

Promoting Participatory Development as a Strategy of Poverty Alleviation in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review of Some Current Practice

PETER OAKLEY* & IAN CLEGG **

ABSTRACT

Poverty alleviation has become a dominant strategy of much of the aid of international donors to countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Such strategies are seen as the principal weapon of attacking the endemic poverty which plagues the lives of many of the region's people. However many of these donors are using their support for poverty alleviation as a means of "democratising" supposedly undemocratic states and of promoting a more widespread and genuine participation of the region's poor in development initiatives and activities. This article explores the experiences to date of poverty alleviation strategies in several sub-Saharan countries which have been built on participatory principles and which seek to get to the root cause of people's poverty. The article reviews the concept of participation in both an economic and a political sense and draws up a balance sheet of the current state of play.

Introduction

Few would contest that poverty is endemic in sub-Saharan Africa and that future trends are not encouraging. The socioeconomic crisis in the region in the late 1970s and early 1980s brought stagnation, decline and widespread impoverishment (Adepoju, 1993; Claire, 1996). In response to the crisis most countries adopted structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which were largely drafted by the World Bank and the IMF and which were a condition of further aid and debt re-scheduling. The World Bank (1994) claimed that adjustment in sub-Saharan Africa generally improved the welfare of the poor; others argue an

* Dr Ian Clegg, Lecturer in Development Studies, School of Social Science and International Development, University of Wales, Swansea, Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP, Wales, United Kingdom. Fax: (44) 1792-295682; email: i.m.i.clegg@swansea.ac.uk

** Dr Peter Oakley, Senior Research Fellow, International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC), Uxford, United Kingdom. Fax: (44) 1865-201852; email: poakley@compuserve.com

opposite outcome. SAPs lead to cuts in public services and falling living standards due to reductions in employment and wages, real wages eroded by some 25% between 1980-1989, and there was a dramatic decline in formal employment. Furthermore the removal of food subsidies negatively affected food consumption of the urban and rural poor, putting their children and families at risk (Woodward, 1992; Gibbon, 1993; Claire, 1996). In the early 1990s it was estimated that almost a half of the region's population lived below the poverty line and that sub-Saharan Africa was the only region in the world in which the number of poor was actually growing at roughly the same rate as the population (World Bank, 1993, 1994).

The response to the above on the part of the governments of the region and the major international donors has been the design and implementation of different forms of **Poverty Alleviation Strategy** with the intention of mitigating, if not reducing, the conditions of poverty in which the vast majority of the people in the region live. This response has taken place against the background of a resurgence in the study of 'poverty' as a phenomenon and the increasing recognition that a 'culture of poverty' was the dominant characteristic of the lives of millions of families in the region and that the cycle of the reproduction of poverty had not been broken (Sen, 1981; Alcock, 1993). Strategies to tackle poverty in Africa have been a feature of international development programmes since the wave of independence and the emergence of post-colonial states in the 1960s. In the 1960s and 1970s modernisation and economic growth became the twin pillars of the region's development strategy until it became apparent that the supposed 'trickle-down' would not alleviate endemic poverty nor reduce inequalities.

Since the mid-1970s, several UN agencies developed their own distinctive strategies for alleviating poverty, notably the ILO's Employment Programme and the FAO's strategy designed to tackle the structural causes of poverty (FAO, 1980). In the early 1990s several major initiatives within the UN system have given fresh importance to the issue of poverty in what Lipton and Maxwell (1992) term the "New Poverty Agenda." This 'new agenda' has heralded a noticeable shift in the thinking behind poverty alleviation strategies by arguing that some form of broad, popular involvement or **participation** could be crucial to the successful outcome of such strategies. Key elements in this fresh approach include decentralisation, the development of local level organisations, the targeting of productive assets at the poor and the direct involvement in the poor in poverty assessments (Lipton, 1996; Riddell & Robinson, 1995). Finally many of these strands of thinking and action come together in the UNDP's (1995) Policy Framework for Country Poverty Eradication Strategies in which centrality is given to the notion of **empowerment** and to the creation of an 'enabling environment' which would promote the non-discriminatory and equitable access of the poor to the productive assets vital to their own survival, security and, ultimately, development.

A longer-term debate concerns the notion of **participation** and the increasing call for more direct involvement of people in development activities and processes. This debate has its roots in the late 1960s and has been extensively documented, but it is not without its controversies and disagreements. In the 1970s and early 1980s the debate was concerned with how to facilitate access to and participation in development processes, in the broadest sense and at different levels, on the part of groups, communities, regions and nations previously excluded from such access. More recently the emphasis has come to be placed on the notion of 'participatory development' or how to make development programmes and projects more 'participatory' and thus more likely to achieve their expected outcomes (Galjart, 1982; Ghai, 1988; Oakley, 1991; Stiefel & Wolfe, 1994; World Bank, 1994). Contemporarily understandings and interpretations of the term 'participation' must take into account the two broad contexts within which the concept is relevant to development:

- (a) participation in the democratic sense of people's rights to participate in national and local political processes and decision-making; and
- (b) participation in an operational sense and one which is linked to a concrete development intervention.

Participation, therefore, is not just an operational concept, but one which takes us into the wider arena of the nature, role and relationships of the state and civil society. In this respect to understand 'participation' in the context of African development, we must examine its historical background and not assume that 'participation' is merely a contemporary discourse.

