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# The Role of Popular Participation in Programmes of Social Development\*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of popular participation in development. It is indicated that participation in development programmes by the local people is very crucial in order to ensure successful implementation of these programmes. The paper also advances the argument that although participation is seen as being very important, there are as yet few countries which have developed appropriate methods and organisational bases geared towards facilitating the participation process.

A fundamental conclusion of the paper is that whilst maintaining existing patterns of intervention in rural areas, efforts should also focus on searching for more appropriate ways in which a participatory approach could underly the whole basis of the intervention.

## Introduction: the issues

The concept of popular participation is well established in contemporary development literature. It is thus difficult to find any recent writings on rural development which do not weave the concept in. Concern with this concept is, however, not accidental. It has stemmed from the accumulated weight of empirical evidence showing that rapid growth in Gross National Product (GNP) has by-passed the poor, especially the rural poor. This emphasis on economic growth is a manifestation of a neo-classical view of development in which it was assumed that additional benefits would automatically accompany a successful growth strategy. The instruments of this strategy were overwhelmingly geared towards the maximisation of growth with a strong

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assumption that the fruits of economic progress would be automatically diffused throughout the entire economy.

Not only was it believed that the problem of income distribution would take care of itself, but it was also held that the maximisation of growth would in the long run be the most effective means of raising the incomes of the poor. The possibility of growing inequality in the short run was conceded, but even this was held to be desirable insofar as total savings were increased and hence a greater output would be available for later redistribution. However, Lee (1981) has shown that the 'spread' and 'trickle down' effects proved to be far less potent than originally anticipated. The glaring discrepancy between the predictions of the growth strategy and the reality of persistent mass poverty has forced a re-evaluation of that strategy in search of one which, while containing the worst manifestations of inequality and poverty, could ensure growth. Thus an anti-poverty policy is now being advocated—the thrust being a direct attack on poverty.

As a result, some popular themes and approaches have been formulated in development circles. These include redistribution with growth, another development, unified development and basic needs. Participation is the latest issue of concern.

### *Conceptual clarifications*

In international discussions of development policies the term participation is frequently used with connotations of a long socio-historical tradition (for example, Stohr, 1981), a tradition which can be traced back to civil emancipation in the course of the social revolutions of 19th Century. Participation was understood to be civil involvement in political life, as the realisation of the self-determination of the individual. It was also seen as a precondition for overcoming the historical development of the social and economic inequalities of social groups and classes in any one society. The term participation acquired importance for development policies when United Nations Organisations and especially the I.L.O. stipulated that participation is a 'basic human need' and thus a value in itself.

In general, then, popular participation has been conceptualised in relation to some form of political democracy and, equally broadly, in terms of involvement in the processes of societal change and growth that the term development suggests. More commonly in development literature it is examined from the point of view of government intervention in development, and, in this respect, terms such as mobilisation have been used to characterise the nature of the

participation. Oakley and Marsden (1984:17) add further credence to this view by noting "that the intervention is itself conceptualised into some kind of planning process with the accompanying paraphernalia of mechanisms, objectives, budgets and control."

### *Some basic theoretical considerations*

As the above account shows, participation is one of the most complex as well as the most basic areas of choice. It raises questions that are very hard for policy makers and planners to face frankly, questions of *who* is doing the choosing, *how* choices are enforced, and *whether* the style of development treats participation mainly as a means or as an end. When participation is willed from 'above' it becomes mobilisation, a means of getting things done. When it arises from 'below' it usually focuses on distribution, becoming also a means, from the standpoint of the groups able to participate, of obtaining a larger immediate share of the fruits of development.

Thus, authentic participation, heightening the participants' awareness of values, issues, and the possibility of making choices, influencing the content of development, generating new ways of doing things, and also safeguarding the participants' right to an equitable share in the fruits of development, remains an elusive aspiration. However, there is a powerful and distinct underlying philosophy of development to be found in this aspiration. This states that the motive force of development lies in the creative energies of the people and that development is about the release and mobilisation of these energies.

In the context of rural development, the main justifying function of participation is the development of people's essential powers – inducing human dignity and respect and making people responsible by developing their powers of deliberate action. In popular participation planning is always contextual, it cannot be done at a distance or in the abstract.

