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Participation: how to minimize risks and limitations?

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Introduction

This paper, inspired for a great part by the book «Participation: the new tyranny?» (COOKE & KOTHARI 2004), published for the first time in 2001, will try to show that there is a current of thought that criticizes the participation discourse and which highlights the gulf that may exist between the discourse and the rhetoric of participation. Although the different contributions to this book can be described as very «provocative», they can serve as a starting point to study such approaches.

Do participatory approaches and processes always achieve their declared aims? Do they really reinforce the power of people they pretend to support and promote? Don't the people involved in such processes have some sort of hidden agenda? Don't those who promote these approaches appear somewhat naïve about the complexities of power and power relations? Is participation not merely the manipulation of people's views and expectations to bring them into line with plans already devised? These are a few questions raised in this book.

Acts and processes of participation as «sharing knowledge, «negotiating power relationships», «political activism», etc. can both conceal and reinforce oppressions and injustices in their various manifestations, although a participatory process is supposed to have the directly opposite effect. How can this happen and is it avoidable?

These questions could also help researchers and practitioners to further explore the applicability of participatory approaches in different cultural contexts and help them to understand that participative decision-making processes should not be reduced to some formulaic or technical process, but should be rooted in a dynamic relationship of mutual trust and respect.

A second book by Samuel Hickey and Giles Mohan, entitled «Participation: from tyranny to transformation» (HICKEY & MOHAN 2004), highlights the recent convergence of participatory development and participatory governance, and gives a more positive opinion of participation as a genuinely transformative approach.

1. Main features of the PRA

Before starting the review of the criticisms brought against participatory approaches and identifying the key elements on which to focus, a brief reminder of the main features of these approaches is necessary.

CHAMBERS (1997) defines participatory rapid appraisal (PRA) as: «a family of approaches and methods to enable rural people to share, enhance, and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act. PRA is increasingly understood as a means of validating local knowledge and empowering local populations. PRA methods have been applied in many sectors.

Methodology of PRA

PRA approaches have been constructed from an extensive repertoire of research tools and methods, some of the core values are:

- Self-critical awareness;
- Personal responsibility (use your own best judgment at all times);
- Improvise in the spirit of play;
- Embrace error;
- Be relaxed and not in a hurry.

The training of the practitioners is concerned as much with the development of interpersonal and communication skills and the transformation of attitudes as with the acquisition of technical skills and focuses on:

- Building good relationships by paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal messages;
- Adopting a learning rather than a lecturing mode;
- Showing respect for people, their skills and knowledge.

In PRA approaches, outsiders play the role of facilitators, learners or consultants.

Epistemology of PRA

PRA embodies different notions of knowledge and evidence. Above all, PRA attaches more importance to the actor's over the observer's view and to local over scientific knowledge. PRA practitioners use 4 criteria to check the validity of their findings: credibility (built upon trust and relationships established with informants), transferability, dependability and confirmability.

The third feature of PRA's epistemology is its emphasis on differences rather than absolute measures. Learning comes from exception, discrepancies, oddities, rather than averages. Finally, preference is given to visual rather than verbal data (i.e. the construction of graphics such as maps, matrixes, diagrams and calendars).

In short, the new paradigm represented by PRA can be presented as a series of transfers:

- From the scientific to local knowledge;
- From extracting to empowering;
- From individual to group;
- From verbal to visual;
- From measuring to comparing;
- From reserve to rapport;
- From top-down to bottom-up;
- From centralized-standardized to local diversity;
- From blueprint to learning.

In the following pages we will analyse some of these elements, which are very closely related to each other, and try to see why a specific importance should be given to them.

2. From the scientific to the local knowledge¹

PRA approaches insist on the incorporation of local people's knowledge into programme planning, and it has become an

¹ See DAVID MOSSE (2004) and UMA KOTHARI (2004).

important element of it. It is important to realise that local knowledge usually reflects local power, and for this reason these two elements are inherently intertwined. Participatory approaches usually consider local knowledge as a fixed commodity that people intrinsically have and own. In reality, however, knowledge is culturally, socially and politically produced and subject to more or less continuous reformulation. It is an accumulation of social norms, rituals and practices that, far from being constructed in isolation from power relations, is embedded in them.

On the other hand, the production and representation of knowledge is inseparable from the exercise of power relations, and that therefore inequalities are created and maintained in a very subtle way through freely adopted social practices.

Talking about local people's knowledge also implies that various aspects are taken into account, i.e.:

- Knowledge and local relations of power
- Outsider agendas as «local knowledge»
- Local collusion
- Manipulation of people's planning

What does this mean?