Any understanding of the nature of 'participation' in sub-Saharan Africa must take into account the **history** of the relationship between the state and civil society. This is necessary because a dominant characteristic of both the colonial and post-colonial period has been the continued marginalisation or suppression of civil society by the state and political elites (Chazan, 1988; Chabal, 1992; Bayart, 1993). Furthermore, it is also important to distinguish between 'traditional' and 'civil' society in an African context in order to indicate a difference between sets of norms and organisational forms controlling production and the distribution of resources between pre-industrial, pre-colonial societies and those characterised by the predominance of market economies (Abrahamsson & Nilsson, 1995). In a general sense, the colonial state practised a form of 'institutionalised participation' in which local government and indigenous institutions were co-opted for the purposes of economic and social transformation (Illiffe, 1979; Clegg & Harding, 1985; Crummey, 1986). By the late 1960s, however, many newly independent sub-Saharan states had witnessed a demise of multi-partyism and the emergence of single party or military rule, despite the transfer of systems of liberal democracy enshrined in independence constitutions. The colonial state attempted to separate

civil from political society and to capture, sideline or abolish more traditional forms of identity and relationship. This process has been continued after independence by elites who wished to continue the project of modernisation and, through the state, to impose hegemony on civil society. As the state has become more extensive and pervasive, both traditional and civil society have become more excluded, disenfranchised and powerless (Samudavanija, 1991).

In an historical review of the previous three decades, Barrat Brown (1995) concluded that the majority of African people have been excluded from any significant contribution to the determination of national policy. If colonial Africa was characterised by popular participation in nationalist coalitions to win political independence, the post-colonial history of African countries has witnessed the rapid and systematic exclusion of the people as a whole from the political arena. Participation was frequently seen as inimical to modernisation and stability which were regarded as necessary conditions for development (Nyong'o, 1990). Indeed, many followed Lipset's (1959) argument that high levels of per-capita wealth, industrialisation, urbanisation and education were preconditions for democracy. However, since the 1980s, there has been an increasing crisis of legitimacy for the post-colonial state centred on its inability to fulfil the dreams of independence. Internal demands for greater democracy have been coupled with external pressures from donor agencies, for increasing economic and political liberalisation. Despite this, the position of the continent's small middle class has been ambivalent, often seeing political liberalisation as a means to increase their own access to the state and fearing wider popular participation as a threat to their own position (Chabal, 1992).

The first major demand for greater popular participation in Africa's political and development processes was made in 1987 at the time of the Conference on the Challenge of Economic Recovery in Abuja, Nigeria. This was a precursor to the 1990 Arusha Workshop on the Role of Popular Participation in Meeting the Challenges of Recovery and Development in Africa. This Workshop proclaimed the African Charter for Popular Participation which asserted the fundamental role of popular participation in generating the support necessary to overcome the continent's economic crisis,

"...where the governed and their governments are moving hand in hand in the promotion of the common good, and where it is the will of the people, rather than the wishes of one person or a group of persons, however powerful, that prevails." (Adedeji, 1990).

The language of development in Africa in the 1990s, therefore, is radically different from what it was in the previous decade. The World Bank's influential

report in 1989 – *Sub Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* – set the tone and content of the debate: liberal democracy, social pluralism and market orientation were to be the three pillars of African reform. African economies were burdened with large public sectors, excessive state intervention and control, poor functioning market mechanisms and the lack of opportunities for more widespread popular involvement in wealth creation. The Report furthermore turned around the theory that economic development would tend to bring in its wake greater social development and, ultimately, more political freedom; instead, the Report suggested that political legitimacy and consensus were a precondition for sustainable development (World Bank, 1989; Harsch, 1993). In the first half of the 1990s economic liberalisation and political reform have been the twin pillars upon which international donors have built their aid programmes in Africa. These had the twin aims of creating both the economic policies and the political environment in which wealth creation and more effective citizen participation would, together, create the necessary conditions for growth and stability. Below we will assess the impact of these policies in the first half of the 1990s, in sub-Saharan Africa.

Political Reform and Participation

In Africa in the 1990s authoritarian regimes have come under siege (Bratton & van de Walle, 1992). Across the continent there have been widespread pressures for political change, on a scale unparalleled since the independence movements of the 1950s and 1960s. In the past five years many countries have launched reforms supposedly aimed at permitting greater political pluralism and administrative change. Africa's authoritarian regimes, which reflected the interests of a small privileged elite and which rested upon the support of the state apparatus, the army and regional ethnic patronage, have been challenged by populations which have increasingly taken to the streets to protest economic hardship and political repression. Decalo (1994) has commented that these internal pressures for "participatory democracy" have been primarily rooted in a widespread recognition of the utter failure of one-party rule to promote economic development, political accountability and national unity. Across the continent it would appear that there is growing support for democracy, with all its uncertainties and unpredictability, as a response to the continuing abuses of authoritarian rule.

Sandbrook (1996a) offers four reasons why governments across Africa have acceded to internal pressures for change:

- strong domestic protest;
- splits among top government leaders;
- contagion induced by democratic experiments elsewhere; and
- pressure from donor agencies.

For example, in the early 1990s domestic mobilisation against authoritarian rule forced the hand of autocratic rulers in Mali, Niger, Madagascar and Zambia. Mkandawire (1994) furthermore identified the emergence of a whole range of "social movements" which have begun to make demands not only in terms of specific policies but, more importantly, on the nature of the state itself and the processes of policy formulation. In some quarters these pressures, however, have been resisted. The introduction of liberal democracy continues to be viewed with suspicion and fear by those who rule; in Nigeria military leaders have stoutly resisted the creation of a free and fairly elected Government, while in Uganda the principle of greater representation may be accepted but multi-partyism is seen as divisive (Makinda, 1996). Despite the still entrenched power of political elites and their resistance, Ake (1993) argues that the democracy movement in Africa is a "powerful, objective, historical force" which expresses the desire of ordinary people to gain power and material improvement.

