Depoliticising development: the uses and abuses of participation

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Introduction

The Bangladeshi NGO leaders discuss the dilemma: they are unhappy with the official agencies' new plan. Neither social nor environmental questions have been given the consideration they deserve. As happens more and more often, they have been invited to attend a meeting to discuss the plan. Flattered at first by official recognition, they are now uneasy. If they do not go, they have no grounds to complain that the interests of the poor have been ignored. But if they go, what guarantee do they have that their concerns will really be heard? Too many times they have seen their discussions drain away into the sand. The plans are left untouched; but their names remain, like a residue, in the list of 'experts' whose opinions the scheme reflects.

'We are all democrats today', was John Dunn's ironic opening to an essay on political theory (Dunn 1979). With its universal acceptance, he argued, what democracy meant *in practice* was increasingly elastic. Rather than describing any particular type of political order, democracy had become 'the name for the good intentions of states or perhaps for the good intentions which the rulers would like us to believe that they possess' (Dunn, op cit.: 12).

These days, the language of democracy dominates development circles. At national level it is seen in the rhetoric of 'civil society' and 'good governance'. At the programme and project level it appears as a commitment to 'participation'. This is trumpeted by agencies right across the spectrum, from the huge multilaterals to the smallest people's organisations. Hardly a project, it seems, is now without some 'participatory' element.

On the face of it, this appears like success for those committed to 'people-centred' development policies. But stories like the one above should make us cautious. *Sharing through participation does not necessarily mean sharing in power.* As with gender and with the 'green' movement, the 'mainstreaming' of participation has imposed its price. In all three cases, the original movement was one of protest against the existing orthodoxy. Some are still fighting for this. But in the mainstream, 'women in development' or 'win-win' environmental policies appear with the sting taken out of their tail. What began as a political issue is translated into a technical problem which the development enterprise can accommodate with barely a falter in its stride. Incorporation, rather than exclusion, is often the best means of control.

The status of participation as a 'Hurrah' word, bringing a warm glow to its users and hearers,[1] blocks its detailed examination. Its seeming transparency — appealing to 'the people' — masks the fact that participation can take on multiple forms and serve many different interests. In fact, it is precisely this ability to accommodate such a broad range of interests that explains why participation can command such widespread acclaim. If participation is to mean more than a façade of good intentions, it is vital to distinguish more clearly what these interests are. This will help to show what many have long suspected: that though we use the same words, the meanings that we give them can be very different.

Interests in participation

There are two main ways in which the politics of participation are admitted in development planning. The first is the question of *who* participates. This recognises that 'the people' are not homogeneous, and that special mechanisms are needed to bring in relatively disadvantaged groups. The second regards the *level* of participation. This points out that the involvement of the local people in implementation is not enough. For a fully participatory project, they should also take part in management and decision-making.

Both of these dimensions are important. The problem is that they do not go far enough. In lending themselves to technical solutions (which is, of course, their attraction), they can again obscure the politics of participation. A quota for the inclusion of poor women on the executive board, for example, seems to provide the answer. But of course, simply *being there* does not ensure that those women have a real say; and, even if they do, there is no guarantee that they will speak for others in a similar situation. At their

best, such measures can only *facilitate* fuller participation, they cannot *deliver* it. More critically, framing the problem in these terms ties us to observing the *mechanisms* for participation; it gives us no means of assessing its *content*.

Table 1 aims to move beyond this in drawing out the diversity of form, function, and interests within the catch-all term 'participation'. It distinguishes four major types of participation, and the characteristics of each. The first column shows the form of participation. The second shows the interests in participation from the 'top down': that is, the interests that those who design and implement development programmes have in the participation of others. The third column shows the perspective from the 'bottom up': how the participants themselves see their participation, and what they expect to get out of it. The final column characterises the overall function of each type of participation. In the following sections I describe practical examples in which the different types of participation can be observed.

This framework is, of course, simply an analytical device. In practice, the uses (and abuses) of participation may be very varied. Any project will typically involve a mix of interests which change over time. Rarely will any of these types appear in 'pure' form. I hope, none the less, that setting them out in this way will highlight some important distinctions. It is in the ambiguity participation, as both concept and practice, that the scope for its colonisation lies.

Table 1 Interests in particpiation

Form	Top-Down	Bottom-Up	Function
Nominal	Legitimation	Inclusion	Display
Instrumental	Efficiency	Cost	Means
Representative	Sustainability	Leverage	Voice
Transformative	Empowerment	Empowerment	Means/End

Nominal participation

An example of this type of participation is found in Zambia. Large numbers of women's groups have been formed by various government departments over the past thirty years. The existence of these groups demonstrates that the departments are 'doing something' and have a 'popular base', which may be significant in their claims for personnel or financial support. Their interest in women's participation, therefore, is largely for *legitimation*.

Many of the women go along with this. They say they are members of groups, but rarely attend any meetings. It serves their interests of *inclusion*, however, to keep their names on the books. From time to time they may 'check in' to see if any new loans or other inputs are on offer. How many of these groups actually exist in a functional sense is far from clear. In most cases, it seems, the women's participation is nominal, and the groups mainly serve the function of *display*.

