PARTICIPATION AND DEVELOPMENT; A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT: IS PARTICIPATION VITAL FOR DEVELOPMENT?

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Abstract

This paper is a discussion of the different ways in which participation is incorporated into development projects and the various levels of participation and their merits and demerits. The paper further discusses the bottom-up versus the top-down approaches to development while critically assessing the concept of participation as a necessary approach to development. The intention here is to analyse whether the notion of participation is working or just a political act for the sake of satisfying the quests for community empowerment through participation. This piece will conclude with the narrative that even though participation is a desirable approach, it has not fully meant total involvement of local actors in development practice as the theory presupposes.

Keywords: Participation, Development, Political Economy, Political Science.

Introduction

The concept of participation as an 'alternative development tradition' has considerably evolved since its origin. Its practice has been intrinsic to public programs since the early 1970s. The shortcomings of the top-down approach to development and the realization that development is more sustainable if the people are involved necessitated the inclusion of participation as an 'absolute imperative' for development within the alternative development tradition and mainstream development discourse (Brohman, 1996). The fact that external intervention interferes with the lives of people shifts the onus of external agencies to find ways to involve people in the development process (Bhatnagar and Williams, 1992:181). Participation as a concept of development constitutes involving local communities in the development process and activities that impact their lives (Martins, et al. 2008:195). Participation stresses on community involvement in decision making and implementation of projects.

In the past, development agencies have often conceived, designed, funded, implemented, and evaluated projects without the inclusion of the project beneficiaries who are often "passive recipients of goods and services provided through project channels" (Kothari and Minogue 2002:93). People participate at different levels of the development process and in development projects. The concept of participation in development is especially important where the population is faced with extreme poverty or marginalized in one way or another. Participating in projects allows community members to earn a living as well as appreciate the complexity of the development project being implemented (Institute of Development Studies 2015).

The concept of participation nonetheless, has remained elusive and controversial in development discourse with often varied meanings connected to the multiple methods of implementation (Brohman 1996:251). There are varied schools of thought on how development should be undertaken. Some experts argue that participation is not a necessary component of development while others argue that without participation, development projects are unlikely to succeed in the long term (Eversole 2010:33). The questions of who participates, in what, why, and how remains unclear because of the complex nature of the 'multi-dimensional' concept of participation as an inherent political act (Brohman 1996:251). These two schools of thought have their individual merits and limitations.

Participation and Empowerment

Participation as an approach to development has been in practice since the early 1970s. It was born out the realization of the shortcomings of the top-down development efforts and the desire for local communities to be involved in 'decision-making' (Fleming 1991:37). Participation as Cornia et al. (1987) stated, helps "to improve the design of policies so that they can correspond to the needs and conditions of

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the people to whom they are directed" (Cornia et al 1987:163). In the discourse of participatory development, the word 'community' is frequently used. Communities, as Brohman (1996) stated are "spatially constituted social structures and centres of collective consciousness and socio-spatial identities" (Brohman, 1996:263). Community participation in decision-making as Moser (1989) stated, is a 'precondition' if the objective of development is geared towards empowerment. Development economists and social planners have often defined community participation as the 'equitable' sharing of benefits of projects and contribution to decisionmaking (Fenster, 1993). Oakley and Marsden (1984) posit that community participation represents a 'continuum' which at one end may mean voluntary contributions to projects without too much of an influence over it or at the other end active involvement that increases 'local or community control.' Community participation is thus an "active process by which beneficiaries influence the direction and execution of a development project with a view to enhancing their well-being in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance, and other values they cherish" (Paul, 1986:2).

This definition, however, does not imply that participation is 'spontaneous' or bottom-top but can be 'induced, coerced or top-bottom' (Fenster, 1993:190). Participation has been a 'means' of improving project results (Conyers, 1985) and also an 'end' in itself. The distinction between participation as a means and an end lays the relevance of the concept. As a means, it is "improving the quality and relevance of projects by facilitating their implementation" which includes 'contribution of local resources' and acceptance (Conyers 1985:8). The participation of people in executing development projects enables them to contribute their "ingenuity, skills, and other untapped resources." As the UNCHS (1984) stated, implementation is facilitated as well as increases benefit to many people while there is a better "outcome response to the felt needs and priorities of the beneficiaries" (UNCHS 1984:8). As an end itself, participation is an 'essential' component of a 'democratic society' that ensures individual and community wellbeing which is a right according to the UNCHS (1984) which notes that "People have the right and duty to participate in the execution of projects which profoundly affect their lives" (UNCHS 1984:6).