Democratisation, in conjunction with institutional capacity building, has been seen as the best hope for "*getting the policies right*" for economic recovery in Africa (Sandbrook, 1996a). Commentators on African politics would appear to agree that the process, however, has yet to take a firm hold and that its foundations are still insecure. Ake (1993) argues that the notions of "liberal democracy" and "African democracy" are not necessarily compatible. Africa is essentially a "communal society" and it is this communalism which defines people's perceptions of their rights, their freedoms and their responsibilities. In this respect, liberal democracy offers a form of political participation which is markedly different to an African concept of participation, which is so firmly linked to communalism. Western political concepts and systems cannot be easily superimposed upon African's political heritage and efforts to do so will not easily prosper. The evidence of the past decade would suggest that radical political reform will encounter stiff obstacles:

I. While a number of countries in Africa appear to have experienced a more genuine political liberalisation – for example, Botswana, South Africa, Zambia and Malawi – most African governments have suppressed, delayed or manipulated attempts at democratic transition (Sandbrook, 1996a). Genuine democratic transitions have occurred in fewer than half of the sub-Saharan countries and even these transitions have largely sought to reform rather than transform entrenched, authoritarian political and administrative practices. Democratic transitions have marked only limited change and have often given rise to high expectations which weakened states cannot fulfil. Fragmented party systems built around personalities or regional ethnic loyalties lead to ambiguous and uncertain rule. The studies of Allen

(1992), Raftopoulos (1992) and Barchiesi (1996) in Benin, Zimbabwe and Nigeria respectively all attest to the immense difficulties and obstacles which current processes of political reform are encountering.

II. Makinda (1996) sees a major impediment to multi-party democracy in Africa in the inexperience of African political leaders in running multi-party systems. He refers to the "winner takes it all" mentality pervasive in African politics, in which the loser has no political role, no right to question or criticise and no involvement in debates on policy. In such a mentality, genuine democracy will find it difficult to take a firm hold.

III. In his review of the movement towards democracy in Africa, Wiseman (1995) points to the critical role of political coalitions in boosting economic reform. Such coalitions would allow, for example, export-orientated small-holders and business people to augment their power and put their support behind the reform programme. In the past, however, authoritarian regimes fragmented or suppressed such forms of association and it will take time for them to be rebuilt. In countries such as South Africa and Zimbabwe, however, significant industrialisation and commercialisation have created the conditions in which well-organised interest groups – e.g., unions and commercial associations – can be involved in negotiations on economic reform.

IV. While the moves toward political reform may imply or even encourage more widespread involvement in policy formulation and implementation, such trends inevitably come up against the power of centralised authority. Thomas-Slayter (1994) argues that, while African governments might encourage communities to undertake various kinds of development activities, which local people begin to develop, the centre inevitably moves to destroy any local organisation which is perceived to be threatening. African governments historically emphasise administrative rather than political decentralisation and there are few instances in which real authority and resources are transferred to lower levels. Thomas-Slayter cites Kenya's Harambee movement and Tanzania's experiment with participatory democracy – *ujamaa* – as examples of national programmes of promoting local involvement which were never allowed to "threaten the status quo."

Given different colonial traditions, regional and ethnic diversity and divergent post-independence political histories, assessing the balance sheet of political reform in Africa in the 1990s is an impossible task. Bratton & van de Walle (1992) observed, at an early stage in the process, that popular protest and political reform

had only just begun and that their future course and outcome in such a range of countries was uncertain. Five years on, the evidence would suggest that their caution was justified. Sandbrook's (1996b) review of the "democratic transition" in six African states – Ghana, Mali, Niger, Zambia, Tanzania and Madagascar – concluded that the transition lacked consolidation: democracy entails more than periodic elections, but depended also on an array of democratic institutions which could guarantee, for example, government accountability and the transparency of decision-making. Elections may lead to a change in the **form** of Government, but they cannot ensure a transformation of the political **regime**. It is unrealistic to expect fundamental institutional changes in Africa's political systems given that the impetus for these changes is largely external and that Africa's masses have yet to emerge in any substantial way from more than a century of colonial and post-independence authoritarian rule.

Historical legacies in Africa present formidable challenges to processes of democratisation, and deep regional ethnic and communal cleavages undermine the trust which is a basic characteristic of democratic institutions (Oyugi & Gitonga, 1987). The question is whether greater and more effective democracy could generate the necessary political will and leadership to bring about the necessary economic reforms so that development is not the preserve of the powerful few. In this respect Sandbrook (1996a) argues that, while democratisation may not directly strengthen political will, it could buttress a government's reformist resolve. Democracy by itself, however, does not necessarily ensure good governance or enhanced political capacity to enact economic reform. Indeed, Allen, Baylies & Szeftel (1992) have argued that, as long as the pressures for democratisation are sponsored by "external interests" (as opposed to internal social forces), they will likely be confined to parliamentarism and the revolving of national elites. Furthermore, given the adverse consequences of SAPs, the majority of Africa's poor are more concerned with survival than with demands for great political representation (Makinda, 1996).

In his examination of participatory democracy in Africa, Decalo (1994) argued that the prospects for what he termed "participatory politics" were decidedly gloomy. The spread of participatory democracy in Africa, despite some five years of intense external pressure, is still "spotty" and, apart from a few examples (Benin, Equatorial Guinea, South Africa), it has hardly affected the political landscape. Morrison's (1996) study of political transition in Mozambique similarly cast doubt upon the "democratic content" of social change since 1992; the imposition of a liberal model of democratisation by external donors in a context in which peasants see democracy as meaningless in the face of the same old privations and where arbitrary state authority still held sway. Furthermore, Bratton & van de Walle's (1992) study of popular protests and political reforms in 31 "reformable" states in

sub-Saharan Africa concluded that the partial liberalisation of authoritarian regimes did not amount to a "transition to democracy." If democratisation is a process whereby the masses enter the political arena and assert their rights, then this process has begun in Africa, but, given the authoritarian characteristics of the body politic, the challenges remain formidable and progress is unpredictable.

