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The participatory development agenda: a critical review

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Introduction

Inspired by the revolutionary work of Paulo Freire (1968), participatory processes have been 'in vogue' in the development discourse since the seventies and the literature on the subject has grown dramatically since. The concept is firmly established in the social, developmental and political lexicon of our time. Used enthusiastically by academics, social workers, aid agencies and politicians alike, and applied to a number of public issues since the nineties, participation has evolved into a panacea for a range of human maladies by ostensibly allowing development processes to become more inclusive, more transparent, more equitable, and more responsible. The interest of national governments and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations agencies in applying the concept is telling, and vouches for its mass appeal despite the fact that this attention has also given rise to claims that such agencies have 'de-politicized' participation. Even though discourse on participation has been generally positive in mainstream analysis, the rapid proliferation of the term and its myriad applications have sparked a great deal of debate and controversy and served as an impetus for more critical analyses of the concept in recent times. Despite the lack of consensus on the importance of, and a conceptual framework for, participation it has remained a key theme in development dialogue for the last few decades.

This paper examines the idea of participation as evidenced in the current discourse. It is designed to explore key issues related to the concept and delve into difficulties associated with its application. The paper finds that despite differences in viewpoints, current accounts of participation suffer from a lack of clear definition of the concept and what it is expected to achieve. Such writing is frequently steeped in ideological debate, which further mystifies and romanticizes the concept, making practical application even more problematic.

Participatory development: a cross-section of views

The first in an influential series of papers by Robert Chambers on the topic in 1994, 'The Origins and Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal', explores the origins and prior exercise of the principles of PRA. The work heralded an NGO-led, bottom-up, grassroots approach to development planning and implementation. Tracing the concept to the alternative approaches to development formulated in the seventies, agrosystem analysis, applied anthropology, field research on farms, and the process of rapid rural appraisal (RRA), the leading author contends that a 'critical mass and momentum' (1994:963) was reached in the 1990s that enabled the rise and spread of PRA approaches. To Chambers, participatory development using PRA techniques offers a means of empowering the poor, the marginalized and the disenfranchised in societies by accommodating for the incorporation of specific local values in the design and implementation of programs and projects, without external influence or pressure. He advocates the use of PRA techniques across a range of sectors as a means of challenging the directionality of conventional developmental decision-making and allowing for participatory, grassroots-centred development.

By contrast, editors of the more recent work 'Participation: The New Tyranny?', Cooke and Kothari (2001) are wary of mechanical acceptance of participatory approaches to development. Using the word 'tyranny' to describe use of participatory processes to create false illusions of empowerment, while simultaneously reinforcing norms and existing power hierarchies, they highlight the need to challenge current practice to create real space for the poor to voice their views. Questioning the

naivety of advocates of participation such as Chambers, they contend that approaches like PRA overlook complex power relations within communities and present an unrealistic view of group behavior and dynamics. In the chapter entitled, 'Power, Knowledge and Social Control in Participatory Development', Kothari is particularly concerned by the lack of attention to power structures at the micro-level and feels that the focus on the local can exacerbate existing inequalities because the 'production and representation of knowledge is inseparable from the exercise of power.' She is equally skeptical about the role of donor agencies, researchers, translators and others driving the participatory process. Using a Foucauldian analysis of the power of discourses, she illustrates how democratic processes can be used to control and subjugate people under the guise of empowering them. Kothari (2001:142) states that 'participative methods of enquiry simplify the nature of power' and that the 'very act of inclusion...can symbolize an exercise of power and control over an individual.'

In his paper, 'Evaluating participatory development: tyranny, power and (re)politicization' Glyn Williams (2001) challenges models of empowerment that are implicit in current literature on participatory development. He neatly encapsulates the major issues with Chambers' idealized vision of participatory development: emphasis on 'personal reform over political struggle'; ignoring local power structures by glorifying the community; and use of 'language of emancipation to incorporate marginalized populations...within a...project of capitalist modernization.' Equally flawed, in his opinion, are narratives of participation's 'tyranny' and of participation as subjugation.

