduce the Arabian oryx into Arabia (Henderson 1974; Jungius 1985; Spalton 1993; Spalton *et al.* 1999; Stanley Price 1989). These projects, often couched in the contemporary developmental language of "participation" and "grassroots" support, in actuality regarded local human populations as obstacles to be overcome—either through monetary compensation or with special terms of local employment—instead of as partners in sustainable conservation and development. In Syria, the previous disregard for the Bedouin's land-use rights is now being questioned in the face of very limited local support for wildlife conservation schemes. Here, the language of participation is being used to mediate the environmental conflict between conservationists and pastoralists. After nearly two decades of "talking" participation, Syria seems to have made the leap from print into action and is making some effort to give conservation a human face. This paper explores and examines some of the efforts to put participation into research and consultancy.

## History of Development Aid in the Desert Regions of Syria

International projects and consultancies in Syria date back 50 years, as does most development aid activity in the region. Post-Second World War assistance, mainly in the shape of the Point IV Plan was grounded in an evolutionary model of development, often called modernization theory, which held the Western "developed world" up as the pinnacle of development. Achieving such a goal required a transfer of knowledge and technology and gave rise to numerous projects, consultancies and technical assistance programmes aimed at raising Syria from its "developing" status to that of a "developed" one. Beginning in the late 1950s, and after a severe drought lasting several years, international experts and consultants identified the indigenous population, the pastoral nomadic Bedouin, as the destroyers of their environment. Proof of this deterioration was asserted to be evidenced in the rapid disappearance of gazelle and oryx from the desert as well as the emergence of thorny scrub which indicated overgrazing and overstocking of domestic herds.[1] The traditional grazing territories of the Bedouin were confiscated, government research stations were set up and international agencies were called in to save this desert landscape from its indigenous nomadic inhabitants.

Although there have never been any empirical studies to support these pseudo-scientific assumptions, the Bedouin as "destroyer of the environment" has underpinned all policy and planning in the region. Such assumptions fits in perfectly with state policies of control where mobile and pastoral communities were regarded as less civilized and more difficult to manage. Programmes and projects have all been based on the exclusion of the Bedouin from their traditional lands, which have then been subjected to projects to replant, re-seed and, more recently, to reintroduce extinct species. Research

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stations and centres funded by international agencies have introduced exotic plants, set up plantations on confiscated grazing areas and set up re-seeding projects. After nearly twenty years of failed efforts, the government of Syria and the international agencies are beginning to look hard at their projects and at what data exist in Syria and in similar regions such as Jordan (Roeder 1996; Rae 1999; Fairhead and Leach 1996; Leybourne *et al.* 1993). These suggest that indigenous people do have a deep understanding of their natural resources which have not been tapped. They know how to use their resources and they exist in a "disequilibrium" (rather than an equilibrium) ecological system which often revives after rainfall or short rest periods (Behnke *et al.* 1993). They suggest, finally, that in many parts of Arabia it is the elite classes and not the indigenous inhabitants who are the hunters and are primarily responsible for the extinction of large mammals in the desert.

## Background: the Bedouin in Arabia

The pastoral Bedouin tribes of Syria, and northern Arabia have, for decades, if not centuries, been in conflict with central governments. Often perceived as "states within states" numerous governments from the Ottoman Empire through the French Mandate period to the independent Syrian state have attempted to settle these people and turn them into easily reachable, controllable sedentary farmers. Two opposing forces have marked the last century in the desert areas: one compelling Bedouin to settle on the edges of the desert and engage in marginal agricultural production; the other forcing them to move away to seek multi-resource livelihoods and pastoral subsistence across several national borders (Abu Jaber *et al.* 1978; Chatty 1986, 1990, Lancaster 1981). The late 1940s and 1950s saw the culmination of several decades of sustained effort to control and break down pastoral tribal organization. Much of the tribal leadership was co-opted into the elite urban political scene, and land holdings once owned in common were increasingly registered in the names of tribal leaders of important families and converted into farms.