Economic Reform and Participation

Within the context of economic reforms in Africa since the mid-1980s – withdrawal of the state from many economic operations, the dismantling of state regulatory bodies and liberalisation of pricing and marketing structure – the question arises whether these reforms have created 'economic space' for the poor and their organisations to derive tangible benefits? Furthermore, whether the withdrawal of the state has opened up economic opportunities which previously excluded groups, through their organisations, have been able to exploit; and finally whether, as a result of increasing economic power, such groups have been able to increase their political power and have been able to influence politics, public investment plans and the flow of resources to previously disadvantaged areas and peoples. In a general sense there is evidence to suggest that in several African countries – for example Ghana, Senegal and Mali – the vacuum left by the state's withdrawal is beginning to be filled by local organisations, often representing smaller farmers, which have begun to take over some of the input-supply, credit and marketing functions previously performed by the state. On the other hand, there is little dispute that the economic reforms have also generally widened income disparities between the rich and the poor and that increasingly private companies have filled economic vacuums where local organisations have not had the resources and skills to do so (Mead, 1994; ILO, 1996).

Without a far-ranging and well-resourced research programme, the above questions are difficult to answer. In their examination of democracy, governance and economic policy in sub-Saharan Africa, Healy & Robinson (1992) concluded with a substantial research agenda related to the likely outcomes of political and economic liberalisation. They suggested, for example, that detailed micro-level studies were lacking of "organised interest groups" and their role in influencing state action and in promoting greater participation in policy-making and implementation. They further suggested that research is needed to test the hypothesis that political liberalisation leads to more widely accessible economic reform. Gibbon (1993) similarly pointed out that much of the research to date in Africa on the reform process had been at the macro-level and, in particular, had not examined the informal sector and the increasing opportunities for economic participation.

Despite the pressures which have been exerted and the resources which have been made available, historically the current reform programme in Africa is relatively new and elite-controlled political and economic systems will not easily yield. For example, Gibbon (1993) has argued that accumulation is still in the hands of the state elites and racially constituted economic elites and that there is little evidence of substantial accumulation outside of these. While such statements might be generally true, there is evidence that the climate of political liberalisation has encouraged the emergence of organisations and groups which, either for reasons of self-preservation in the face of shrinking state support, or for economic opportunism, have begun actively to engage in productive activities and to seek out economic space:

I. In the 1980s in Tanzania, **local voluntary organisations** became increasingly important in providing alternatives where the state's ability to guarantee adequate incomes and basic services declined. Indeed throughout the 1980s pressure from some of these groups began to influence the state's agenda and to bring state policies more into line with the needs of the poor. In the years following independence Tanzania's Government sought to co-opt and to curtail such organisations but, as the state plunged into economic crisis in the 1980s, these organisations became revitalised and helped people to find their own solutions to everyday problems of food, income, security and services. These organisations are usually formed on ethnic, religious and kinship ties which can mitigate against the formation of broader alliances and their influence is often more regional than national. Many of these organisations have external support and they are instrumental in opening up space for economic opportunities at the local level (Tripp, 1992).

II. Several studies illustrate the increasing role of local NGOs in Africa and their attempts both to generate economic opportunities and also to represent the interests of the poor in policy matters (Bratton, 1990; Copestake & Wellard, 1993; Gary, 1996). This is a vast area of enquiry and generalisations are difficult. Bratton's studies in Zimbabwe and Kenya concluded that, while not disputing the conventional view that the rural poor in Africa have difficulty making their voices heard in the public policy process, NGOs representing the rural poor can attain a modicum of policy influence and can alter the allocation of public resources. Fowler (1991) has argued, in the context of structural adjustment in Africa, that NGOs fulfil the role of securing equity by targeting and assisting groups which have been marginalised by the adjustment process. Gary (1996) examined the above in the context of NGOs in Ghana and how increasingly they have enabled

the poor to obtain the means to become productive. He concluded that NGOs, in their perceived ability to deliver development, promote participation and mitigate the social effects of adjustment on the poor, have begun to occupy prominent political space in Africa. The downside of this massive burgeoning of the NGO sector, however, has been the increased opportunities for accumulation on the part of a small number of African elites.

III. A recent ILO (1995) study of economies under reconstruction in East Africa described the dramatic impact which SAPs have had upon agricultural cooperatives, which were largely unprepared for the drastically changing economic environment, which saw their state support substantially cut and which managerially did not have the capacity immediately to respond to the situation. However, evidence in the early 1990s seems to suggest that, although the cooperative movement in East Africa has shrunk in terms of membership, the surviving organisations are beginning to emerge and are seeking to re-establish themselves as regulatory forces in a liberal market and able to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by liberal policies. Putterman's (1995) study of smallholder agriculture in Tanzania in the post-liberalisation era noted a "new wave of cooperatives" with substantial Nordic donor support, which were beginning to break into export crop marketing. Finally Beaudoux, et al (1994) examined the development of farmer "empowerment" through cooperatives and other farmer organisations in six African countries, as part of a wider World Bank study and suggested that *"new dynamics are emerging from the grassroots level in Africa, based on shared interests and common initiatives."* The different country studies pointed to a favourable political climate, supportive but not dominant external funding, and sound internal management as the key factors in sustaining these organisations.

