

# Participatory Development: The Taxation of the Beneficiary?<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Development practitioners and analysts have become deeply committed to the concept of beneficiary 'participation'. The notion has become synonymous with 'good' development and has become a minimal requisite for donors, but it is increasingly being confused with the notion of beneficiary 'ownership' of a project. Unfortunately much of what passes for 'participation' tends to be perfunctory attendance at inconvenient meetings or physical labour, often sustained only by coaxing or cajoling, or a vague hint of extortion: the 'taxation' of the beneficiary. The article argues that participation must be distinguished from 'ownership' and that there is need for a truer 'partnership' between development specialists and beneficiaries. The benefits of genuine participation are, in fact, the true 'ownership' of a project by the beneficiaries, which can be achieved by a more perceptive choice of projects coupled with an honest 'selling' of some of the development worker's intentions.

Over the last ten years current development orthodoxy has, it appears, developed a very narrow concept of at least one aspect of what 'good development' is. Especially since the publication of Chambers (1983) celebrated book on rural development, it has become virtually axiomatic that all 'good' projects are projects which *involve* the beneficiaries from the very start. Such projects are supposed to be at least partially *conceived, planned and implemented* by the people who will benefit from them. Development pundits have isolated the concept of *participation* as one of the key ingredients in any successful process of development. The rhetorical publications of international agencies have tended to play a crucial role in reaffirming this mechanical and unquestioning respect for the idea of the mutual involvement of beneficiary and development worker. Characteristically, the term 'participation' is now the everyday parlance of development workers, practitioners, analysts, ordinary donors, governments and even the occasional beneficiary, as a descriptive 'holdall' of a developmental process which is supposedly both

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transactional and straightforward. One example will suffice (Andersen and Woodrow, 1989:62):

"Language is powerful. The terms used to refer to people affected by a disaster reveal attitudes about them. Aid agencies have called them 'victims', 'survivors', 'recipients', 'clients', 'beneficiaries', and the 'target population'. Each of these terms implies different things. Some imply that these people are less than fully competent to cope with their own lives and futures. Others imply admiration for or accountability to them. However, all imply that the aid giver is the active party. No one ever develops anyone else. People and societies develop themselves. External agencies can help, but the people who live in the situation must take ultimate responsibility, and they gain the advantages or suffer from the mistakes of their, and the donor's, actions. They are, fundamentally, the 'participants', not just in projects or programmes, but in development."

Thus, apart from having diluted the concept of participation so that merely being alive becomes tantamount to participating in development, there is an implicit suggestion that participation is somehow on everyone's agenda. The premise that participation is indispensable has become such a touchstone that readers presumably nod knowingly and move on past this to the real subject matter of the book or article.

Even on the ground, in 'the field', participation of the beneficiary has become an integral part of the development package. It is now virtually heretical for a development worker to so much as hint that participation could possibly be neither imperative nor feasible.

In what follows I am not attempting to debunk the indisputably valid view that both donor and recipient share important roles and obligations towards one another. Still less am I arguing that the recipient need be, indeed should be, passive. People have resources. This is true in almost every circumstance. They should, moreover, have 'ownership' over activities that affect their lives and wellbeing, and they should be 'involved' in any plans concerning such activities. The difficulties arise only when one seeks to draw mental lines around the boundaries of what is and what isn't 'participation'.

What do we all mean when we speak of 'participation'? Does it really mean that people have participated if they have merely been informed about a development programme? What if they have felt moral, peer, and other less benign pressure to 'donate' labour? Could people be said to be participating when the donor simply helps them do what they were already doing? How participatory are 'for example, food-for-work and cash-for-work programmes?

As there is a certain amount of ambiguity about what precisely participation entails, the term is being used unthinkingly in almost every description of development projects. Somehow the mere implication that there has been participation confers quality and credibility on a project. Thus participation has

become something that evaluators and implementors seek to quantify and measure. This tendency is matched by a marked reluctance to critically examine the concept (Midgley, 1987:6):

"The continued popularity of the concept may be attributed not only to its effective appeal but to a surprising lack of critical debate about its precise meaning, theoretical consistency and practical value. Unlike most other areas in development studies, popular participation has not been subjected to careful academic scrutiny and many questionable and controversial issues in participation theory have not been properly debated. As an ideal, participation is shielded from the profanities of intellectual skepticism."