The 1960s was a period of strenuous government land reform, including the complete seizure of all common tribal land and the confiscation of the large tracts of land owned by tribal leaders. Following a three-year-long drought, in which over two million sheep died, the government instituted a programme to alleviate the problems caused by this ecological disaster. An internationally sponsored project was set up to revitalize the pastoral sector of the Syrian economy. Its foremost goal was to stabilize the pastoral livestock population. This proved very difficult mainly because the officials running the project did not understand Bedouin methods of animal husbandry.[2] In turn, the Bedouin had no trust in government, especially in light of the recent confiscation of grazing land, and the explosive expansion of agricultural development over nearly a third of the best rangelands of the desert (Al-Sammane 1981: 32).[3]

After a number of years of poor project results, a handful of specialists (Draz 1977) launched a campaign to convince agencies concerned with


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rangeland of the importance of studying the human factor. They argued that unless development programmes were in harmony with the customs and ways of life of the pastoral populations, the whole rangeland development scheme would fail. Bedouin as well as government cooperation was required in order to solve the problem. Eventually a plan was accepted to set up a programme of cooperatives whereby block applications by tribal units for control over their former traditional grazing lands were generally granted by the government. Power and responsibility within a cooperative thus remained within a tribe, giving its members a participatory role in the programme. Today perhaps two-thirds of Syria's Bedouin population belong to such cooperatives and associated schemes, although government reports (Al-Sammane 1981) suggest that number is nearly 90 per cent.

There were numerous ups and downs caused by changing legislation, and inadequate restraint on the spread of agriculture into the desert (Masri 1991). However, the current situation which allows Bedouin a participatory voice in the running of cooperatives that were set up to accommodate traditional Bedouin land use patterns, is an improvement over the uncontrolled grazing of the 1950s and the rigid government regulatory schemes of the 1960s. Flexibility and a *de facto* acceptance of traditional Bedouin systems of exploitation and marketing have resulted in a national programme of some success at both the national and local levels.

Throughout this period, however, the government had experimented with protecting and conserving flora in the desert, often integrating the structure of the cooperatives into its protectionist projects. The rationale behind these measures and pilot projects has been to attempt to rehabilitate rangelands, protect threatened plant and shrub species, and stop the incursion of thorny bush. The hope has always been that the Bedouin would appreciate the benefit of fencing and exclusion and be inspired to do the same on traditional land holdings. Unfortunately this has not happened. Instead, the Bedouin express resentment at traditional common lands being confiscated for government experiments from which they perceive that they are deriving no benefit (Chatty 1995; Roeder 1996).

## Problem: Integrating Local Populations into Mainsteam Planning and Policy Making

An understanding is very gradually spreading among some experts and consultants that further disregard of the indigenous population from mainstream planning and policy making will only result in further displacement and social exclusion. For specific projects, such exclusion will result in continued failure to meet project goals. In the desert projects of Arabia such failure inevitably results in a cycle of censure and recrimination directed at the nomadic pastoralists or Bedouin for not complying with project regulations. Thus the very population that had been excluded from all stages of project development would be blamed for the failure of the project efforts (re-seeding, replanting and reintroduction of gazelle and oryx). In order to break this negative cycle some agencies have returned to the concept of "participation" and attempted to look at it in a new light. The aim is to

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move beyond a flippant acknowledgement of the existence of local users to a concerted effort to understand and integrate the indigenous population into project planning, design and management.

In 1992, Syria negotiated funding for a project to rehabilitate rangeland and to establish a wildlife reserve in the Palmyra desert. This project was approved, and the Food and Agriculture Organization was drawn into the operation of the project as it appeared to have a development focus (improving food security). The project proposed to address three interrelated issues: diminishing grazing land, disappearing wildlife, and increasing requirements for supplemental feeding of domestic herds. It also proposed to incorporate some of the land holdings of three cooperatives into protected ranges, to set up restrictions on access by Bedouin and their domestic herds, and to run a programme to introduce new plant species. After two years of this three-year project, it expected to have obtained a high enough "forage production . . . to enable domesticated animals and wildlife to live in harmony on the land" (FAO 1995: 7). In the third year of this project, physical boundaries were to be established and "the reserve will only be devoted to wildlife grazing" (FAO 1995: 7). In other words, at the close of the project, the Bedouin and their herds were to be excluded from an important area of rehabilitated rangeland.