IV. Tripp's (1994) study of economic reform and its effect of causing greater political unity among women in Uganda and Tanzania is an important contribution to our understanding of how women are responding to economic crisis. She found that in both countries poor women, in order to cope with unprecedented hardship, were joining groups to facilitate income-generating activities, savings and the provision of social services. In both countries in the 1990s women's organisations were among the fastest-growing types of new associations. Most of these organisations remain small and informal and serve as a means of saving money to reinvest in a business, to get a business started, or to save profits which are used later for urgent expenses. These organisations have also had an impact on the broader political arena: in Uganda, for example, as a result of pressure, the

Government was compelled to address women's issues at a national level in a way not addressed by previous governments. Tripp concludes that these women's organisations have proliferated in part due to opportunities afforded by liberalisation policies which have obliged states to concede political and economic space to non-government actors.

V. Finally Mead's (1994) study on the contribution of **small enterprises** to employment growth in post-restructuring South and East Africa provides evidence of a substantial start-up of small businesses in the past five years, absorbing up to 40% of the increase in the labour force in the countries under study. The key policy implication is 'start-up' and the need to recognise that enterprise start-up faces different problems and constraints from those faced by firms seeking to expand. Mead, however, concludes that we still do not accurately understand the relationship between growth of employment and reductions in the levels of poverty and that this relationship demands more detailed study.

The foregoing evidence would suggest, therefore, that the economic reforms in Africa since the mid-1980s, while having a significant and negative impact upon the livelihoods of the poor, have encouraged some groups and organisations to explore the opening economic space and to take advantage of it where appropriate. These explorations should be seen in the context of the people's continuing responses to the economic crisis in Africa, which are largely oriented towards survival, and a whole range of on-going initiatives at the local level aimed at ensuring the long-term survival of local economies and their eventual dynamic transformation. (Gooneratne & Mbilinyi, 1992) Business associations, small enterprises, export-oriented small and medium farmers, local NGOs supporting income-generating activities and women's groups in the informal sector have, to differing degrees in different countries, seized available opportunities and sought to turn them to their own advantage. Two significant questions, however, remain:

- (a) to what extent can these initiatives be seen as constituting the positive benefits of economic reform in terms of distribution and their impact on poverty?; and
- (b) to what extent do they add up to a challenge to existing political and economic elites and the beginnings of a shift of influence and resources in the direction of previously excluded groups?

We have little understanding of the magnitude of such initiatives in relation to the extent of poverty, nor of their sustainability. Only careful monitoring at the local and ultimately national level could enhance our understanding.

The Balance Sheet: Critical Issues in Promoting Participation

Over a decade ago El Ghonemy (1985) asked the question whether 'participation' could resolve rural poverty and concluded that there was insufficient empirical evidence to form an authoritative conclusion. Asking the same question in 1999 would present a similar dilemma. In the past decade or so there has been a mushrooming of 'participatory development' in Africa and this has manifested itself in the changing nature of the principles supposedly underlying donor-driven development. Participatory development in Africa in the sense of projects of planned social change as opposed to indigenous traditions of cooperation and support, is an external construct and it has begun to flourish where the resources have been made available. The distinction, however, must be drawn between the strengthening of people's participation within the processes of African development and its potential to have an impact upon poverty. But as Graham (1994) has commented, development processes in Africa "move slowly" and the reforms of the past decade have had little effect upon poverty, which, he argues, has simply grown worse in many countries. While recognising that 'participatory' initiatives in several countries have begun to bear fruit, it is in the light of such sanguine comments that we should perhaps reach our overall conclusions.

The efforts to promote a participatory form of development in many African countries in the past decade have been quite vigorous and undoubtedly have left their mark. In the mid-1980s the FAO launched its People's Participation Programme (PPP) which included Ghana, Sierra Leone and Zambia and which, through the availability of credit, sought to create the conditions for the rural poor to begin to gain access to the resources which could 'kick start' their involvement in development. In 1987 the FAO also held a Workshop to review a number of cases of Innovative Participatory Development in eight African countries and argued that an extension of the approach could be *"vital for helping the rural poor to participate in the benefits that development can bring."* (McKone, 1987). Ghai (1988) examined a number of community-based associations in West Africa and described how they were seeking to bring previously excluded groups within the development process. Later Wellard & Copestake (1993) examined a whole range of NGO initiatives in promoting a participatory form of development, mainly in the area of natural resource development, and showed how in Africa the methods and techniques of promoting farmer participation had filtered down to the grassroots project level. Burkey's (1994) timely study on the steps and issues involved in promoting participatory development in a Ugandan context has also been widely influential. Finally the studies of Gooneratne & Mbilinyi (1992), Bergdall (1993) & Cromwell (1996) have all contributed to examining the concept of participatory development within an African context and to showing its increasing relevance and practice.

In terms of promoting a participatory approach to poverty alleviation in Africa, in the 1990s the UNDP has, for example, undertaken several important initiatives:

- (a) promoting a country-wide dialogue on Malawi on anti-poverty strategies;
- (b) by supporting the development of a Poverty Alleviation Action Plan in Zimbabwe; and
- (c) operationalising a small grants programme in several countries which is intended to encourage local decision-making and promote networking between community groups and government agencies.

In the 1990s also there have been two major initiatives which have made substantial progress in promoting greater participation in poverty alleviation strategies:

I. The UNDP undertook a detailed study entitled *Poverty Alleviation in the Gambia. A Challenge to Participatory Approach* which sought to develop a strategy for poverty alleviation by using a participatory approach (Poutiainen, 1994). The overall strategy focused on four main issues:

- (a) enhancing the productive capacity of the poor;
- (b) improving access to and performance of social services;
- (c) building capacity at the local level; and
- (d) promoting participatory communication processes.