Why is it that 'participation' remains so big in the minds of development workers and yet continues to be so loosely applied? I believe that it is not merely coincidental. It is essentially because it is a uniquely adaptable vehicle for different, and in some cases contradictory, 'meanings' or 'values' that it has become such a ubiquitous and loaded concept. The potency of the notion of 'participation' lies precisely in its apparent simplicity and hidden ambiguity. It is a condensed or multi-faceted symbol (Turner, 1970) that can mean different and contradictory things to different people, and can be used to justify even the most preposterous project. Even undemocratic regimes have become adroit at exploiting participatory rhetoric to camouflage indifferent and callous projects.

The concept of participation is a useful device, largely invented by development workers, which allows us to perpetuate a myth about the popularity and ultimate sustainability of projects. Those intimately concerned with grassroots development will have to accept that it is the development workers, the governments and the aid agencies that have become dependent upon participation. It has become the cornerstone of our entire developmental repertoire. Participation has come to stand for no less than the verification of the fact that a project is 'owned' by the community it is intended to serve. Thus, a typical affirmation of the importance of the 'ownership' of a programme becomes, somewhat curiously, inextricably interwoven with the idea that only the 'participants' can identify development aims. Paradoxically, not only must the beneficiaries identify the development aims but they must also 'accept' plans and projects. One example will illustrate this circular thinking (Metzemackers, 1984:55):

"Identifying development aims is not a task which can be performed by foreign experts. It presupposes a clear knowledge of what a people need, what [they] can realise, and what [they] want to realise. A development plan is only feasible if based on the actual situation of the society to be developed. Acceptance by the people, and their participation in the realisation of development aims and plans are essential for the ultimate success. Any assistance given by foreign governments, private companies or international organisations is subsidiary to the process of development planning and its acceptance by the society."

I will return below to the issue of who is best equipped to identify projects, for now I merely want to stress that there has been an inclination to overplay the interrelationship between 'ownership' of a developmental project or process and participation in the same. Indeed, in much development writing there is a marked tendency to use the concepts as if one presupposed the other. To talk glibly about 'participatory development' as if certain of unambiguous meaning is one thing, but to make a quantum leap from that to conclude that only projects that are 'participatory' can be 'owned' by beneficiaries is to tread on extremely precarious ground.

Moreover, it must be said that there is an element of confusion between the objective reason for participation and the value position that participation in and of itself is a worthy goal. The 'objective' reason usually given for participation is that somehow project design will be done in partnership with beneficiaries. The latter, then, having chosen, planned and implemented the project, will subsequently feel 'ownership' over it and sustain it. It will, thus, become 'their' project. A significant dilemma has been highlighted very eloquently in another context (Mintzberg, 1979:204):

"In discussing [participative management], two of its propositions should be clearly distinguished. One, of a factual - that is testable - nature, is that participation leads to increased productivity: 'Involve your employees and they will produce more', management is told... The other, a value proposition, and so not subject to verification, is that participation is value worthy in and of itself: In a 'democratic' society, workers have the right to participate in the organisations that employ them. The American debate over participative management has focused almost exclusively on the first factual proposition (although the proponents seem really to be committed to the second value position). In the light of this focus, it is interesting that the factual proposition has not held up in much of the research. Studies by Fiedler (1966) and others have indicated that participation is not necessarily correlated with satisfaction or productivity."

Even if we were to make a leap of faith that 'participation' does give beneficiaries a genuine sense of ownership it is reasonable to ask what such participation entails in practice.

One very blatant example of participation as an imposed agenda is the way in which it has become a euphemism for either the physical labour of the beneficiary or extensive and frequent discussions with the community and lectures by the development worker. I would prefer to call this form of participation what it really is, namely *taxation*. For taken to its extreme this is what 'participation', at least in its most recurrent form, means to the poor and vulnerable.

