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A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW OF PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE

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Current participatory practice

The concept of community or user participation in development programmes, particularly for the poor, has become widespread and now most international funding organisations attempt to highlight its importance in their programmes. Rahnema (1992) has chronicled the increasing popularity of participatory development, showing how this concept with its initial quasi-radical overtone has eventually been co-opted into mainstream development discourse. The term 'participation' has received tremendous attention since the 1970s and various proponents have postulated a variety of analytical conceptualisations and operational definitions. While often used in political propaganda and in manipulative schemes to advance vested interests (of which there are many examples), participation is commonly advocated as a theoretical construct [with practical applications, characterised by Participatory Action Research (PAR)] for changing structural conditions within society which prevent self-actualisation and poverty alleviation of under-privileged individuals and communities (for example, see Chambers 1997; Rahman 1993). It is also common to define it in more narrowly as simply involving beneficiaries in development projects (see Fuglesang and Chandler 1993; Oakley *et al* 1991). Touching on its more sinister applications, Hamdi has written about the spectrum of conceptual divergences regarding participation:

> The best processes of community participation ensure that everyone involved has a stake in the outcome and that therefore they have some measure of control over it. The best processes ensure that all concerned will share the responsibilities, profits, and risks of what they will decide to do. ... The worst processes are tokenism. These are plans devised by a dominant group legislated to seek the opinion of others, who consult these others on issues that are preselected and may have little or no relevance to those invited to comment. In between, where most projects fall, are various shades of community participation...
>
> (Hamdi 1991)

These divergences occur because of the wholesale acceptance of the participatory concept by a variety of actors within the development establishment; its exclusion may even suggest anathema towards current development practice and discourse. It is interesting that despite their diversity in conceptual and programme orientations, most development organisations based in the West claim to endorse participatory practice in some form or the other. There are bound to be varying interpretations and different levels of performance in application, and even misuse, when there is such widespread endorsement of a concept. Without considering the implications of participation in practice, it has become conventional for most development project documents to contain references to it. How it is practised, or whether it is practised at all, remains a different matter.

Participation in the Bangladeshi context

To comply with stipulations of Western funding organisations, in Bangladesh there is also widespread reference to and claim of participation in local project documents. For example, projects of the government's Adarsha Gram Programme (AGP) for housing and resettlement of the landless are built by contractors based on centralised standard design decisions and there is no participation of beneficiaries; sometimes beneficiaries are even chosen after houses have been built. Yet an AGP annual report states: '... the Adarsha Gram Project now includes components such as landuse planning, people's participation ...' (Bangladesh Ministry of Land 1995). Conversely, as pointed out by an observer: 'The financing memorandum and the [AG] project proforma stipulate that the construction of houses has to be done by the settlers themselves. But, in fact, this has been done by contractors' (Hye 1996). Many such examples can be cited.

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If the AGP programme is compared to the example in Box 1, it can be seen that in the latter there was at least an attempt at participation, albeit with poor results, whereas in the former there was only a token reference to it. In these examples organisations tended to act in response to their own perception of a community 'need', without considering community 'aspirations'. Need can perhaps be fulfilled without participation, but not aspirations. The example in Box 1 shows a common pattern: the grid was a result of self-interest of both parties, replacing aspirations with perceived need. What is tacitly common

between both examples is that people in a context of poverty and vulnerability generally tend to agree with how a commodity, such as housing, is provided by organisations. Even when a poor person articulates the importance of participation, it is often framed with reference to its benefit to the organisation, not to the beneficiary: 'If we were allowed to build our own houses, there would be no risk of blaming the government', said Rohima Khatun, an AGP beneficiary (Ahmed 1999). On the other hand, a prominent AGP staff member believed that it was better to involve beneficiaries in project implementation because this led to more beneficiary satisfaction with the houses provided. However, in reality there was usually only one pre-implementation meeting with beneficiaries, which the same staff member thought made the projects sufficiently participatory.

Box 1 An example of the poor application of the concept of participation

(from Chambers 1997)

In India, new villages were planned after the Maharashtra earthquake of 1993. The planners wanted a grid layout for the new villages. Given a choice between a grid and cluster layout, people opted for the grid. The planners said that the decision was participatory.