The overall strategy combined intervention at the local and at the policy level; an attempt to achieve a balance between a **macroeconomic environment**, which would promote equity, provide new development opportunities and support human resource development, and the establishment of an **institutional framework** favourable to a people-centred approach to development. Central to the development of the strategy was the building of **consensus** between policy-makers, donors and local people and this was achieved via extensive discussions prior to the elaboration of detailed courses of action. Conceptually the strategy was a move away from *ad hoc* actions to coordinated interventions on a national scale; and also from conceptualising participation as a means, aimed solely to promote greater project efficiency and sustainability, to the empowerment of local people. The strategy has begun to be implemented and it is hoped that much will be learned on how a participatory approach to poverty alleviation might be promoted on a national scale.

II. The World Bank's concept and technique of **Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA)** has been widely promoted in Africa and has come to be seen as a critical prelude to the determination of national poverty alleviation strategy (Salmen, 1995). The first PPA in Africa was undertaken in Ghana (1993-95) and since then similar exercises have been set up in more than twenty African countries. A PPA has a number of key elements: a poverty profile, a review of current Government policies relating to poverty, an analysis of relevant public expenditures and institutions and an overview of NGOs and community-based organisations working on poverty issues. Critical, however, is the direct involvement of a wide range of poor people in explaining the conditions and problems associated with their poverty. This involvement is predicated on the assumption that when poor men and women participate in the design of a poverty strategy, governments can be more confident that their poverty alleviation policies and programmes will have a positive impact on the day-to-day lives of the people for whom they are intended. This latter assertion is critical and will serve as a indicator against which to judge the effectiveness of the PPA strategy. With so much PPA activity in Africa at this moment, it is hoped that the results will throw some important insights on the relationship between people's participation and poverty alleviation strategies.

While the above studies and initiatives and the undisputed evidence of the penetration of the language of participation together add up to a substantial move forward in terms of how Africa's development is currently being discussed and promoted, we can be less sure on their impact and whether they constitute a radical shift in African development strategy. Certainly in national and pan-African fora, commitments to participatory development have been voiced, but, in the labyrinth of economic, political and social networks and relationships at the level at which programmes and projects operate, its overall impact is as yet difficult to measure and assess. Undoubtedly poor people are gaining access and achieving some measure of economic and political influence but, until we are able to adequately document these trends, their true extent remains unknown. In summary, if a participatory form of development is, in any meaningful way, to emerge and flourish within the current 'reality' of African development, there are a number of critical issues which will be influential in this process:

I. The active **collaboration** between Government and those who hold economic and political power, on the one hand, and the poor, their representatives and their organisations on the other. Ake (1993) has suggested that there is an increased awareness among Africans that the

monopoly of power enjoyed by national elites *"has to be broken in order that power can be transferred to the people who have little to lose and much to gain!"* This collaboration can only be achieved through negotiation and when those in power are prepared to concede and to fashion new relationships and not merely seek to manipulate the processes involved. Ndiweni's (1993) study of ORAP (Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress: Zimbabwe) aptly illustrates the importance of Government-Development Agency cooperation and the positive outcomes this can produce. Governments and their allies must be prepared to negotiate and, ultimately, to concede greater people's participation, if a broader consensus on how to tackle poverty is to be achieved. The contrary may well provoke increasing confrontation.

II. The importance of transforming participation from a one-off injection in programmes and projects into an **institutionalised** form of development practice, in both the public and private domain is necessary. Buck's (1993) pioneering study of the critical events and processes in the institutionalisation of participatory approaches in agroforestry in Kenya over a decade is illustrative of the need to take the longer time view. Similarly Graham's (1994) study of poverty alleviation strategies in Senegal and the work of AGETIP – a semiautonomous government agency – referred to a "small-scale institutional revolution" in terms of the building of vital administrative infrastructure at the community level which was the basis of many autonomous local development initiatives. Research into the role of community level institutions in poverty alleviation strategies in Nigeria similarly underlined the importance of building people's participation around these institutions (Francis, 1995). Efforts to promote participation should be accompanied by efforts to ensure that its lessons are learned, that knowledge is accumulated and that priority is given to the dissemination at different levels of current ideas and practices.

III. If it is to be an effective strategy to combat poverty, initiatives to promote participatory development must reach down to the **poorest** and not merely to those groups on the margins who are in a better position to take advantage of such opportunities. This is a major challenge and one which, at this moment, has not really been taken up. The World Bank (1993) underlined this critical issue and, in the context of Uganda, argued that unless this was done, the poorest would effectively lose all opportunity to participate in any economic growth. A key initiative in this area is the current work to promote a more participatory approach to poverty assessment. This is a critical issue which is being addressed in a number of

contemporary Participatory Poverty Assessments which could prove to be a most effective mechanism of involving the poor in both the definition of and proposals to tackle poverty.

IV. A key determinant of the success of participatory development in poverty alleviation may well be the future role and influence of NGOs in Africa. Worldwide NGOs are seen as a counterweight to state power; protecting human rights, opening up channels for participation and promoting pluralism. In Africa, governments and NGOs are "uncomfortable bedfellows" but they are destined to cohabit (Bratton, 1989). In Africa generally it is possible to say that NGOs have links with the poorest groups, place emphasis upon community level initiatives and are committed to promote participation (Wellard & Copestake, 1993). They seek not just the direct result from a project initiative but equally the transformation of political and economic structures. Gariyo (1995) urges that NGOs in East Africa should continue to pursue an agenda which seeks to democratise both economic and political power. NGOs constitute countervailing power and harmony with African governments is not widespread. But NGOs, as important constituents of civil society, appear to have a vital role in trying to ensure that the reform processes in Africa are participatory and that the benefits are shared by the poorest groups.