Typically a considerable amount of time is spent in talking or lecturing to beneficiaries about a project. Much less time is spent listening to beneficiaries

articulate their 'needs' and there is much subtle juggling of different perspectives or agendas: those of the donor, the implementing agency, development and extension workers, government, and the different interest groups within a village community. Much time is spent in trying to justify and convince one another that we are actually paying attention to a community's desires and capabilities. Even if we do listen it may be that the development workers are not really aware of what they are listening to. For example, in negotiations at the village level there tends to be much formalised speech. The fieldwork literature is full of examples of various settings when it is impossible for communities to be 'rude' and voice obviously negative feelings to outsiders. The 'polite' ways of saying no is, of course, to prevaricate and delay, postponing the decision.

A classic example of protracted discussions with intended beneficiaries is the oft-cited series of meetings between the extension agent and the 'community' held to establish a kind of verbal contract as to what each side expects of the other. Typically the development workers explain that their agency is interested in "helping the people help themselves" and attempts to stress that what is at issue is the community's own strength and ability. Again, typically, the meetings end with a mutually agreed 'list' of potential projects which will be ranked in order of priority. It is an unwritten convention that not all the community's 'felt needs' will match the agenda of the funding or implementing agency and that this list becomes something of a shopping list whereby the contracting partners work their way down the list until they hit upon a mutually desired 'project' which meets the agenda of the donor and the desires of the beneficiaries. Further meetings are held whereby the actors negotiate their 'different roles'. Usually it is a question of what materials the donor will provide in return for the community's involvement in implementing the project. In the main this means the community collecting building materials, and often means physical labour. Often the numbers of people attending the work-sessions are carefully noted and then reported back to headquarters or donors as an indication of the popularity of the project: a sort of participatory index.

What is seldom admitted, however, is the fact that this 'negotiation' is often a very skillful process in which the agency ends up basically delivering its standard developmental package in the guise of meeting people's desires. Whatever it is, water and sanitation (wells, spring protection, latrines), agriculture (credit, seeds, fertiliser, and warehouses), health (health posts, village health workers, clinics) or income generation (grinding mills, tractor pools, etc) - development agencies tend to have standard recipes. It is curious, therefore, that there has not been more questioning of the agencies role in negotiations and a more critical evaluation of contractual transactions.

More often than not government officials have already been 'consulted' about the project and, once a project is semi-official, even if project staff are unaware or

do not intend it, there is a degree of coercion behind the committed labour. Even if this is not the case there is rarely an attempt to rationalise the amount of time or energy that is extracted from the poor by different players. Thus, in a situation with myriad extension departments and a plethora of enthusiastic Non Government Organisations all concentrated in one area, it is possible to find that different development workers are each making demands (reasonable enough, perhaps when made in isolation) for the attention, time and energy of their 'beneficiaries'. In one rural community in Zimbabwe, Save the Children staff found, for example, that there were at least six different organisations which were making 'participatory' demands on the same community. There is rarely, in such instances, much coordination of meetings and very little conscious effort to ensure that meetings are held at convenient times for the community itself. Indeed, 'participation', understood as passive attendance at meetings, is steadily declining.

The most subtle problem in soliciting participation, however, is the fact that participation itself is an alien concept accompanied by many extraneous modes of operating which run directly counter to traditional culture. Thus many attempts to agree the terms of mutual obligations can completely misfire. This is particularly the case in regard to marginal participants.

There are two kinds of marginal participant. Firstly, there are those that participate marginally: those coerced, bribed, cajoled or pressured into initial participation, and who participate wistfully because it is required of them. Such participation is typical of larger and less community-sensitive projects such as food-for-work and other major structural programmes (such as resettlement and villagisation projects) which can easily find themselves manipulated into what can only be called oppressive projects.