Knowledge and local relations of power

«Local knowledge» reflects local power, and the way it is expressed through PRA events sometimes produces a rather peculiar type of knowledge, shaped by local relations of power, authority and gender. «Local knowledge» should be viewed within the context of who produces it and in terms of different ways of knowing; this is not usually the case in planning PRA.

Outsider agendas as «local knowledge»

Project actors are not passive – they actively shape and direct PRA processes. In doing so, their projects clearly influence the way people express their needs.

Local collusion

In a planning process, insiders and outsiders mutually influence one another and «local knowledge» is shaped by locally dominant groups as well as by project interests.

Manipulation of people's planning

In the final stage of a participatory process, programme decisions often take place with little reference to locally produced knowledge. PRA often legitimise decisions already taken into advance. The potential creativity of participatory problem-solving is often restricted by external constraints or by an already fixed set of standard interventions (organisational systems and procedures, wider institutional setting, political and financial considerations, etc.)

Two frames of thought can be said to meet head on. The first emphasises local-level integrated planning and local capacity building, while the second is governed by the operational logic of the development agency with its criteria of accountability, efficient use of funds, planning and delivery of results quality programmes. There is therefore a contradiction between participatory approaches and operational procedures.

While some «local knowledge» can be integrated in PRA processes and influence project planning and implementation, it also frequently happens that farmers in their turn ac-

quire and learn to manipulate new forms of «local knowledge» to meet the bureaucratic requirements of the planners.

Finally, local knowledge is usually mediated in a non-linguistic and tacit way, whereas PRA relies heavily on linguistic representation (the diagrams provide a talking point or the results are written in a report), hence much of what is important is left out of the equation.

3. From extracting to empowering²

A number of binaries or oppositions, as presented by CHAMBERS (1997), are regularly underlined as popular slogans of participation and empowerment, i.e.: «uppers» and «lowers», North and South, professional knowledge and local knowledge. Participation methodologies usually adopt a framework in which the micro is set against the macro, the margins against the centre, the local against the national elite, and the powerless against the powerful. But this has led to the false assumption that people who control power are located only at institutional centres, whereas power is something which is not located here or there, but is employed and exercised at different levels via a network-like organization. Power is everywhere and can be analysed by investigating the creation of social norms, customs and cultural practices that are found at all levels of society.

Efficiency and empowerment

In participation there is always a dichotomy between efficiency arguments, which view participation as a tool for achieving better project outcome, and equity and empowerment arguments, which view participation as a process that enhances the capacity of individuals to improve or change their own lives. Problems often arise in analyzing empowerment. Who needs to be empowered? Are we talking about the individual, the community, women, the poor or the socially excluded? Do individuals really benefit from their participation in management committees? Little exploration has been done until now on the scope and limitations of the empowering effects of any project.

Elite capture

One of the main supporting arguments for participatory approaches is that development interventions based on local knowledge and experience are more likely to be sustainable and that methods of enquiry used should encourage a process of empowerment. It appears, however, that participatory approaches frequently simplify the nature of power with the risk of reinforcing the power and social control already in the hands of certain individuals and privileged groups of people. In such circumstances, the potential benefits of the operation are skewed towards the better-off in rural society. Understanding power therefore requires that it is analyzed in its most diverse and specific manifestations.

Social dependency or hierarchy

By using visual tools, like «community mapping» for example, PRA approaches implicitly accept a concept of the social that is based on individuals entering a form of social contract with

² See KOTHARI (2004).

each other, while ignoring pre-existing forms of hierarchy, dependency or powerlessness (HENKEL & STIRRAT 2004).

Finally, empowerment is also often used as an alibi or as an instrument to serve planners or outside agencies interests, as will be shown in the following point.

4. From individual to group³

Some people see an ambivalent connotation in the term participatory. On the one hand, they say, it refers simply to the fact that people are taking part in the process of decision-making. On the other hand, they think, it involves a kind of vision of society as *communitas*. It is in fact true that PRA approaches give precedence to the community level, both methodologically and morally and it is important to understand the PRA conception of social reality and the role it implies for professional development.

With such a community orientation, however, insufficient attention is paid to social differentiation. Community consensus is often merely a veneer, which conceals, rather than resolves, conflicting points of view or alternative orders of opposition. PRA emphasizes the creation of conditions for good communication in spite of differences in status that clearly exist within communities. On the other hand, PRA emphasizes the notional community to the detriment of other social groups and institutions (individual, household, lineage, work-group, etc.)