Thus, participation should be in planning, implementation, and management which address questions of 'empowerment and control over decision-making' (Brohman 1996:252). However, as Moser (1989) posits, "Where participation is a means to achieve a development object, it is usually included only at the implementation and maintenance level" (Moser, 1989:85). Can participation, therefore, be enhanced? An analysis of the approaches to development may throw light on this question.

Approaches to Development: Top-down versus Bottom-up

One approach to development has been top-down. According to proponents of the top-down development approach, this is appropriate for large-scale development projects. They point out that developing a region in areas such as road networks requires little involvement of local communities. Instead, they state that expert services are required to make these projects successful (Castella, et al. 2007:531). Objectively, development projects such as water dams and road networks require large-scale operations coordinating capital and labour in order to accomplish the intended purpose. Nevertheless, as Crescenzi and Rodríguez-Pose (2011) observe, even large-scale projects need community participation to be sustainable in the long term. Top-down development impacts communities without requiring their participation. This approach, however, has had several setbacks in several projects around the world one of which is community resentment and long-term failure of certain projects Crescenzi and Rodríguez-Pose (2011:773)

The alternative to top-down development is the bottom-up development approach which encourages community participation. While this model of development is often used for less expansive projects, it can improve the sustainability and effectiveness of larger scale projects (Crescenzi and Rodríguez-Pose, 2011:773). The bottom-up development approach incorporates the concept of participation. Local communities' plan and control development projects on issues that affect them. Funding for these projects often comes from the communities, although some funding may be raised from external sources. For this reason, many of the bottom-up development projects are small scale in nature. Verburg and Overmars (2009:1167) point out that both top-down and bottom-up models of development are important for modern society. Nevertheless, they point out that it is important to balance their implementation based on the size and complexities of the development project. Participation is highlighted as an important aspect of modern development projects.

Ways of Participation in Development

Participation occurs in varied ways depending on the development project. The significance of participation in development has been established for both large and small-scale projects. It is essential to point out that there are different levels of participation involved in each development project. This variation is based on the level to which community members can be involved (Taylor, 2007: 297). For instance, in the

case of road network development, there is not so much that community members can do, especially in areas that require professional skills. This discussion focuses on four forms of participation in development: participation by consultation, passive participation, empowerment participation, and participation by collaboration. Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009:6) provide significant insights into these four forms of participation.

Passive Participation

Passive participation is the least involving form of participation. The idea behind this form is that people are informed of the activities involved in the project. Their involvement is limited to the information they receive, and the feedback they give if any (Cornwall, 2008:269). Many large-scale projects often involve passive participation. This is because the people involved in the implementation are usually professionals and experts in their fields. For instance, large-scale engineering projects often involve passive participation. If a project involving the construction of a dam is put forward, the community around the construction project and those affected by the dam are informed of what is going to happen. This may involve calling for community meetings where the community is given information. Often some people are required to leave their land and be compensated appropriately. Passive participation, in this case, involves the information given to the people, and the feedback they give to the project leaders. The community is not involved in the actual building of the dam.

Passive participation is measured through counting of people receiving information and giving feedback (Reed 2008:2417). In cases where compensation is required, development projects will often face resistance from the community because of the displacement issue. Legal challenges are often brought forth in the courts. These activities constitute passive participation in development. Passive participation, while minimal, is an important aspect of development as it indicates how important the community thinks the project is although such form of participation does not lead to community empowerment. The acquisition of jobs by community people would only be limited to manual labour and does not go far enough.

Participation by Consultation

In this form of participation, project leaders seek information from stakeholders during the project development and planning stage. The idea behind consultation is that stakeholders have more intimate knowledge of the local landscape than the professionals planning the development project (Kalleberg, Nesheim, and Olsen, 2009:99). Unlike passive participation, however, this form allows stakeholders to forward their input at any point of the process, not only during meetings. This is a more expansive form of participation because it allows for more engagement with the project leaders. Participation by consultation also encourages more feedback from stakeholders due to the involvement in early stages of planning. Unlike passive participation, where the community is being informed of an already planned development project, this case involves stakeholders contributing to the planning of the project.