The second type of marginal participant presents a threat that is far more subtle and ominous. Analysts and development pundits confronted with a project in difficulty are apt to point out that the beneficiaries who were 'consulted' were the wrong ones. Often those that are consulted tend to be the more vocal and outgoing members of their communities, and they may not represent the consensus. For example, in social anthropological training it is recognised that the most out-going and, therefore, easily approachable members of the community, tend to be those that are marginal to their own societies. Indeed, the very fact that they can communicate with outsiders in foreign languages may imply a sophistication which suggests that they cannot be considered representative spokespersons for their communities. Moreover, in many 'participatory' jamborees, the development worker actively seeks the marginal members of the group, precisely because they demonstrate a marked degree of 'entrepreneurial' spirit and are therefore rightly considered to be those most likely to experiment with and adopt innovative methods. The problem is simply that however enthusiastic such people are about

a project they cannot guarantee its acceptance by the community. This is particularly the case when the marginality of the individual concerned actually represents a threat to the perception of the project by the intended beneficiaries. It is too easy to fall into the trap of actively soliciting the 'participation' of the wrong person'.

One could, of course, fill pages with examples of where the consultative process has gone amiss: the wrong people consulted, the laden signals misread, the classical 'misunderstandings' of cross cultural communication. Often analysts sifting through the strategies of earlier designers and implementors of projects find that the flaws were in the selection of the participants or the lack of cultural understanding about the context (Salole, 1988; Waldron, 1988). Whilst it becomes increasingly predictable that evaluations of development projects will, with monotonous regularity, point out these defects, there continues to be a marked paucity of constructive ideas about how to go about obtaining participation.

Does the 'community' know what it knows? It is impossible, of course, for a community to actually 'know' anything. One can observe that a given community does a certain thing a certain way. A community cannot articulate what it knows in the same way that an individual can. The individuals and family units that comprise 'the community' are able, however, to demonstrate the sum of millennia of experimentation, adaption and expertise which can be understood by a trained and experienced observer. Even individual members of the community are often unable to account for their 'knowledge' or tradition (Salole, 1981).

The best analogy that I have heard concerns language. Children learn a language unconsciously. By the time they are able to speak they begin to assemble sentences and phrases that are grammatically correct. Most adults, therefore, speak a language perfectly correctly, they go further by mastering the skills of rhetoric, irony, sarcasm, pun, joking, teasing, subtlety, innuendo, etc - without actually being able to break up their sentences into grammatical rules. It is only those that have been taught grammatical rules that are able to actually single out nouns and adjectives and dissect what they do. Conversely, a linguist who has never spoken a language is sometimes able to discourse freely about the 'structure' of a language without being able to speak a coherent sentence of the language. If one were to approach a child or an unsuspecting adult and ask them to analyse why they pause at certain moments, or why the stress some words and not others, ie ask them to explain the rules they are following, the majority would not be able to answer adequately.

It is clear, however, that people subconsciously *know* the rules. They are, after all, using them every time they speak. It takes someone with the necessary training, a linguist, to actually listen to the person speaking and to 'construct' the rules. In short it takes a combination of the native speaker and the linguist to come up with

a systematic description and analysis. Without the linguist the language would continue to be spoken. Without the native speaker, the comparative perspective would be void.

Similarly, the community knows what it knows but may be unable to articulate this consciously. I suggest that development workers needs to learn how to observe and analyse so that they can be technicians in helping a community decipher its need and abilities.

A few years ago, for example, I was involved in a development project which was concerned with 'introducing' agricultural techniques and crops to a group of people who were defined as nomadic pastoralist. The agronomists and specialists were enthusiastically engaged in 'teaching' and 'demonstrating' these techniques because of a perception that these people did not have a quick maturing drought resistant variety of sorghum. In discussions with the pastoralists, however, it became obvious that they were, in fact, very unclear about the period of time that it actually took for their indigenous plants to mature, and there had been some technical confusion which led development workers to come to the conclusion that what was needed was a different variety of sorghum. The participants, as is often the case, agreed, when pressed, that they were in urgent need of this assistance. In the end, to everybody's chagrin, it turned out that the varieties chosen were not only more prone to pests and diseases, but took at least one or two weeks longer to mature than the crops they already had. To make matters worse, it eventually emerged that what the experts had thought was a literal scattering of seed over untilled land was, in fact, a very rapid, well rehearsed and proficient dropping of one or two seeds into pre-dug holes. The 'experts' had spent considerable time cajoling these participants into taking part in elaborate planting-training to the amused, but secret, derision of the beneficiaries.