The homogeneity of communities

The notion that a community is a homogeneous group of people with a single identity is generally false. This is particularly true when it comes to particular interests concerning the management of natural resources. CBNRM regimes tend to assume a homogeneity of interest in resources across a community. Individual livelihood strategies, however, vary tremendously and some community members will have a lot less interest or reliance on the resource in question than others. In this case, the exercise of communal access may not correspond to, or may even run counter to, these variations in underlying reliance or needs.

The social psychology limits of participation

Another aspect that must be considered when working with group is the social psychology risks related to this practice. Social psychological analyses of what happens when people work together highlights the risk of getting results that restrict the ability of participatory development to achieve its purpose. It shows the group effect of taking decision that are more risky or that are even contradictory to what the people really want. It shows how the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of individuals are influenced by the presence of others.

The group process theory is of particular importance because the face-to-face interaction between a group of people is not limited to PRA, but also applies to a range of sectors in development projects, such as public sector reform. In all these processes, there is usually an external player, called researcher, facilitator, consultant, animator, agent of change, etc.

Social psychology also challenges the claims made for participation as a means (ability to deliver more effective development) and participation as an end (to empower people). Critics, on the other hand, say that planners can use participation as an instrument of control and that the rhetoric of empowerment associated with participation

serves more to justify the activity of outside agencies, and largely ignores autonomous organisations, resistance and empowerment.

The main symptoms of group dysfunction have been characterised in 4 different ways:

i) Risk shift

- In some societies, in a group situation, most individuals want to appear to be willing to take greater risks than the average person in order to enhance their status in the group
- Individuals who embrace risk tend to be the most influential
- Individual accountability for a given decision is blurred when responsibility is shared.

ii) The Abilene paradox or the unconscious collusion to produce false agreement. The six symptoms of the paradox are:

- The agreement, at a private level, on the nature of the situation being faced.
- Agreement on what is to be done about it.
- Group members fail to communicate accurately their actual desires and tend to do exactly the opposite.
- On the basis of this misperception, the group agrees to actions that are actually contrary to what everyone wants to do.
- This leads to anxiety, frustration and anger.
- If this inability to manage agreement is not dealt with, the cycle is likely to repeat itself.

A good example is given for a public sector reform planning workshop. Actors to the workshop included an external facilitator, ministerial and civil service representatives of the government department concerned, and other stakeholders.

iii) Group thinking

Group thinking is the term used to describe a set of group dynamics that leads to evidently bad or wrong decision being taken. The concept centres on there being an ingroup and an outgroup, and its main principle is: The more amiability and team spirit there is among a policy making ingroup, the greater the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions against outgroups. One remedy is to set up more than one decision-making group to furnish a counterbalance.

iv) Coercive persuasion

Coercive persuasion shows how group processes can intentionally be shaped to set up specific group dynamics to achieve a particular outcome. Method of attitudinal and behavioural change has been described by SCHEIN (1987) as a three-stage model:

- a) Unfreezing or creating motivation and readiness to change:
 - (i) disconfirmation or lack of confirmation;
 - (ii) creation of guilt or anxiety;
 - (iii) provision of psychological safety.
- b) Changing by helping the client to see things, judge things, feel things and react to things based on a new point of view:
 - (i) identifying with a new role model;
 - (ii) scanning the environment for new relevant information.
- c) Refreezing by helping the client to integrate the new point of view:
 - (i) the total personality and the self concept;
 - (ii) significant relationships.

³ See BILL COOKE (2004).

Example of the public sector reform process

In a participatory workshop on the reform process of the state, unfreezing is brought about by presenting the participants with all sorts of «evidence» that things cannot go on as they are. The state must be reformed or bad things will occur (disconfirmation); donors will withdraw funding, development will be impeded (creation of anxiety). There is a way out if we follow certain prescriptions and a process of good governance (provision of psychological safety). Change is brought about by providing examples of how other people have done it. The group identifies with real and fictional organizational and individual models of what it would like to be (identifying with new role models), and set up research programmes into the functioning of their and other civil services (gathering new information). The unfreezing process can then begin, generally helped along by the presence of an external facilitator. Change is presented as an iterative process. Unfreezing is also achieved through the use of data collection processes that reveal hitherto concealed or unspoken issues. The role models, upon which change is to be based, are often provided by the external representative of donors.

For SCHEIN (1987) finally, the outcome of a participatory process will often depend on an ideological position, suggesting that participatory processes never take place in an ideological vacuum.