V. Attempts to promote participatory development must recognise the essentially pre-capitalist and pre-industrial nature of African society. Political participation derives from the concept of liberal democracy, which is somewhat different from the dominant African concept of participation which is linked to communalism (Ake, 1993). Africa is still largely a communal society and it is this communalism which defines people's perceptions of involvement and their roles and responsibilities within their communities. Mutual aid and support, defined often on regional or ethnic lines, lie at the heart of this communalism and give rise to a plethora of mutual aid such as labour groups, church organisations and burial groups (Bouman, 1995). Such associations can be enormously influential in determining a community's response to a development initiative. The key lesson is that participatory development approaches should be built upon and, with the agreement of existing communal groups, should recognise the tradition and practices upon which these are constituted. Madu & Umebali's (1993) study of the role of self-help groups in rural transformation in Nigeria confirmed this critical issue.

Harsch (1993) is optimistic that participatory development will take hold in Africa and that popular organisations will emerge and consolidate independent of dominant elites. This process, however, is only in its incipient stages and promoting people's participation in national politics will need to break down deep-rooted mistrust of urban centred political institutions. In the long-term different sectors of African society will come to fight for their democratic rights and to promote their economic interests. Ironically, however, this support for popular empowerment in Africa is taking place at a time when there is a decreasing number of public institutions in which this power might be exercised. Furthermore both Tidemand (1994) and Kiondo (1994) note that the majority of emerging people's organisations are basically concerned with economic survival strategies and any power or influence they achieve is via brokers or patrons of one form or another. Thomas-Slayer (1994), similarly, is hesitant in her conclusions regarding participation and sees a history of African governments encouraging local communities to take on responsibilities which they could not manage, but moving quickly to destroy such initiatives if significant organisational strength emerges at the local level. In the past decade there can be no doubting the relevance of and the advances made by participatory development in African development and reform strategies, but these achievements need support and further strengthening if they are to consolidate into a proven strategy to tackle the poverty which still dominates the lives of many millions of Africans.

References

- Abrahamsson, H & Nilsson, A (1995) **Mozambique in Transition: From Socialist Construction to Free Market Capitalism**, Zed Books, London.
- Adedeji, A (1990) **The Role of Popular Participation in Meeting the Challenges of Recovery and Development in Africa: Democratisation in Development Process**, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.
- Adepoju, A (1993) **The Impact of Structural Adjustment Programmes on the Population of Africa**, UNFPA/Heinemann/J Currey, London.
- Ake, C (1993) "The unique case of African democracy," in *International Affairs*, Vol 69, No 2.
- Alcock, P (1993) **Understanding Poverty**, Macmillan, London.
- Allen, C (1992) "Restructuring an authoritarian state: 'Democratic renewal' in Benin," in *Review of African Political Economy*, No 54, pp 42-58.
- Barchiesi, F (1996) "The social construction of labour in the struggle for democracy: The case of post-independence Nigeria," in *Review of African Political Economy*, No 69, pp 349-369.

- Barrat Brown, M (1995) **Africa's Choices. After 30 Years of the World Bank**, Penguin Press, London.
- Bayart, J F (1993) **The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly**, Longman, London.
- Beaudoux, E, et al (1994) **Farmer Empowerment in Africa Through Farmer Organisations: Best Practices**, World Bank, Washington.
- Bergdall, T D (1993) **Methods for Participation: Experiences in Rural Development from East and Central Africa**, Oxford University Press, Nairobi.
- Bouman, F J A (1995) "Rotating and accumulating savings and credit associations: A development perspective," in **World Development**, Vol 3, No 3, pp 371-384.
- Bratton, M (1989) "The Politics of Government-NGO relations in Africa," in **World Development**, Vol 17, No 4, pp 569-587.
- Bratton, M (1990) "Non-Governmental Organisations in Africa: Can they influence public policy?," in **Development and Change**, Vol 21, No 1, pp 87-118.
- Bratton, M & van de Walle, N (1992) "Toward Governance in Africa: Popular demands and State responses," in G Hyden & M Bratton (eds) **Governance and Politics in Africa**, Lynne Rienner, London.
- Buck, L E (1993) "Development of participatory approaches for promoting agroforestry," in K Wellard & G Copestake (eds) **Non-Governmental Organisations and the State in Africa**, Routledge, London.
- Chabal, P (1992) **Power in Africa: An Essay in Political Interpretation**, Macmillan, London.
- Chazan, N, et al (1988) **Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa**, Macmillan, London.
- Claire, M (1996) **Adjusting Africa: Structural Economic Change and Development in Africa**, World View Publishing.
- Clegg, I & Harding, P (1985) "Criminal Justice and the Colonial State in East and Central Africa," paper presented to the Development Studies Association Annual Conference.
- Cromwell, E (1996) **Governments, Farmers and Seeds in a Changing Africa**, ODI, London.
- Crummey, D (1986) **Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa**, Currey, London.