The drawback, however, is that the project leaders are under no obligation to consider or input the opinions of the local community in their final plan (Ghai and Vivian 2014:31). While the contribution to the discussion is encouraged, the decision-making still falls on the development project leaders. This may be a drawback in terms of encouraging participation. Since people know that the leaders could ignore all their ideas, they could be discouraged from participating. Nonetheless, consultation often leads to a better participatory environment than the passive approach. The benefits of using this approach for development project are also expansive. Due to the involvement of stakeholders, project leaders are able to understand the local landscape and therefore come up with a plan that has high chances of success (Davidson, et al. 2007:102). Consultation of the community in project planning also helps in designing projects that are reflective of the felt needs of the community.

Participation by Collaboration

The concept of collaboration, in this case, refers to community stakeholders working together to achieve a predetermined purpose in a project. This form of participation involves bringing together stakeholders in a community and facilitating their contribution to the project. The development purpose is present, but the strategies to accomplish this purpose are usually not determined. This method involves external facilitators and experts guiding stakeholders on how to develop plans for the implementation. The work of these facilitators and experts is capacity building for stakeholders with an intention of equipping them to collaborate on the project. Unlike participation by consultation, collaboration actually involves stakeholders making development decisions. Head (2007:441) points out that the purpose of collaboration is to ensure that the strategies developed in terms of the project are consistent with the needs of the community. While this participation does not determine the development purpose, it incorporates locally endorsed strategies.

There is a consensus among scholars that given enough time, collaborative participatory actions can develop into independent forms of participation. If capacity building works effectively, the stakeholders should be able to become less and less dependent on the experts and facilitators. Nevertheless, this is a cautious action since stakeholders are not always qualified in the fields of the development projects. The benefits of collaboration are more than those of consultation and passive participation in terms of the project success, due to the decision making allowed in this model (Snow, et al. 2011:3).

Empowerment Participation

The concept of participation in development is best manifested in the empowerment participation model. In this form of participation, community stakeholders have an equal say in what should be accomplished and how it should be accomplished. While external participation is allowed, the majority of the decision makers are local stakeholders. The development purpose is determined by the local community as well as the strategy to achieve this purpose. Dialogue among stakeholders identifies aspects that require development. External participants are usually experts in these fields that provide advisory purposes and perhaps funding for the projects proposed by the community. The community has the control of the activities surrounding the process of development. Ansari, Munir, and Gregg (2012:813) point out that the ultimate form of participation is empowerment participation. They state that the sustainability achieved by this form of participation makes the development project more likely to succeed.

An important aspect of empowerment participation is the fact that it can be initiated without external stimuli. The government or nongovernmental organizations do not need to be the initiators of this form of development (Blackstock, Kelly and Horsey 2007:726). While participation in this form results in small-scale development projects, the goals achieved are sustainable over the long term and the cost of each project is significantly reduced. Since the solutions are often locally developed, the implication on the community is significant. For instance, empowerment participation leading to water projects often involves people contributing non-monetary inputs such as labour in order to achieve the intended purpose. People will avail themselves to dig the trenches and lay the piping for the water projects. The capital outlay is, therefore, limited and community involvement leads to ownership and therefore sustainability in the long term (Harvey and Reed 2007:365).

Critical assessment of participatory development approach

Participatory development is a current trend in today's externally funded projects designs and framework which is a proclaimed 'credential' for reaching the 'poor and the poorest' to ensure project sustainability in the absence of external help. This is deemed important and a trend for development planning with the belief that development projects fail because the top-down 'planning philosophy' does not create enough room for local participation This approach often engages citizens as 'clients or even as servants' (Kumar and Corbridge, 2002).

The past two decades have seen an increase in the number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have played significant roles in implementing 'community-based' development strategies and 'initiatives' in many developing countries (Brohman, 1996). Even though Participation has been heralded in current development discourse, has not been fully realized. As Black (1991) stated, "development, in theory, and in practice, is a slave to fashion and current fashion dictates the promotion of community organization and the involvement of the community in the assessment of needs and the planning of projects" (Black 1991:160). Even though all development agencies do contend that participation is their objective, very few have demonstrated this in practice. For instance, when a close analysis of the developmental policy approaches in Africa is made, there is yet to emerge a 'genuine' bottom-up participatory approach to development. The poor have often been reduced to "passive recipients of often inappropriate goods and services supplied individually rather than on an integrated basis" (Brohman, 1996:270). Empowerment of the poor therefore needs to be prioritized if they are to achieve their potentials through 'alternative strategies' of development.

