

Is Participation The Next Buzzword in Development?

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In recent decades the notion of a more participatory approach to development has become popular in mainstream development thinking. To involve the *local population* 'in the creation, content and conduct of a program or policy designed to change their lives' and to use '*local decision making and capacities* to steer and define the nature of an intervention', (Jennings 2000:1; emphasis added) has become fashionable amongst international organisations such as the UN and the World Bank and donors like the US and the EU. Today, these influential actors focus on development strategies that are not only written and owned by the countries they involve but that are also inclusive of spaces in which citizens and their representative organisations, so-called civil society organisations (CSOs), have been given a voice (Mohan 2008).

The question is whether the move towards 'participation' has resulted in an actual change in development policies or whether it has just become the next 'buzzword'. Buzzwords 'define what is in vogue' (Cornwall 2007:472): they characterise the cultural and political values of the time (Cornwall 2007). Because these words can be used to symbolically support certain ideas and beliefs (Esteva & Prakash 1998), they can effectively become 'instruments of power' (Alfine & Chambers 2007:492). And as such, they can be converted into deliberate *marketing tools* for selling a particular view on and way of social engineering.

This essay explores the above question. As the critical inquiry into the power structures embedded in the use of language is key to post-modernism, I first briefly discuss the effects of this movement on development theory and on the initial rise of the participatory approach. Second, I examine why and how participation came to be at the *forefront* of the development agenda. Third, I explore how its idea has effectively become de-politicised and how this undermines its potential. Finally, I conclude with advocating the need to re-politicise participation.

Towards a Participatory Approach

Influential post-modern thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard questioned the validity of modernisation and its underlying assumptions such as the persistent pursuit of progress and the emphasis on rationality and universalism. Instead they embraced pluralism. A particular concern of this school of thought was to lay bare the underlying power structures of the language and words we use. Through so-called 'discourse analysis' an awareness was brought to the fore that what lies beneath meaning can affect actions and recipients. Post-modern philosophers asserted that language always involved a *representation* of reality. Language could not simply be regarded as a neutral instrument of communication. And with

the notion of reality being closely linked to what one *believed* to be reality, language was, as a consequence, inherently political (Turner 2000).

In relation to development studies, post-modernism was seen to be irrelevant, fashionable and Western-biased. A critique on the process of modernisation - with modernity yet to be globally achieved - was argued to be inappropriate (Pieterse 2002). But post-modern principles did gain a foothold in development studies as the analysis and deconstruction of mainstream development ideology and discourse instigated a cynical attitude towards 'established orders and vested power' (Simon 2008:120-121). The very language of development was regarded a Western mechanism for managing the Third World in a way that was in the developed world's interest: its 'modern words and concepts' trapping the underdeveloped nations (Esteva & Prakash 1998:289; see also Escobar 1992 in Pieterse 2000:179). The representations inherent in the development discourse effectively suppressed local cultures, women, identities and histories (Mohan & Stokke 2000).

These critiques resulted into two broad development perspectives with those looking for *alternatives to development* (post-development) and those looking for *alternative development* (participatory development) (Parfitt 2004).

Post-development emerged in the 1980s as a form of resistance and essentially rejected the very idea of development. The promise of modernisation remained not only unrealised; it was increasingly in question. Prolonged periods of authoritarianism and the market-driven policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank evangelising liberalisation and privatisation through structural adjustment programmes had largely undermined political structures and rendered states unable or unwilling 'to direct or intervene in the economy on behalf of the poor and the disadvantaged' (Brohman 1996:261). The divide between the affluent and those living in 'dehumanizing poverty, servitude and economic insecurity' had become undeniable (Korten 1995 in Allen & Thomas 2000:19). The idea of development was considered 'a ruin in the intellectual landscape' (Sachs in Allen & Thomas 2000:21), not only on account of its (lack of) results but also because of its Western world-view with underlying premises and motives and its economic and reductionist view of existence (Pieterse 2000).

Critics, however, argued that the worship of progress was, as evidenced by the successes of the Asian Tigers and the BRIC countries not confined to the West (Rist 1990 in Pieterse 2000:179). Furthermore they asserted that 'if action is not to be in the name of development then would not another concept have to be put forward with probably just as many contradictions' (Allen & Thomas 2000:20)? With post-development advocates only expressing critique but not proposing an alternative (Pieterse 2000), they only further endorsed the status quo and therefore provided effectively more of the same (Cowen & Shenton 1996; Simon 2008).

‘Mainstreaming Participation,...

In contrast, proponents of participatory development shared the critique on mainstream development thinking and its capitalist globalisation agenda, but retained belief in and set out to redefine its idea. As social movements had arisen in developing countries and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and CSOs had assumed the role of filling in the social gaps left by the state and the market, a belief that progress would be more just and effective if *participatory* environments were created *empowering local individuals and communities* started to take hold. The assumption that experts knew best was rejected. Local knowledge was regarded a first step towards social change (Mohan & Stokke 2000) as it specifically involved those that would directly be affected by development intervention (Mohan 2008).