In conclusion, it can be said that there are real social psychological limits to what can be achieved in participatory development. It shows the limitation of our own practice and how we should change it. It could also help us understanding when participatory processes must not be used.

5. Limitations of participatory approaches⁴

Based on the examples developed above, it appears that the evidence of the long-term effectiveness of participation – in materially improving the conditions of vulnerable people or as a strategy for social change – remains, in some cases, to be proven. Participation has become an act of faith in development; this is an attitude that should be subjected to closer scrutiny. Participation is useful under certain conditions but it cannot be taken as a panacea for solving all problems; it is not a procedure that should be used in all circumstances. It is useful to be aware of its limitations and then to study what can be done – if anything – to offset these problems (see GRAZIA BORRINI-FEYERABEND 1997).

First, participation functions best in a democratic environment. Strict hierarchical societies might not easily accept the participation of disadvantaged groups.

Second, culture might forbid speaking up in front of one's elders or superiors, which is a necessary condition for participation.

Third, local or national governments might pay only lip-service to participation. In fact, they may see participation as a threat to their powers. A participatory approach requires institutional backing.

Fourth, participation costs time, manpower and other resources that may not be available, or only in limited quantities.

Fifth, participatory approaches require long-term commitment, especially as results do not appear very rapidly. As the problems are severe, forest departments or people might be discouraged to undertake lengthy participatory processes.

Sixth, a tension may exist between national interests (e.g. complete ban on cutting forests) and local needs (e.g. forest use). Compromises in objectives need to be negotiated. If this is not possible participation might turn out to be a fake process.

Seventh, a participatory process may raise expectations for certain outcomes that can not be delivered because the Forest Department does not have the necessary capacity, financial or technical means at its disposal. Frustration among communities may lead to mismanagement of natural resources.

Eighth, too much emphasis on the participatory process may take away the attention and resources that are necessary for the technical content of interventions.

Ninth, the process of participation needs clear objectives, a well-structured process and expert guidance. If these needs are not met, the process may lead to unclear or undesired or non-results.

Also, a participatory process is directed towards the mobilisation and use of local knowledge and practices. However, it should be kept in mind that local knowledge and practices might be needed to build sustainable interventions, but that they are not necessarily «good» or «sustainable».

Finally, but certainly not the least important point: it should be understood that participation takes place within a framework of constraining factors. Participation does not mean that every proposed intervention is acceptable. Existing laws and policies determine the boundaries for the outcome of a participatory process. Also, budgetary, organisational and financial constraints need to be determined and clearly communicated to the local communities before the participatory process starts in order not to frustrate people afterwards!

Beyond the examples given in this paper and the limitations cited above, which show that the translation of the conceptual underpinnings of participatory approaches into policy and practice is not always consistent with the desired impacts, there are a few elements that, if properly considered, could also reduce the limits of participatory approaches.

Participation, social capital and inclusion

There is a need to better understand the complexity of the livelihoods of people, by adopting a more holistic approach, and by considering the particular that social capital plays in development processes. Over recent years, different development agencies have promoted a livelihoods approach, which attempts to incorporate the complexity of the environment and helps to provide a more complete picture of the way people organise their living.

This approach can be used at different levels: from the micro (household) to the macro (national). It integrates sectoral concerns, with wider development initiatives. It is a holistic approach. It was conceived initially for rural areas, and particularly for natural resources, but it can also be applied to other sectors. It is well suited, for instance, to study poverty issues. It integrates sectoral concerns with wider development initiatives. It is based on the practice of «systems thinking», i.e., by looking first at the «whole» and the way it relates to its environment. As a process approach it implies the opportunity to learn from experiences and mistakes, and to change strategic direction during the life of a project.

⁴ See FRANCES CLEAVER (2004).

The tyranny of techniques

There is a profusion of techniques in participatory approaches, which has transformed them into a codified exercise based on toolboxes of procedures and techniques. Reviewing and improving techniques cannot substitute for a more fundamental examination of the very concepts that inform such approaches. Techniques or tools are only instruments at the disposal of the stakeholders in a participatory process.

Institutionalism and formalisation

Institutions (also called organisations) are promoted because they help to codify the translation of individual into collective endeavour in a frame that is visible and amenable to analysis, intervention and influence (SCOTT 1998). Outside of such institutional models people are considered as marginalized. Often the poorest or the weakest groups in a community are excluded from a process whose reach should be as wide as humanly possible. To avoid such situations, flexibility is needed and all the social categories have to be represented in one way or another in institutions. On the other hand, if the importance of social and informal institutions is taken seriously, the tendency is to formalise institutions (contracts, committees, etc.). These imported models, however, often ignore the fact that many interactions between people take place outside formal organisations.