Even more important, broad participation in planning has the virtue of facilitating the implementation of plans. Kent (1981) has argued that there is a new and growing literature on the problem of implementation, literature that agonises over the fact that plans that seem to be technically sound are not carried out successfully. The simple reason may be that people do not like to carry out a scheme devised by others – irrespective of its merits. In contrast, when plans are generated by the people who are to implement them so that the goals and the motivation are wholly internalised, implementation becomes much less problematic.

Although there is unanimity in relation to the importance of participation in the development process, there is less unanimity on the nature and content of the participation process. At the risk of generalisation, it may be helpful if a few statements are made on what participation is:

- (i) With regard to rural development, participation includes people's involvement in decision-making processes and in implementing programmes; their sharing in the benefits of development programmes; and their involvement in efforts to evaluate such programmes (Lish, 1981).
- (ii) Participation refers to organised efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations, on the part of groups and movements of those people hitherto excluded from such control (Pearse and Stiefel, 1979).
- (iii) Participation means, in its broadest sense, to sensitise people and so to increase the receptivity and ability of rural people to respond to development programmes, as well as to encourage local initiative (Lele, 1975).

These statements reflect the dominant paradigms of development thinking and, indeed, the more commonly expressed understanding of participation. These statements are predicted upon the particular perspective of rural development being employed.

### **The practice of participation**

Based on the above 'interpretations' of participation, some common strands of the concept emerge as follows:

- the sharing of power and of scarce resources;
- deliberate efforts by social groups to control their own destinies and improve their living conditions; and
- opening up opportunities from below.

Thus for participation to bring about structural change implies the taking of action, and this action can only be taken from a position of power – that is, power in terms of access to, and control of, the resources necessary to protect livelihood. This is why the development literature is overburdened with equating the concept of participation to the process of empowering. This is a radical departure from years of traditional practice. Hence, where participation is the means to achieving previously established development objectives, its strategy is to reform and improve. Where it aims at achieving power in order to demand meaningful participation, it implicitly demands some kind of structural change.

### *Obstacles to the practice of participation*

In spite of the insistence on popular participation in United Nations development programmes, an examination of the performance of these programmes is not encouraging. Authentic popular participation seldom occurs. To view participation as a means suggests a set of obstacles usually associated with the operational procedures of the task under-taken (Oakley and Marsden, 1984). In contrast, if participation is viewed as an end the obstacles become more associated with structural and institutional relationship both at the national and local level.

The obstacles more commonly referred to include overcentralised planning, inadequate delivery mechanisms, lack of local coordination, inappropriate project technology, irrelevant project content and lack of local structures. For popular participation to be meaningful and effective, some measures must be devised to overcome the obstacles. Participation should not simply be considered as some kind of quantifiable ingredient to be injected into a development project. This is indicative of the fact that participation is a live, dynamic process so that there are major limitations to the amount we can learn merely from conceptualisation. We shall now, therefore, examine some ways in which local people may be involved in the participation process. Thereafter, we shall examine some examples of its practice which reflect the range of interpretations of participation and which may help us to give the concept more form and meaning.

### *Some ways of 'implementing' participation*

A number of ways of involving the public in planning for their own development have been well documented in the literature. Here, we will focus only on a few of them, including the use of extension staff, community development and decentralised planning.

#### *The use of extension staff*

In most developing countries many government departments or ministries have field staff whose primary role is to provide a link between policy makers and the local people. Some of these extension staff are technical officers attached to such sectors as agriculture, education and health. Because of their role as a link between local communities and regional or national authorities, extension staff can be used as a means of achieving popular participation in

planning. They can provide information about the type of development projects needed in local areas, and they can help to assess the likely impact of particular projects or problems which may occur. Similarly they can explain to local people why a project is being introduced, what form it will take and how they can benefit from it. They may be particularly useful in the case of projects which are planned and implemented by a single department or ministry.

Using extension staff has some advantages. Since they are already in the local area, they are likely to have already established links with the local community and gathered a considerable amount of information about local conditions and needs. This represents a two-way communication between decision makers and local people. However, the use of extension staff does have its limitations. Most government agencies are not organised in a way which facilitates this type of communication between field staff and their supporters at regional or national level. More often than not, communication is seriously inadequate, confined to the issuing of orders from headquarters to the field – in short ‘bureaucratic red tape’.