This notion of ‘participation’ caught on in mainstream development thinking and amongst international donors and development organisations. But not in the least as a response to the growing criticism these influential development actors had faced during the ‘90s. Culminating in the 1999 public demonstrations during the World Trade Organisation round in Seattle, citizens and media worldwide strongly questioned the intentions of the top-down Western economic agenda of development. They not only critiqued the lack of accountability of these external forces towards the recipients of aid, but also the lack of democratic representation of those in whose name and interest development strategies were supposed to work.

The intention to democratise developmental progress by embracing actors such as civil society and grassroots development organisations became in vogue (White 1996) and the concept of ‘participation’ (together with ‘democratisation’, ‘good governance’ and ‘local ownership’) was adopted into the development discourse. The question, however, is whether this has effectively resulted in a change in development policy and practice?

... Depoliticising Development¹

A participatory approach demands answers to *who* participates, *what* do they participate in, *how* do they participate and for what *reasons* – questions that are inherently political (Brohman 1996). Incorporating local people and communities into development projects does not necessarily make the development process more democratic and just (Mohan & Stokke 2000). Local communities can include very persistent structures of power. Local and project-based work is constricted in its focus and might only *appear* to be participatory. It does not necessarily challenge the wider social structures of marginalisation such as the exclusion of women or the poor from the public sphere (Hickey & Mohan 2005).

¹ Williams, G. (2004), page 557.

Experiences from the field find that participation may take place largely on a symbolic level while the real decisions are taken at a much higher level. Ghana for instance, only began to *talk* about participation when the donors moved towards 'good governance' as a condition for further loans in the late 1980s (Mohan & Stokke 2000; italics added).

Social confrontation is unavoidable in processes of social change: transforming social structures leads to power struggles. But, social confrontation is an issue the 'development industry has never been able or willing to address' (Leal 2007:544), because it sees its role as 'apolitical' (Ferguson 1994: 327). Some argue that participation has therefore been 'freed from its originally intended politics and ideology' (Leal 2007:544) and it can indeed be noted that there is a 'major gulf' between the reality on the ground and what participation set out to achieve (Desai 2008): to be an *end* in itself, a tool for social transformation. As such, participation could provide an alternative to the mainstream and top-down market-driven neoliberal policies.

But the localisation of development has become 'translated' as the *decentralisation* of development, which is at a *par* with the liberalisation and privatisation agenda of those same market-driven policies. Decentralisation is key to the neoliberal aim of 'rolling back the state'. NGOs and CSOs provide a convenient alternative to an 'inefficient' state to deliver the development process. As a result, local involvement in development functions predominantly as a *means* for efficient service delivery and project implementation (Parfitt 2004, italics added).

Because intervention into the systems and structures that determine power and allocate resources at a local, national, and global level is avoided, the notion and practice of participatory development has become depoliticised (Ferguson 1994; Mohan & Stokke 2000). As a result of this depoliticisation, the routinisation and institutionalisation of participation and the persistence of top-down power structures prevails. Participation has been 'marketed' through the discourse of 'efficiency', 'effectiveness' and 'sustainability'. What began as a political issue is adequately 'technified' and co-opted by continuing neoliberal agendas (Brohman 1996; Leal 2007). Rather than providing an alternative version of development, participation now simply provides *alternative methods*.

Bring Politics Back In

But 'must we abandon valuable words because they are abused' (Pieterse 2000)? Post-modern philosopher Jacques Derrida asserted that every concept has inherent contradictions. Almost any theory, any practice deals within a dynamic, whether welcoming or hostile, context and as such has to deal with constant change, adaptations, and critical assessments.

Development is such a concept. It involves a process in which there are both losers and winners, dilemmas and destruction, creative possibility and conflict (White 1996). Whether

one is politically left or right, it is best to recognise and be prepared to accept these moral implications: avoiding them will not let them disappear (Sideway 2008). Power struggles are an imminent and inherent element in both top-down and bottom-up development: we have to accept that a process of social engineering cannot *afford* to be politically neutral (Brohman 1996).

By limiting the definition of participatory development as a mere means to efficiently obtain project objectives and by promoting non-state actors as alternative providers of social welfare, participation has instead weakened the social contract between state and citizen. Its potential as a tool for social transformation has been undermined at both a local and global level (Hickey & Mohan 2005).

Rather than creating parallel systems outside the state, interventions should be geared towards building the capacity of the state as an *integral* part of this localised, grassroots work. Projects of democratic decentralisation should be located within wider political programmes of state reform, as Brazil and India have shown (Hickey & Mohan 2005). The original idea of participation intended to bring people into politics, to help transform and democratise the political process.

True participation can contribute to the strengthening of the state's legitimacy to govern and it can build and solidify the social contract between citizens and that state (Williams 2004). It can allow citizens to hold states, (trans)national corporations and institutions, donors, NGOs and other agents representing their interests, accountable for its results and it can become a tool to empower citizens to have a say in the way their societies and economies are engineered (Gaventa 2002; Desai 2008). With capitalist modernity likely to remain a force in shaping contemporary and future development processes (Hickey & Mohan 2005), by *re-politicising its meaning* participation can be an effective and democratic counterbalance to that force.

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