Eventually it emerged that several factors had combined to induce choice of the grid layout: the planners had loaded their description in favour of the grid; older people did not fully understand the choice; young men said that the grid was modern, and ridiculed the older people for their doubts; the grid was known to be what the outsiders wanted to provide; and people believed they would get housing quicker if they agreed to the grid, since some other villages had already been constructed on those lines.

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Often, in cases where there *is* participation, such as the Grameen Bank's micro-credit programme, it is used more as a clever arrangement for better cost-recovery and programme efficiency (Rahnema 1992) than for advancing human rights and liberating people's creative energy, fundamental premises of the concept (for example, Rahman 1993). Thus it is not surprising to find that in the field of low-income housing in Bangladesh there is very limited evidence of actual practice of participation by community development organisations (Ahmed 1999); indeed, despite its widespread endorsement, this appears to the case with the development field in general in Bangladesh, pointed out in an UNDP report, echoing the authors' observations:

Usually policy decisions at the national level are based on judgements of the top level planners, politicians, bureaucrats and powerful lobbies of industry and agriculture. They talk about the poor, make decisions about their problems and priorities and allocate resources. The voice of the poor as a stakeholder in the development process is neither heard nor desired to be heard. Poverty increases and many poor groups become increasingly isolated from the mainstream of development. (UNDP 1996)

Participation: an exogenous concept?

The fact that the participatory concept developed and became accepted in developed countries as a policy for intervention in poorer societies, perhaps an outcome of their earlier consolidation of democracy-orientated institutions, is less mentioned in literature or by its advocates; it is founded on liberal ethics and conscience about social justice, the roots of Western democracy, acting as a grand narrative. In that sense, paradoxically, it also represents one-way, vertical flow of knowledge from the epicentres of development theory in developed countries, almost similar to notions of North-to-South resource/skill transfer characterising development thinking before the participatory concept was advanced as an alternative (Chambers 1997, Rahnema 1992, Tripura 2000). This is evident from the fact that it is uncommon to find examples of its indigenous promotion in developing countries as a community development policy independent of sanction or support from developed country funding bodies. One is led to reflect seriously upon Lerner's assertion made more than three decades ago: 'traditional society is non-participant', while modern society is 'distinctly ... participant' (Lerner 1958). However, this picture of traditional society as an isolated closed system can be questioned in the present context. Such insular societies are indeed few now when West and East, North and South, rural and urban, and rich and poor are all entangled in a global web spun by the all-pervading cash economy of a single monetary system of subversion of previous modalities of exchange. Lerner's studies actually pointed out that traditional society was beginning to 'pass', perhaps an oblique premonition of present-day globalisation and the development fiasco, the forces of which had already set in motion during the time of his publication with the then recent formation of the World Bank, IMF and the UN.

Yet if the case of Bangladesh is considered, it is clear that its social structure is comprised of powerful hierarchies of income, age, gender, ethnicity, etc, often a reflection of regional tradition; ideals of democracy and equal opportunities, while given lip-service in political propaganda, are as yet a far cry for the large majority of citizens. Thus the concept of participation of poor

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communities in their own development appears incongruous in the context of the Bangladeshi social structure; it perhaps undermines the basis of this structure.

Hence there appears to be an impasse: conventional top-down development projects are not able to meet local needs at the micro-level, hence the promotion and co-option of participatory development, often at odds with local tradition. Participation then appears as an exogenously-contrived action mode that seeks to promote endogenous autonomy; thus participatory development appears to be an oxymoron. However, informed by an Oriental philosophical perspective, some thinkers now embrace paradoxes instead of decrying them in an Occidental positivist vein and co-existence between apparent polarities is accepted as an essentially human condition (Sillitoe 2000), thus presenting scope for revision and re-interpretation of contradictions. The tradition versus participation impasse can be reviewed further by considering that in the Bangladeshi context specifically, exogenously-driven change was present throughout history: socio-cultural cross-fertilisation over the ages, which is still continuing, is endemic, often belied by the apparent timelessness of the relatively less-affected Bangladeshi rural setting, the icon of Bangladeshi tradition [for example, while identifying 'timelessless' as a characteristic of Bangladeshi villages, Ashraf (1997) has chronicled the diversity of external influences over time that have shaped religious, aristrocratic and public buildings in this region]. Thus if local tradition is not static then it is only natural that widely popular concepts such as participation transcend national and cultural boundaries. In this light, the participatory concept deserves reassessment in terms of its relevance to local context.