The project is now in its second three-year cycle and many of its goals have not yet been achieved. Although there is a recognition that the "integration and effective collaboration of the beneficiaries to the programme" are required for sustainability, no visible effort has been made in the technical description of the project to incorporate the Bedouin in its planning, development, or implementation. The indigenous population, however, are only to be involved peripherally in the data recording process and in the discussion of results in order to "develop their awareness on environmental protection" (FAO 1995: 11). The wildlife reserve, *Taliila,* which received 8 oryx from Jordan and 16 gazelle from Saudi Arabia, will remain the home for these animals for the foreseeable future. The Bedouin have been excluded from any role in the planning and management of the reserve; even the four "local" guards at the entrances of the reserve have been recruited from the town of Palmyra.[4]

## Research and Consultancy: Implementing a Working Concept of Participation

A quiet effort in the direction of true local participation, of mobilizing community resource management, of encouraging the formation of small "user" groups, and of building capacity and managing institutional change is now under way. Over the past two years workshops—initiated by the Food and Agriculture Organization—have been held at or near the site of the oryx reintroduction project. These meetings or consultations have aimed at introducing the concepts of participation into more than just the vocabulary of project personnel. Three workshops have been held bringing together government technicians, Peasant Union officials, project personnel, extension teams, and Bedouin whose traditional grazing and watering rights have been


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compromised by the oryx and gazelle reintroduction project and associated government plantation and re-seeding schemes. These workshops have, step by step, moved toward drawing all sides together to work towards a common goal—maintaining the wildlife reserve while at the same time permitting limited resource use by the Bedouin and associated users. The end goal is to achieve further capacity building and truly participatory resource management.

This first tentative workshop effort, initiated at the international level in an effort to put a brake on the inevitable failure which the project seemed to face, had numerous obstacles to overcome. The first hurdle, surprisingly, was in persuading the various potential participants of the importance of the effort. The local government technicians felt they knew the Bedouin well and therefore had all the information that was necessary. The international conservation consultants supported the position that the Bedouin did not know their environment and were not interested in sustainable conservation. The Bedouin, themselves, were mildly bemused at this rare effort to incorporate their ideas or opinions.

In April 1997, just a few months after the arrival of the oryx and gazelle to *Taliila,* I was asked to set up a unique workshop which would bring together government technicians, party officials, project conservationists, wildlife experts, rural extension workers, as well as local Bedouin herders. After visiting Bedouin campsites and discussing the project—of which they claimed no prior knowledge—to ascertain their willingness to participate, I approached the official managers within government and at the project site. Along with an officer from the Food and Agriculture Organization, I organized a five-day workshop with the aim of introducing some basic concepts of participatory research: communications skills, informal interviewing, as well as mapping, ranking and scoring techniques. The participants included ten government technicians and Peasant Union members, ten Bedouin herders and five project staff members.[5] On the third day of the workshop the participants were to spend an afternoon in Bedouin tents, attempting to use their "new" participatory research skills. A number of the government technicians were unhappy with this exercise, for although they had never before been in a Bedouin tent, they were sure that Bedouin were ignorant illiterates with very little knowledge of the desert flora or fauna—despite having survived for centuries in this environment.

At the close of the workshop, in an internal evaluation, the government technicians reported that they had, surprisingly, learned much from the Bedouin. They found them to be hospitable and concerned. They exchanged information and listened to each other. The technicians learned more about the indigenous plants, water resources and behaviour of animals than they had known before. They came to understand why the Bedouin resisted some of the exotic plants that were being introduced. They also came to understand the burden which Bedouin exclusions from government controlled grazing areas placed on the community. And more important, they agreed to relax some of the rules of exclusion and to carry on meeting and undertaking participatory work (Chatty 1997a). With enthusiasm high, a follow-up second participatory workshop was recommended by the government and

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the international conservation managers. This was tentatively approved and scheduled for six months later.

In September 1997 the second five-day workshop was set up. The same individuals who had attended the first workshop took part in a two-day review after which the workshop was moved into a large Bedouin tent in one of the grazing reserves. Here an additional 25 Bedouin men and women attended. For the project personnel and government technicians, the workshop aims were to work further on understanding traditional knowledge and land use. The Bedouin herders had a somewhat different focus. They wished to become players, if not equal partners, in any development of ecotourism to the area. They did not wish to see the income which would be generated by tourist visits to the oryx and gazelle remain exclusively in the hands of the urban service providers. The conservation management team wished to emerge from the workshop with Bedouin promises to respect their continued exclusion from the project's re-seeded areas and plantations. In exchange they were prepared to allow limited access to a water source within *Taliila*, as well as further incentives in the form of income-generating activities for women.