Similarly, communication is further hampered when more than one government agency is involved in the planning process. Obviously, in such cases it is difficult to coordinate plans of these various agencies, let alone involve the various extension staff of each agency. Other problems relate to the training of extension workers themselves, most of whom are not adequately equipped to effectively communicate with local communities or to collect the sort of information which is needed for planning purposes. Added to this, extension officers are often looked upon as strangers by local people and as such they may not be very instrumental in promoting popular participation in development programmes.

In spite of these short-comings, many countries are now making efforts to improve the quality of extension work by providing training which directly focuses on the needs and aspirations of the local populace. It, however, remains to be seen what impact this will have on the development of rural areas.

## **Community development**

The rhetorical literature about community development frequently calls for programmes built on the felt needs and spontaneous initiatives of the people. Thus, the thrust of community development is viewed as a process of development which emphasises popular participation and the direct involve-



ment of a population in the process of development (United Nations, 1971).

In essence, community development programmes seek to prepare the rural population to collaborate with government development plans. Such programmes are designed to raise the standard of living and improve the quality of life of the community (Conyers, 1982). Activities which feature highly in community development programmes include adult and functional literacy programmes, the provision of basic services such as housing, water supply and health care and the promotion of development programmes for women. In all these activities it is intended that the community itself should play a major role in initiating, planning and organising them. Community development is also related to the concept of self-help, in the sense that the use of local resources, and in particular the fact that activities are initiated and organised by the community itself, help to strengthen the community as a viable entity.

The implementation of community development programmes requires the use of extension staff (Community Development Assistants) who, unlike other extension workers, are not trained in any specific technical skills, but in general extension techniques. Their role is to work with communities, and to assist in the formation of local organisations such as village development committees, through which local initiative is enlisted. These workers also assist in obtaining any technical, financial, or other help which the community may require. It is in this way that community development activities can promote popular participation in development. Despite these merits, community development activities encounter a number of problems. These include lack of resources, especially staff, and confusion about what community development is really about. In most countries, community development is not considered sufficiently important to warrant large resource allocations and this weakens the activities. Thus, if popular participation is to be meaningful in promoting development, there is need for governments to be fully committed to providing the necessary resources and support services. Otherwise, all efforts will be a waste, leading to continued problems of 'underdevelopment'.

### *Decentralised planning*

In most developing countries today, the term decentralisation is defined very broadly to include the transfer of authority not only to local levels of government or administration, but also to special project organisations, parastatal bodies and voluntary agencies. In the context of this paper we will mainly discuss how planning may be done at the local level.



Local-level planning may be carried out through the establishment of local planning agencies/bodies composed of local officials and/or elected representatives, who are responsible for plan implementation in their area. Secondly, representatives of a national planning agency based at this level may do the planning. In either case, the preparation of local plans may form an integral part of a national planning exercise, or may be carried out independently. Although it may be argued that planning at the local level does not fall readily into the commonly accepted concept of planning, it is, nonetheless, an essential element within the planning process (Kent 1981). In order for development to liberate people from the causes and substance of their poverty, it must involve a process over which they have control, hence the role of decentralised planning.

As we have shown earlier, if people at the local level are fully involved in planning and the implementation of plans and have some direct control over financial and other resources within their area then they are much more likely to be committed to the plans and also to ensure that they are relevant and implementable.

Although the importance of decentralised planning has been widely accepted in a number of developing countries, there are a number of problems associated with its implementation. Firstly, many local level people do not have the capacity to carry out planning successfully. Secondly, integrating local planning into national planning is not as simple as presented here. Local plans are easily submerged within a national plan and so tend to be ineffective as instruments of local development and run the risk of being in conflict with national aims and objectives. Finally, even if planning is decentralised, the ordinary people at community or village level are not directly involved in the planning process. Decentralisation also calls for political commitment in order to facilitate its implementation. Therefore, popular participation schemes require concomitant political and administrative and financial support in order to contribute to the development process.

Having presented some possible ways in which local people may be involved in planning for their development, the ensuing discussion centres on some examples of participation from Malawi.

### *Empirical examples of the practice of participation*

The success or failure of programmes of planned change depend on the ability and cooperation of local people through their local leaders at the village level. In order to improve communication and education activities, targets should be

set in such a way that they directly relate to those persons within rural households who are decision-makers and act upon new information. The essence here is that unless the local community (through its leaders) understands what an innovation is about, they will not participate in its implementation.