There are countless examples of similar misunderstandings which are in essence a failure on the part of development and extension workers to listen or watch attentively. Often those who are supposed to be most intimate with the community lack the necessary training and skills to be able to make analytical sense of what they see. As Chambers (1983) illustrated, too often those trained in modern western sciences have an inbuilt reaction to the knowledge of the rural poor that borders on contempt.

Yet, setting out on a course of identifying people's own projects might mean that we are often faced with a choice of supporting a project we may not really agree with. We must recognise that poor people's own priorities are not always readily understood by us. Sometimes the choices they make are not the ones we would make (or like to think we would make) in similar circumstances. A classic example would be the amount of time, energy and cash the the poorest of the poor seem to find it necessary to spend on 'proper burials'. It seems that those who are most in



need of money are those who spend an inordinate amount of their savings and energy in seeing their friends and relatives off. This simple manifestation of poor people's own priorities is repeatedly misunderstood, ignored or despised (Salole, 1991).

There is something profound at stake. Too many development workers (expatriates and urbane urban nationals alike) are actually offended by their clients' own choices. We cannot afford to be offended by the choices made by poor people without making a better effort to understand those choices. Some choices, such as the desire to have as many children as possible, despite not having the wherewithal to support them, are choices that we have decided are wrong. So wrong that we have made plans to eradicate those choices in more or less subtle ways. Other choices are less threatening or irritating but are still regarded with some ill disguised derision as choices that the poor are being frivolous over. Thus, even in texts that are presented as the champions of peoples participation and selfhelp, it is possible to have very simplistic and one sided accounts of such choices (Harrison, 1983:203, emphasis added):

*"In most of the Third World life is a bitter, competitive struggle for survival and advantage. To many people, having more children seems a way of ensuring their survival and advancing their interests ahead of those of other people. It is a situation where individual self interest is in conflict with the interests of the community. In the ideal model village of the new development, such opposition between individual and community interests would not exist and personal conduct which damaged the collective good would be strongly discouraged."*

Somewhere out there the social engineer lurks ready to pounce. Structural lunacy. We seem, according to Harrison, condemned to continue pretending to lay the foundations for a bottom-up development process with the reality of a top-down agenda demanding immediate attention.

Yet, people, groups, communities, and societies do not do things collectively without a perceived reason. Poor people, vulnerable communities, societies in situations of stress, do not embark on costly and time consuming activities without good reason. Deliberate decisions, choices, plans and compromises are being made by people in such situations on a daily basis.

If participation is a device invented to facilitate our ability to accomplish our agenda it behoves us to be very clear that we are indeed setting the itinerary. We are determining the process, albeit in a disguised or subtle manner. In so doing are we 'breaking' the mutual obligations between donor and beneficiary? Is there another way of looking at the process and the relationship?

In order to invoke a classic participatory process I would like at this stage to take the following fictional account of participation at the planning and decision stage (Shute, 1950:122):

"There was the long clamour of discussion. Some of the women were doubtful if the men would ever allow such a thing, and some were doubtful whether it was not impious to wish to alter the arrangements that had satisfied their mothers and their grandmothers before them. But most were avid for the innovation if it could be achieved; once they were used to the idea, they savoured it and turned it over, examining it in every detail and discussing where the well should be and where the wash house, and where the concrete pools should be, and where the drain ... The men sat in conference next morning ... They all got up then and went to see the ground and discuss it from all angles, and all the women of the village stood around and watched their lords making this important decision. She did not hurry them; she had lived three years in this village ... It took them several days."

This passage, I am sure, evokes an 'ideal picture'. No one would seriously question that there are many aspects of participation in the events described. The fact, for example, that it was an outsider that identified the project does not necessarily make the project something that cannot be 'owned' by the community. The project does get 'bought' by different sections of the community and become theirs. 'Ownership' is not determined by where the project originates. The project is, however, shaped by the process in which it is 'sold' to the participants. Once it is 'sold' it ceases to be something that is 'owned' by the instigator. It is not a form of participation which can be confused with taxation.