- Decalo, S (1994) "The future of participatory democracy in Africa," in **Futures**, Vol 26, No 9, pp 987-992.
- El Ghonemy, M R (1985) **The Crisis of Rural Poverty: Can Participation Resolve It?**, FAO, Rome.
- FAO (1980) **Report on the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development**, FAO, Rome.
- Fowler, A (1991) "The Role of NGOs in Changing State-Society Relations," in **Development Policy Review**, 9(i), pp 53-84.
- Francis, P (1995) **Community Level Institutions and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria: Consultative Surveys in Thirty-Six Countries**, Africa Participation Note No 5, AFTCB/World Bank, Washington.
- Galjart, B (1982) **Counterdevelopment**, University of Leiden, Netherlands.
- Gary, I (1996) "Confrontation, co-operation or co-optation: NGOs and the Ghanaian State during Structural Adjustment," in **Review of African Political Economy**, No 68, pp 149-168.
- Garyio, Z (1995) "NGOs and Development in East Africa. A view from below," in M Edwards & D Hulme (eds) **Non-Governmental Organisations. Performance and Accountability**, Earthscan, London.
- Ghai, P (1988) **Participatory Development: Some Perspectives from Grass-Roots Experiences**, UNRISD, Geneva.
- Gibbon, P (1993) **Social Change and Economic Reform in Africa**, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala.
- Gooneratne, W & Mbilinyi, M (1992) **Reviving Local Self-Reliance: People's Responses to the Economic Crisis in Eastern and Southern Africa**, United Nations Centre for Regional Development, Japan.
- Graham, C (1994) **Safety Nets, Politics and the Poor. Transitions to Market Economies**, The Brookings Institution, Washington.
- Harsch, E (1993) "Structural Adjustment and Africa's Democratic Movements," in **Africa Today**, 4th Quarter, pp 7-29.
- Healy, J & Robinson, M (1992) **Democracy, Governance and Economic Policy: Sub-Saharan Africa in a Comparative Perspective**, ODI, London.
- Illiffe, J (1979) **A Modern History of Tanganyika**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- ILO (1995) **Cooperatives in Economies Under Reconstruction in East Africa**, ILO, Geneva.
- ILO (1996) **Participatory Development and Poverty Alleviation: A Research Proposal**, ILO, Geneva.

- Kiondo, A (1994) "The New Politics of Local Development in Tanzania," in Gibbon, P (ed) **The New Local Level Politics in East Africa. Studies on Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya**, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala.
- Lipton, (1996) **Successes in Anti-Poverty**, ILO, Geneva.
- Madu, E N & Umbali, E E (1993) "Self-help approach to rural transformation in Nigeria," in **Community Development Journal**, Vol 28, No 2, pp 141-153.
- Makinda, S M (1996) "Democracy and multi-party politics in Africa," in **Journal of Modern African Studies**, Vol 34, No 4, pp 555-573.
- McKone, C E (1987) **Selected Cases of Innovative Participatory Rural Development in Africa**, FAO, Rome.
- Mead, D C (1994) "The contribution of small enterprises to employment growth in Southern and Eastern Africa," in **World Development**, Vol 22, No 12, pp 1881-1894.
- Mkandawire, T (1992) "The political economy of development with a democratic face," in G A Cornea, et al (eds) **Africa's Recovery in the 1990s. From Stagnation and Adjustment to Human Development**, Macmillan, London.
- Mkandawire, T (1994) "Adjustment, political conditionality and democratisation in Africa," in G A Cornea & G K Helleiner (eds) **From Adjustment to Development in Africa. Conflict, controversy, convergence, consensus?** Macmillan, London.
- Ndiweni, M (1993) "The organisation of rural associations for progress and grassroots development," in K Wellard & G Copestake (eds) **Non-Governmental Organisations and the State in Africa**, Routledge, London.
- Nyong'o, P A (1990) **Popular Participation and the Challenge of Self-Reliance in Africa**, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.
- Oakley, P (1991) **Projects with People**, ILO, Geneva.
- Poutiainen, P (1994) "Poverty Alleviation: A Challenge to Participatory Approach to Development. The Gambian Experience," (Draft) UNDP.
- Putterman, L (1995) "Economic reform and smallholder agriculture in Tanzania: A discussion of recent market liberalisation, road rehabilitation, and technology dissemination efforts," in **World Development**, Vol 23, No 2, p311-326.
- Raftopoulos, B (1992) "Beyond the house of hunger: Democratic struggle in Zimbabwe," in **Review of African Political Economy**, No 54, pp 59-74.
- Salmen, L F (1995) **Participatory Poverty Assessment. Incorporating Poor People's Perspectives into Policy Assessment Work**, World Bank, Washington.

- Samudavanija, C-A. (1991) "The three dimensional State," in J Manor (ed) **Rethinking Third World Politics**, Longman, London.
- Sandbrook, R (1996a) "Democratisation and the implementation of economic reform in Africa," in **Journal of International Development**, Vol 8, No 1, pp 1-20.
- Sen, A (1981) **Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation**, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Stewart, F (1991) "Strategies to Fight Poverty," (mimeo), Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford.
- Stiefel, M & Wolfe, M (1994) **A Voice for the Excluded. Popular Participation in Development**, Utopia or Necessity? Zed Books, London.
- Thomas-Slayter, B P (1994) "Structural change, power politics and community organisations in Africa: Challenging the patterns, puzzles and paradoxes," in **World Development**, Vol 22, No 10, pp 1479-1490.
- Tidemand, P (1994) "New local state forms and 'popular participation' in Buganda, Uganda," in P Gibbon (ed) **The New Local Level Politics in East Africa. Studies on Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya**, The Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala.
- Tripp, A M (1992) "Local organisations, participation and the state in urban Tanzania," in G Hyden & M Bratton (eds) **Governance and Politics in Africa**, Lynne Rienner, London.
- Tripp, A M (1994) "Gender, political participation and the transformation of associational life in Uganda and Tanzania," in **African Studies Review**, Vol 23, No 3, pp 371-384.
- Wellard, K & Copestake, G (1993) **Non-Governmental Organisations and the State in Africa**, Routledge, London.
- Wiseman, J A (1995) "Introduction," in J A Wiseman (ed) **Democracy and Political Change in Sub-Saharan Africa**, Routledge, London.
- Woodward, W (1992) **Debt, Adjustment and Poverty in Developing Countries**, Pinter Press, London.
- World Bank (1989) **Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth**, World Bank, Washington DC.
- World Bank (1993) **Implementing the World Bank Strategy to Reduce Poverty**, World Bank, Washington.
- World Bank (1993a) **Uganda. Growing out of Poverty**, World Bank, Washington.
- World Bank (1994) **Adjustment in Africa: Reforms, Results and the Road Ahead**, Oxford University Press, New York.