In Malawi, the concept of popular participation has been widely applied through various self-help programmes. One of the best examples of the practice of participation is the gravity-fed rural piped water supply project. When the project was being introduced in 1969 (in Chingale area in the south of the country), it became apparent that the mere introduction of the technology could not be successful unless it was preceded by a series of consultations and inter-personal communication between the projects officers and the local people. Water was indeed a critical problem in the area in that local wells always dried up in the dry season. Even the river water dried up so that people had acute water problems during this time.

The implementation of the gravity-fed water supply project was thus based on the basis of frequent consultation with the local people until they saw the problem themselves and, in turn, saw the need for taking some action with the assistance of community development assistants who were already in the area. A number of committees were formed and soon local people began to dig trenches in which the pipes were to be laid from the main source at the top of a mountain. Local people also cleared access roads to storage tank sites, excavated tank sites and carried out all ancillary work related to the project. Their local input is estimated at about 30 percent (Msukwa and Kandoole, 1982).

Following the successful completion of the project in Chingale area, a number of other areas emulated the example and, as of 1977, community labour had laid some 750 miles of pipes feeding 1,800 communal taps at a cost to the Government of only about US \$6 per person served (World Bank, 1981). Similar projects are now being implemented throughout the country and the key to the project's success has been effective community participation.

There were a number of key elements which stimulated participation in the project. These included:

- intervention, contact at the local level, seeking assistance from local leaders
- a detailed explanation of the projects' objectives and congruence of these objectives with local needs

- mobilisation, stimulation of interest and an awareness of the project
- enlisting the support and help of local people and structuring local water committees as vehicles of this support
- continued involvement in the maintenance and repair of the communal taps, stand pipes and aprons.

These key elements suggest that the practice of participation at the project level is indeed invaluable in order to ensure successful implementation. The context of participation must be clearly understood before action is contemplated. Thus a process of research-action must be built into the intervention mechanism. Similarly, some form of organisation is fundamental to the process of participation, without which the would-be participants lack a structure to facilitate the process.

Popular participation has also been instrumental in promoting other social service self-help projects in Malawi, including feeder roads, dispensaries, teachers houses and primary school blocks. These are implemented through District Development Committees (DDCs) which seek to forge a spirit of self-help in the provision of basic services and to give opportunity to the rural people to communicate their needs and problems to relevant government ministries/departments. These DDCs are the nexus of a strong organisational-communication-cum-participation system for the planning and implementation of district-level development projects. They also serve as a forum for some decentralised planning and through which the government is made aware of development needs throughout the country.

### *Constraints*

Although the practice of participation has been relatively successful in the implementation of projects in Malawi, some serious problems still remain. Firstly, planning at the local-level is still largely a formal exercise carried out by 'specialists' with limited consultation with the local people. The identification of some of the self-help projects is influenced by extension workers and some influential local leaders such as councillors and chiefs. This leads to the planning of projects which are never implemented. Secondly, maintenance of the completed projects is another serious problem. There are usually no clear guidelines on who will carry out the maintenance, the local people or the public agencies. For example, in an evaluation of the Zomba East piped water project, Msukwa and Kandoole (1982) have shown that when the local people were asked about who is responsible for the maintenance of aprons and taps 39

percent of the interviewees said that it was the community, 21,4 percent said it was the government and 32,6 percent said they did not know.

This demonstrates that some members of the community were not fully involved in preliminary stages of the project and still feel that the government is responsible for its maintenance. These findings are supported by Oakley and Marsden (1984) who have observed that we cannot assume that participation will occur merely as a result of project intervention. Rather, the preparation of the local/rural people to participate effectively must be seen as an important project activity in itself.

## **Conclusion**

Popular participation is indeed an integral part of the development process. As has been shown in this paper, there are very few countries which do not publicly declare the need for popular participation. This is reflected in the common use of such terms as bottom-up planning, involvement at the grass-roots and democratic planning.

Participation will, however, not have much meaning if it cannot be ensured that the rural poor can effectively participate in rural development. The implication here is not to abandon the existing patterns of interventions, but rather to search for more appropriate ways in which participation may contribute to successful intervention in rural areas. As Esman (1974) has pointed out, the romance of participation should not lead administrators to expect that the results will be painless. Participation will generate conflict, it will make more work for officials, but hopefully it will improve the relevance and the effectiveness of developmental public services.

Thus, to speak of participation without considering a fundamental shift in the nature of practice is quite meaningless, but that is the implication of a strategy of participation which seeks to challenge existing development orthodoxies.

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