This second workshop threw up a number of conflicts of interest which required ongoing consultation between the Bedouin, the sheep merchants, the farmers and project staff. However, as the consultant and facilitator, I found myself very much in sympathy with the Bedouin position (Chatty 1997b). They were prepared to make compromises, but they wanted to be a more integrated part of the project. The conservation team seemed to have become stuck looking for a "carrot" or compromise with the Bedouin which would protect the project's replanted and re-seeded areas from being grazed by Bedouin herds. The team did not seem interested in exploring a real partnership for ecotourism, or other developments. The traditional and current *de facto* land-use allocation system left the project plantations untouched in years of good rain, but vulnerable to grazing by Bedouin groups with long-established user rights to the areas in years of drought. This was not understood by the project team, nor did they wish to grasp the underlying principles of Bedouin land use. It was more convenient to use a Western model based on private property and open access (Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons*, 1968) even though it did not fit the realities of the site. However, there remained good will on all sides and a desire to continue working together. A third workshop was provisionally set for April 1998.

My report on the outcome of the second workshop included a recommendation that traditional land use and resource allocation needed to be empirically studied and documented before further work could continue in developing a truly participatory conservation effort. The reason I gave this recommendation such emphasis was my hunch that once the project team understood the true manner in which traditional Bedouin practices of land and resource allocation persisted, they would be prepared to permit the Bedouin greater voice in negotiations and discussions. This report was well received in the technical units of the FAO. However, the on-site project management team was unhappy with the findings and felt that the Bedouin were being given too much attention, while the need for protection of the plants and shrubs was not.


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The third workshop scheduled for April 1998 was cancelled by the project manager and instead a women's development expert was sent out to the project. During this three-month consultancy, several women's income-generating activities were set up: tailoring, embroidery and dressmaking. A number of young Bedouin girls took these courses and received diplomas in official ceremonies based in Palmyra. An evaluation at the close of this consultancy revealed that although the girls had enjoyed the classes and the new skills, they were unlikely to be able to earn an income from these activities and did not find them relevant to their way of life.

By the summer of 1998, it was obvious that a serious drought had set in. Against the advice of the project managers and other international experts, the Minister of Agriculture declared all government plantations and re-seeded areas open to the Bedouin. Contrary to the open free-for-all which the project team had anticipated, Bedouin descended upon government grazing areas in an order of sorts. Only particular tribal groups appeared at certain sites, generally reflecting traditional associations of tribes with land and wells. This phenomenon indicated that the traditional tribal order continued to play a significant role in the way in which the Bedouin accessed resources. In other words, the project had failed to recognize that Bedouin traditional resource use and land allocation continued to function alongside the state's contemporary socialist forms of organization and access.

The project management, with encouragement from the FAO headquarters, decided that it would be in the interests of the project to better understand Bedouin land and resource allocation before continuing with any further efforts at developing a participatory relationship with the local community. A land-use consultancy was set up in April and May of 1999, and this was followed by the scheduling of the third participatory workshop in September 1999. Originally the third workshop had hoped to identify and invite actual tribal groups using, or having the rights of access to, lands under the control of the conservation project. But the land-use consultancy was too short-term to provide such information.[6] Instead the third workshop focused on reviewing the concepts introduced two years earlier, re-establishing trust and creating the most appropriate background for mobilizing community resource management, and managing institutional change. The working plan had entailed inviting 10 to 12 Bedouin in addition to the group of 18 which had participated in both previous workshops. However, the Minister of Agriculture wished the numbers to be doubled, in the belief that the success of the earlier sessions could be spread further afield. Hence the third workshop hosted over 50 participants on the first day, in a Bedouin guest tent put up on the edge of *Taliila*. The focus of the workshop was to encourage the understanding of "user" groups, their formation, leadership potential and the foundation for understanding how to deal with conflict resolution. At the close of the workshop, the participants and project staff put forward tentative plans to hold a fourth workshop which focused on group formation and conflict resolution (Chatty 1999). This would take place once the traditional land and resource use consultancy had been completed in the summer of 2000. The project personnel, government technicians and Bedouin herders had found a mechanism to communicate with each other and to attempt

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to solve their problems and difficulties. This was the "workshop" where all parties were able to participate to voice their concerns and search for ways to work together—if not as equals, then certainly without hierarchies of authority.