The term participation has often been used to pay lip service "for reasons of political expediency, and a real fear that grassroots organizations will generate popular empowerment beyond state control Brohman 1996:271). Even though the decentralization rhetoric has been heralded to promote participation through alternative development programs, the state and development agencies 'tightly' control this in practice. Indigenous political organizations have often been undermined by outside 'imposition' of the concepts of participation by state agencies and NGOs that have created "paternalistic and authoritarian patterns of domination" (Fowler 1991, Fox 1990). Consequently, development programs have been viewed as

an outside imposition by the poor and marginalized and "participation has been reduced to a mainly rhetorical exercise" (Brohman, 1996:271)

Genuine popular participation as Brohman (1996) stated has been 'frequently lacking' between development agencies and local communities. Even in the internal relations between the communities themselves, the selection of stakeholders to represent the masses in the community creates a discord and imbalance as a result of the political and economic power distribution at the local level in many countries which often limits development opportunities for the poor. The elite method of community involvement in participatory approaches has been exclusive to only a few individuals who are regarded as stakeholders. There often exists a disconnect between the masses and these stakeholders (Jennings 2000). Participatory development projects have most of the time failed to adequately address issues of inequalities such as class and caste while trying to give communities a voice (Mohan 2007). These local inequalities are shown as only elites often 'hand-picked' from the community can speak and 'rubber stamp' the participatory credentials of development agencies (Mohan 2008:48). This act is purely an image-boosting technique employed by organizations rather than seeking to actively engage the local populations with whom they work. Insufficient attention is paid to local socio-economic, political and cultural structures that enhance the smooth interaction with projects that are introduced (Brohman 1996:271)

Participation is viewed as a 'right' that encourages people in society to be involved in decisions that impact their lives. Participation as a political endeavour challenges oppression and discrimination for poor and marginalized people. People can identify opportunities and strategies that enable them to clearly see and learn from the complex development climate they live in order to effect change and build solidarity. However, participatory development has been difficult to achieve in practice. Genuine participation has been sometimes criticized for being slow and costly as getting community consensus in project design and implementation may take time (Jennings, 2000).

Participatory development projects also treat communities the same. Issues often raised in this regard relate to gender. While many development agencies acknowledge the relevance of woman in the participatory development approach, their involvement has often been limited. As Mayoux (1995) alleged, this could be as a result of projects seeking to address the immediate needs of women "without addressing the underlying aspects of gender subordination such as the unequal division or reproductive labour, restrictions on female mobility, domestic violence, women's lack of autonomy and so on" (Mayoux, 1995:242)

The 1994 World Bank review of the development programs it supports concluded that it is complex and difficult to promote people's participation (World Bank 1994). Participation is more than simply getting beneficiaries to involve in 'economically successful development projects' or a 'one-off activity' or 'inputs into projects' It is a 'process' which is ' a broad multidimensional phenomenon' with socio-political, and 'economic characteristics'. Thus promoting participation in development projects demands carefully conceived thought and specified actions (Oakley 1995:23). There are, however, a range of 'bottlenecks' and 'obstacles' that can impede and frustrate efforts to promote participation in development These could either be the lack of political will and support or the absence of a 'national development policy', the non-availability of specified resources, the lack of project guidelines and procedures and the existence of socio-cultural values and barriers which discourages active participation of people in development (Oakley 1995:23).

Conclusion

Consensus to enhance participation in policy-making is relevant in participatory development. Today's participatory development approach is centred on its "epistemological assumption that learning in a participatory fashion will produce better policy and lead to more effective governance" (Mohan, 2007:780). Participation has been demonstrated to be an important factor in development. Even the least form of participation (passive participation) has an important implication on development within the community. The most important form of participation, however, is the one that involves stakeholders taking responsibility for decision making on all aspects of the development project which would ultimately empower them. While the role of experts and facilitators in participation cannot be underestimated, participation that leads to empowerment is the most effective in terms of long-term development. The argument of bottom-up versus top-down development highlights the importance of participation in any development project, irrespective of the scale. However, for participation in development to be transformative, political changes that institutionalize participation are required to enable the marginalized to hold to account those who wield power (Gaventa 2002). Most of these may include 'democratic; state spaces' locally decentralized institutions and international civil society networks (Mohan 2007:780). Even though overall, participation might increase the chances of long-term development project success and sustainability

by involving local populations in decision-making at varied levels, most development agencies and the state only pay lip service to participation and genuine participation in the development process is difficult to achieve.

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