If we start with the premise that our means are limited, and that our ultimate aim is the improvement of the quality of life, we must guard strenuously against becoming an increased load on their backs. The question, as always, is, 'Do we really mean it?'. To take the same situation in another context: (Perrow, 1974:35):

"The term participative management...includes the hygienic sprays that are supposed to reduce alienation, but it also deals with feelings of powerlessness. The lower orders are consulted on decisions and encouraged to make their own in some areas, subject to the veto of superiors. The veto is important; it is like saying we have a democratic system of government in which people elect their leaders, but subject to the veto of the incumbent leaders. Workers and managers can have their say, make suggestions, and present arguments, and there is no doubt this is extremely desirable. It presumably results in the superior's making better decision - but they are still his decisions."

I am not suggesting a radical departure. I suggest we take participatory rhetoric to its logical conclusion. There is no shame in having a clear and open agenda which one tries to sell to one's potential beneficiaries. We should perfect our analytical tools to understand better what kind of pitch will work and we should refine our sales technique to perfection. Once 'sold', however, we must be prepared to relinquish control of them - something we have singularly failed to do.

Instead of expecting people to participate in our projects, and using participation as a device to impress our donors, we should concentrate on our ability to 'sell' our projects convincingly to the beneficiaries. This will seem to some to be a mere play of words or some simplistic formulae that sounds trivial. What is required is for us to be clear about our own agenda and understand better what it is we see in the communities that we are attempting to assist. It is essential that we accept the reality of mutually beneficial partnerships that are likely to emerge. Something that is marketed honestly and is sold at a price and in a currency people can afford cannot be perceived as 'taxation'. We have to learn to distinguish between 'participation' and 'ownership'. That is the real challenge.

In conclusion, this decade will be a difficult one for development agencies. As funds continue to get scarcer and as the development climate becomes markedly more hostile it will be imperative that we begin to assess what the last ten to fifteen years have taught us and what we have learnt about our effectiveness. We will be obliged, as our beneficiaries become more vocal and critical of our efforts, to refine our work and to make more modest claims about what we can achieve. In essence we are engaged in the old business of social change. The tools we use should be grafted from the social processes and structures that have evolved their own ways of introducing, coping with and institutionalising change. As development agents we should clearly see our role as assisting these normal everyday developments take place more smoothly and, ideally, in an accelerated way.

We should borrow from the empirical social sciences appropriate methods of observation. There is much to be said for the participation of development workers in the daily life of the community they intend to work with. At the risk of using participation once too often, there is much to be said for good old participant observation. Our first task should be to observe and then understand and analyse what we observe. Our goal should be to facilitate and reinforce the social change that we see as crucial, and our objectives should be always to ensure that we do not retard or hinder natural processes by an over-optimistic view of what we can achieve. It is essential that there be a more profound understanding of the invisible but hardy social infrastructure that binds societies together. Once we 'development workers' have learnt to use the various techniques of participant observation to understand the context and milieu we operate in, we should be able to design projects that combine both our own developmental agenda and the exigencies of the beneficiaries we wish to assist. We will thus be better able to ensure the 'end product' that all this participation is supposed to achieve. Namely, that those we assist will 'own' their projects, will be involved in them because they genuinely make their lives easier on a day to day basis, and, finally, that they will be sustained because they are authentically addressing real needs. I remain convinced that another basic 'truth' of social anthropological training remains true in this context

also. It is not always those that live in a situation who are best placed to be objective and see all the implications of it. In the final analysis, there is no substitute, I believe, for a well trained development worker who is prepared to perform the role of 'grammarian' and to interpret adequately the expertise and lucina the beneficiary community unfolds in the drama of everyday life.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. I am currently working for Save the Children Federation USA. I would like to stress that the views that I express in this article are my personal views, and they should not be construed as reflecting the views of the agency. The original spur for writing this article was a remark overhead on the radio. A person who was talking about adult literacy in Zimbabwe was lamenting the fact that the people were not participating enough. She concluded: "It's hard, you know. These people take time off to tend their fields.". The original title "Participation through tightly squeezed eyes" was a direct quotation from an Ethiopian Peasant I interviewed in 1987 who told me that 'participation' was just the latest in a long line of deceptions to bleed and tax the poor. I would like to thank Chris Eldridge and especially Mai Salole for their incisive comments on earlier drafts.

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