Finally, there is also a risk of creating artificial structures, which are not sustainable or conflict with existing, traditional structures. Before creating a new institutional set-up, it is necessary to analyse the context and to adapt choices to the local situation.

Individual participation within organisations

The election of committees is a common feature of participation through democratic representation. It is also assumed that meaningful participation in public meetings is evidenced by individual verbal contributions. Such principles, however, generally stand in contradiction to local norms and practices. Again, a good knowledge and understanding of local power relations, hierarchies between social categories of people, or simply between different generations or between men and women is necessary to limit the risk of reinforcing the power of an elite minority that already has the upper-hand over the rest of the population.

Myths of community, interpreting inclusion and exclusion

Community is often presented as the model of a «natural» social entity characterised by relationships based on solidarity. The participatory literature in development presents oversimplified ideas about the beneficial nature to individuals of participation, underestimating the potential links between inclusion and possible subordination. But there is clear evidence of the overlapping, shifting and subjective nature of «communities» and the permeability of boundaries. Communities habitually face processes of conflict, inclusion or exclusion, diverging interest, social stratification, etc. It is not unlikely that exclusionary tendencies may be increased by locally based participatory development. Structural constraints often limit the capacity of functioning of community-based institutions. In cases of major conflicts or vested and diverging interests between different categories of stakeholders, a clear assessment of the situation is vital before the introduction of a participatory approach.

Conclusion

While emphasising the need for empowerment, approaches often continue to be dominated by issues surrounding efficiency. While recognising the importance of institutions, approaches focus mainly on the formal (visible) one. A strong focus needs to be put on individuals' participation and their potential empowerment must be supported by appropriate analyses of individual positions, and the opportunity and constraints they face.

Better documentation is needed of the empirical evidence of the positive effects of participation. Further analysis is also called for in order to understand power relationships, to investigate how the structures of participatory approaches influence the interests of people, to develop a more complex and holistic approach to means of livelihood, to elaborate a more dynamic vision of institutions and of community, which incorporates social networks and recognises informal power relationships, and to grasp both the exclusionary and the inclusionary nature of participation.

Summary

Participation approaches are more and more used in project implementation, policy dialogue and governance in developing and developed countries alike. In recent years, however, these approaches have come in for sharp criticism, which dismisses participation as subject to manipulation by some agencies or people pursuing their own agendas, and decries participation as a bundle of tools, techniques and procedures with more rhetoric than content. This paper tries to show how, despite some limitations to participatory approaches, developers and agencies can overcome obstacles and use it for transformative processes and outcomes to the benefit of marginalized people and communities.

Résumé

Participation – comment limiter les risques et les restrictions?

Plusieurs pays recourent de manière accrue à des approches de participation dans le cadre de l'exécution de projets, du dialogue des politiques et de la gouvernance. Au cours des dernières années, ces approches ont cependant fait l'objet de violentes critiques: la participation est rejetée car jugée comme étant un moyen de manipulation de certains organes de décision qui utiliseraient cet instrument pour défendre leurs propres intérêts. De plus, la participation passe pour un assemblage d'instruments, de techniques et de processus d'un contenu plus rhétorique que constructif. Sous réserve de certaines limitations, l'article montre comment les concepteurs et les autorités franchissent les obstacles et utilisent cet outil dans les processus de réorganisation, au profit des minorités et des communautés défavorisées.

Traduction: CLAUDE GASSMANN

Zusammenfassung

Mitwirkung – wie lassen sich Risiken und Beschränkungen limitieren?

Ansätze von Mitwirkung werden bei der Durchführung von Projekten, im politischen Diskurs und in der Regierungsführung mehr und mehr in verschiedenen Ländern angewendet. In den letzten Jahren gerieten diese Ansätze aber unter scharfe Kritik, wobei Mitwirkung als Mittel der Manipulation gewisser Entscheidungsträger, die diese für ihre eigenen Interessen

verwenden, abgelehnt wird. Und Mitwirkung ist verschrien als ganzes Bündel von Werkzeugen, Techniken und Abläufen mit mehr rhetorischem denn konstruktivem Gehalt. In diesem Aufsatz soll – trotz einiger Begrenzungen – gezeigt werden, wie Entwickler und Behörden Hindernisse überwinden und diese in Umgestaltungsprozessen und zum Nutzen von Minderheiten und benachteiligten Gemeinschaften einsetzen.

Übersetzung: MARGRIT IRNIGER

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