Context-specific participatory development

In Bangladesh, as in many other parts of the world, there is the necessity for context-specific social development in education, health and related spheres, perhaps at the grassroots primarily, and the need for reducing vulnerability to environmental and man-made hazards (which seem to be on the increase), so that low-income communities are not further marginalised and deprived of their rights and share of national resources in a context of globalisation and consequent, often irrevocable, economic transition. There is a developmental role for the state and civil bodies in these regards, which remains nebulous and without clear direction in Bangladesh.

Anti-development notions expressed by authors such as Escobar (1995) and Rahnema and Bawtree (1997) can only be accepted in the case of projects affecting communities and households negatively because of the lack of, or

minimal, or inappropriate local consultation. As a forthcoming publication suggests through a variety of examples, participatory practice does have many pitfalls, but it still offers methodological and other advantages if its limitations and the context of application is understood well (Cooke and Kothari 2001; from Zed Books Catalogue 2000-2001). Despite its exogenous roots, the participatory concept does hold some water: the state, its institutions and civil society have a responsibility towards improving the lot of its citizens and common sense suggests that it is better to involve them in action towards their own development instead of bypassing them. However, without major structural changes in the nature of formal institutions and their relationships to poor communities, the notion of participation may remain simply rhetoric and an impasse would persist. Hierarchical arrangements and attitudes, although reflecting local tradition, need to be questioned especially when they conflict with collective benefit. If tradition is viewed as a flexible entity continuously moulded and redefined over time, perhaps there is then space for incremental change and growth in human potential by participation in action and change that has collective relevance to society at large.

A case for participation

The arguments against participatory practice are built largely upon cases such as those cited above, perhaps because they are preponderant in the development landscape. The criticism arises mainly because participation was not an integral aspect of these projects, but more of a corollary in response to established ethos of current practice. The grinding axe is not directed against core human values such as 'attention, sensitivity, goodness or compassion' or acts such as 'learning, relaxing and listening' (Rahnema 1992), which are central to the participatory concept. Thus the criticism is not against participation *per se*, but against current bad practice. Indeed, even ardent critics such as Rahnema (1992) have suggested re-defining participation in an alternative vein beyond co-option by vested interests, encompassing human values that contribute towards realising social, community and personal development. In such a definition then, the core human values inherent in the concept of participation would be central and integral, beyond concerns for programme and resource efficiency.

Search for new directions

Given the above framework, it is obvious that new directions in development practice regarding the place of participation within it are needed. By shedding its old skin, how can the current serpent of participation metamorphose into a genuinely humane being? Perhaps this metamorphosis

begins with inquiry and reflection to enable action to inform the search for new directions. Two inter-related streams of inquiry, conceptual and pragmatic, might allow translation of thought into action; mediation between these two realms would then have to be forged. To simplify for the sake of initiating the search for new directions, the two streams of inquiry can be encapsulated thus:

1. Is there a place for basic human values, immeasurable, yet inherent in the participatory concept, such as compassion, sharing, learning from others and respecting their viewpoints and dignity however marginal they might be, and accommodating in action multiple perspectives of all stakeholders?
2. What is the role of the professional in the context of social development to which s/he is expected to contribute? Is this contribution to be made by respecting local traditions of hierarchy or by accepting exogenous concepts that apparently contradict such traditions? Can there be a blend of these two, which might perhaps indicate the way forward?

The scenario suggested by these questions is one of reconstruction: trekking through a war-ravaged landscape and salvaging tiny gems inlaid in mangled armour and undamaged pieces of the war detritus, it might be possible to create with them new implements for rebuilding the landscape as one of long-lasting peace. Not to give participation a new lease of life, but to give it new life.

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