Williams contends that 'polarization between protagonists' is based on simplistic positions and has prevented the radical transformation of participation into a politically empowering process. Williams stresses the need for development practitioners to engage with the political aspects of development and recognize that empowerment is an inherently political struggle. Addressing issues related to the de-politicization of the participatory process, he maintains that it is naïve to ignore the political nature of participation and rely on idealized narratives of communal behavior that understate power and politics. Contending the claim that participation dis-empowers communities by reinforcing power structures, Williams states that while participation is a 'highly malleable' process, it has an important democratizing role and not all outcomes can be predetermined or controlled. Williams moves beyond criticism of participatory approaches to development and concerns about 'participation as incorporation' to offer a way forward by reestablishing participatory approaches as legitimately transformative processes through their re-politicization. His work presents much needed 'middle ground' analysis in the highly polarized debate on the topic.

Beyond rhetoric: reviving the spirit of participation

As is evident from these papers there is little agreement amongst academics and practitioners on the value of participatory development processes. The stark contrast between Chambers' unrelenting optimism and Kothari's cynical realism is a good indication of the wide division of views in the literature on participation. The complex and challenging nature of the process itself adds to the confusion, and subjects both to either: the insidious tendency of development agencies and governments to use participation as a 'frill' or 'window-dressing'; or to assertions that participation is a panacea that will transform the development world. Such extreme positions on the concept have generated much rhetoric and stood in the way of serious consideration of key issues.

Participation is often seen as having radical pedigree (Chambers 1994, Williams 2004), and this serves to heighten its status as an empowering approach, but the colonial roots of key terms used in the debate make for interesting analysis. While most of the literature on development management

has overlooked such distressing parallels, terms “central to participatory development which came into vogue through colonial anthropology ‘like ‘community’, ‘village’, ‘local people’...depict the world in terms of a distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’” (Stirrat 1970 in Cooke 2001). Stirrat further states that vague usage of the term empowerment justifies activity by external agencies and ‘contrary to participatory rhetoric, “in practice new forms of dependency are also encouraged in which ‘motivators’ and ‘mobilisers’ form the new elite.” Cooke asserts that participatory development, far from being the triumph of ‘the radical over the orthodox’, is actually ‘metaphorical colonization’ which ‘both maintains, and is maintained by, a literal perpetuation of colonization processes on the part of development management.’

In spite of this sobering analysis about the origins and pervasive legacy of the fundamental expressions in the participation debate, it is easy to be charmed by Chambers’ vision of a participatory approach to development problems that is led by the grassroots, and includes the perspectives of all stakeholders. Rather than a one-sided extraction process by external evaluators, local stakeholders are empowered to choose and define procedures and methods on their own terms. The role of the outsider is reduced to that of as catalyst or facilitator of this local empowerment and learning process. The idea that the poor can be informed participants in development processes has merit and participation as a key means of enabling the poor to influence decisions that impact them can not be dismissed as mere rhetoric.

However, appealing as Chambers’ idealism is, it is difficult to sustain his level of enthusiasm for the capacity of communities to transform in miraculous and equitable ways to contest authority structures. In this regard, his analysis is both normative and unsophisticated. Often what is labeled ‘local knowledge’ is strongly influenced by local associations of authority, gender and power and may not produce any real change within the community. As Kothari points out, external agendas can easily be presented as local ‘needs’ by project facilitators and the process of participation can be employed to legitimize donor priorities by ‘rubber-stamping’ or manufacturing community consent. Chambers’ glorification of the ‘local’, assumption of harmony and homogeneity at the community level and lack of attention to injustice and inequity within community structures are also serious concerns.

What is more disturbing is that even though Chambers is often criticized for his idealism and naivety, his version of community participation or empowerment does not transpire as a result of processes that occur within the community, but rather is dependant on the outsider even in their limited role as facilitator. The outsider serves as a catalyst for more than community participation; (s)he, by mere attendance, also *instigates* a process of dialogue and information sharing that is intended to transform the community. In this sense, it is the outsider, who may originate from another country, and not the power of the participatory process that is the ‘magic bullet.’