## Conclusions

Government efforts to rehabilitate the Syrian desert rangelands in the 1960s initially failed to meet their objectives. Only when the human element was integrated into project development was there some success (Draz 1977). Thirty years on, government and international development agencies again proposed to rehabilitate parts of the desert and to establish a wildlife reserve—without any Bedouin consultation (Roeder 1996; FAO 1995). The lessons learned decades before appeared, briefly, to have been forgotten. Pastoralists cannot be separated from their animals or from their common grazing land. Furthermore, the underlying assumption of this project seemed to be again turning back to the stale assumption that it is pastoralists that are overgrazing, or overstocking, and that the solution is to reduce herd numbers and restrict their access to land in order to protect its carrying capacity. These assumption were not only wrong (see, for example, Behnke *et al.* 1993; Pimbert and Pretty 1995: 5), but simply provided a scapegoat for a problem rather than looking for sustainable solutions.

Conservation research and consultancy requires the inclusion of the indigenous, local human population. Such projects need to fully comprehend that their work is not strictly about plants and animals, but also about human users—the potential protectors and conservationists of endangered flora and fauna. In the situation of desert conservation research in Arabia, the Bedouin need to be part of the overall conservation effort. Their perceptions of the problems, the causes and the possible solutions need to be taken into account. Their needs for their own herds, their access to grazing land, water and supplemental feed need to be considered as well. For without their full participation, Bedouin will not support such projects, rendering international wildlife reintroduction efforts unsustainable in the long term.

Now, at the beginning of the new millennium, the Syrian government and its international conservation partners are finally reviewing the delicate balance which needs to be maintained between pastoralists, conservationists and the environment. The link to this balance has been sought through the application of the concept of participation. However, the term has been used for decades with very different meanings. True participation requires compromise, adjustment and a sincere effort to learn from all parties. It also requires the application of that learning to readjusting, revising, replanning and redrawing projects. Otherwise it is not participation, but simply a tool used by the stronger to control the weaker. In the case of the Syrian conservation project, the medium of true participatory research and consultancy in resource management, sustainable conservation and development is being sought. And despite some setbacks and conflicts of interest, the process appears to be ongoing.



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## Notes

1. Jonathan Rae suggests in his study (1999) that the emergence of thorny scrub is linked with the disappearance of camels from the desert grazing areas. Between 1930 and 1960 many camel herding tribes switched to sheep-raising in a response to market demands. Evidence strongly suggests that camels, by eating thorny scrub, play an important role in keeping this unpalatable scrub under control.
2. Bedouin animal husbandry is based on risk minimization rather than the more common western market profit motivation. See Shoup (1990: 200).
3. The Bedouin "dry-farmed" cereal crops during years of good rain, but the large-scale cultivation in this arid zone had never occurred before.
4. During a consultation visit in 1997, I engaged in a discussion of the hiring of local Bedouin for the reserve as a way of beginning to integrate them into the project. The international wildlife expert at the time rejected my suggestion, saying that "Bedouin would not work for the salaries I am offering". The sums concerned were minimal—a matter of $20 or $30 a month. The significance of local, indigenous participation for the long-term success of the project, however, seemed to have been lost on the expert.
5. Of the project staff, only the international wildlife expert did not attend.
6. A further land-use study has been commissioned for a total of five months for February 2000 which should provide some of this information for future participatory workshops.

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# *Multiple Scripts and Contested Discourse in Disseminating Research Findings*

**Gillian Lewando Hundt**

## Abstract

*Disseminating research findings locally, nationally and internationally is complicated and sensitive. International teams of researchers have to navigate and wind their way through multiple agendas, scripts and discourses. This leads to contested discourses concerning the meaning and relevance of findings, often expressed through disputes over the use of language. There is a need to consider local, national and international sensitivities, structures, policies and ideologies and to negotiate a shared awareness and understanding of these differences. The case study presented here is drawn from an international collaborative research project in the area of maternal, reproductive and child health in the Middle East. Issues of difference arose in relation to the nature of the research, the significance of the findings, the terminology to be used when referring to the groups of people being studied or when presenting data. The importance of the political and social context of the research and research teams was as relevant as the research design, data collection and findings.*

## Keywords

*Politics; Research; Collaboration; Dissemination*

## Introduction

This paper explores verbal and textual communications in international research as performances that occur within interpretive and literal (textual) frames. As performance, these events have a structure including particular settings and ground rules with participants, performers and audiences (Bauman 1978: 9). Literary criticism and reviews of plays are always diverse, with multiple often conflicting interpretations of the meaning, significance and quality of texts and performance and production. Bauman in his essays in the field of sociolinguistics in *Verbal Art as Performance* writes of how verbal art is a way of speaking:

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