Another key issue in the debate is the idea that there can be a singular doctrine of what development should be and how it should take place. The failure of academics to recognize that development and associated concepts like participation and empowerment are slow, awkward and uneven can result in disenchantment even with processes that are working. Bureaucratic models of participation that are propagated as the only way to ensure empowerment and equity can be just as detrimental to development as traditional authoritarian models. The framework within which ‘good’ participation takes place is also top-down and based on ideas of outsiders about how communities interact and behave. Cultural context is not given adequate priority and focus lies on the implementation of a range of ‘participatory techniques’ which may or may not work as envisaged. Kothari implies that even if a process is inclusive, it does not automatically empower as well, and participatory approaches can be blind to power relations inside groups. For example, women may participate in

PRA style group sessions, however, because of the communal nature of the activity, they may be forced to conform to traditional roles or remain silent on issues that impact them due to gender biases within the social fabric of that community. Such sessions are equally open to being usurped by the social, political or economic elite of the community.

While participatory development has drawn more than its fair share of critics and it would be unfair to shelve participation as a development sector ‘fad’ prone to manipulation by external interests, not all concerns about the true nature of participation can be dismissed as cynicism. As evident in Williams and Kothari’s analysis, there is genuine cause for trepidation regarding the motivations of the actors in participatory processes, especially when most such initiatives are instigated by external agents. Of particular concern is the power of donors, governments and development agencies including non-governmental organizations to control and guide discourse and interpret information to suit their own agendas. Such processes can devalue local knowledge and experience and further disempower local communities. Cooke (2001) also raises the issue of the use of participation to mask or maintain existing social and economic inequities.

It is important to note, however, that control is never complete and even orchestrated participation can open up new space for dialogue and change, but, this does not imply that academics should be naïve about the intentions of actors and institutions in the development process. Such analysis also begs the question: do people participate in development to further their own interests or for the general good? This involves examination of the relationship between individual and collective interests within societies, egocentric and sociocentric positions in communal groups and cooperation and competition between and within communities which is often missing from analysis of participatory processes.

Moreover, most critics of participatory development ignore a potent truth about the environment within which all development activity takes place: the real world is not ideal and even when development initiatives operate with the best of intentions, compromises are involved. This may have more to do with the difficulty of translating the ideal into the practical than any hidden agenda or active de-politicization process. Recognition of the complexity of community power relations and the exclusionary aspects of participation are essential to counter limitations of empowerment processes. However, imperfections or even deep-rooted flaws do not imply that practitioners should disengage from the process.

In this regard, Williams’ proposal to resolve problems with current models of participation offers some hope for the future development of the concept as the tool of empowerment that it was designed to be. For Williams, the pursuit of participation is politically motivated and he is equally reluctant to give in to the Chambers’ romanticism or Kothari’s bleak standpoint. Unlike Kothari, whose critique does not offer an alternative view of development, Williams illustrates that far from being a redundant concept, participation can be genuinely transformative with positive outcomes for all participants. In this respect, he offers a more constructive critique of participatory development than Kothari does. It is also worth mentioning here that Kothari and her colleagues tackle issues in what Alan Rogers in his review of the book refers to as ‘in-house discussion among a group of self-identified experts who use their own power of discourse (jargon) to exclude others.’ This critique can be applied, unfortunately, to most of the discussion that occurs on the topic and detracts from the nature of the principle being promoted.

Despite the fact that the papers discussed here take fairly disparate positions on the issue of participatory development, the authors are similar in that they are all engaged in and committed to a quest to move beyond lip service and institutionalize participation. Furthering the participatory development agenda would require a more thorough consideration of facts and issues than space

permits here. Suffice to say that while participatory approaches have myriad advantages and benefits over the non-inclusive strategies of the past, important issues need to be addressed to ensure that such activities are meaningful.

Participatory efforts need to have ‘teeth’ and move beyond tools which allow people to ‘vent’. This would involve citizen engagement at the top rungs of Arnstein’s (1969) famous ladder of participation. If this process of empowerment entails the re-politicization of participatory development, discussion needs to move beyond the pedantic and technical to explore political questions regarding the position of participatory development in the broader context of policy processes and political institutions. The cause of participation will be best served when issues surrounding ethics and power are tackled in mainstream debate and the concept is taken beyond its current tendency towards tokenism.

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