Instrumental participation

Under the terms of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), government funding for essential infrastructure and services in many African countries has been sharply reduced. People's participation may be necessary, therefore, to provide the labour for local schools. This serves the *efficiency* interests of outside funders. The people's labour is taken as 'local counterpart funds', which guarantee the people's commitment to the project. The funders' input can be limited to financing raw materials, and the programme can therefore be far more 'cost-effective'.

For the local people, participation is seen as a *cost*. The time that they spend building the school has to be taken away from paid employment, household work, or leisure. But if they want the school, they see that they have little option. Participation in this case is instrumental, rather than valued in itself. Its function is as a *means* to achieve cost-effectiveness on the one hand, and a local facility on the other.

Representative participation

A Bangladeshi NGO wished to launch a co-operatives programme. It invited the local people to form their own groups, develop by-laws, and draw up plans for what they would do. The function of participation was to allow the local people a *voice* in the character of the project. From the NGO's side, this would avoid the danger of creating an inappropriate and dependent project, and so ensure *sustainability*.

A group of fishing families decided to apply. They wanted to form a co-operative for loans and fish marketing. For them, taking an active part both in their own meetings and in discussions with the NGO was important to ensure *leverage*, to influence the shape that the project should take and its subsequent management. Participation thus took on a representative form, being an effective means through which the people could express their own interests.

Transformative participation

The idea of participation as *empowerment* is that the practical experience of being involved in considering options, making decisions, and taking collective action to fight injustice is itself transformative. It leads to greater consciousness of what makes and keeps people poor, and greater confidence in their ability to make a difference. An example from the Philippines indicates how this can be.

Encouraged by a community organiser, 25 hillside families decided to form a consumers' co-operative. Prices at the local store were 50 per cent higher than those in the town, but the town was four hours' walk away. They took some training in co-operative management from the local NGO, and gradually devised their own constitution, by-laws, roles, and responsibilities. As their confidence grew, they decided to take on other projects. Then a presidential election was called. The local Mayor and some other officials visited the area. They had only one message: 'Vote for Marcos'. They had no time to listen to the villagers' questions or enter into discussion with them. After they left, the villagers decided to boycott the election.

When the election came, all 398 villagers spoiled their ballot papers. The community organiser visited them two days later. The election was widely viewed as a public relations exercise, but she had never discussed it with them, so was surprised and impressed by what they had done. She asked them for their reasons. One of the farmers explained:

In the co-operative, we discuss problems. We look at them from different angles. When we think that we have understood the situation, we try to come to a consensus. We avoid voting as much as possible. When the government officials came, we asked for an explanation of why we were given other than what we asked for. We asked for a school, teachers, and a road. The Mayor sent us the army, guns, and bullets. He refused to answer our questions. He just told us to vote for Marcos. We want the government to be run the way we manage our co-operative store.[2]

Empowerment is usually seen as an agenda 'from below'. This is because empowerment must involve action from below. However supportive, outsiders can only facilitate it, they cannot bring it about. None the less, as shown in Table 1, empowerment may also be identified as the interest in participation 'from above', when outsiders are working in solidarity with the poor. From Marx's analysis of alienation, to Freire's work on conscientisation, to the 'alternative visions' of organisations like DAWN,[3] it is in fact not usually those who are poor or disadvantaged

themselves who identify empowerment as the key issue. The latter generally have far more immediate and tangible interests and goals. This case is typical, therefore, in that empowerment of the poor was initially the concern of the local NGO. It was only through their experience in the co-operative that the hillside families came to see empowerment as being in their interests. In this form, participation is therefore at one and the same time a means to empowerment and an end in itself, so breaking down the division between means and ends which characterises the other types. In another sense, of course, this process never comes to an end, but is a continuing dynamic which transforms people's reality and their sense of it.

Dynamics in participation

All of the above examples are positive. There is a degree of match between the interests from 'top down' and 'bottom up'. This is because the stories are told as a way of clarifying the framework in Table 1. They are snapshots, abstracted from their wider social context, and even their own history as development programmes. Only one set of interests is focused on, and presented as though this were all there is to say. The stories, as much as Table 1, are a device, highlighting some points, but throwing others into shadow. Stated in this way, the framework itself runs the risk of depoliticising participation, something which it was designed to overcome.

What needs to be injected into Table 1 is a sense of dynamic, along (at least!) four dimensions. These are presented in Figure 1. Clusters of circles show the interests from top-down and bottom-up, and the forms and functions of participation. The small arrows between the circles indicate the first dynamic, that each of the clusters is internally diverse, and there is tension over which element — or combination of elements — will predominate at any one time. In particular, as seen already in the case of the election boycott, the character of participation typically changes over time. The second dynamic is shown by the arrows coming in to the 'form and function' cluster from either side. These indicate that the form or function of participation is itself a site of conflict. The third pair of arrows comes out of the 'form and function' cluster, and into the 'interests' clusters, showing that the outcomes of participation feed back into the constitution of interests. The final dynamic is indicated by the arrows feeding into the diagram from either side. These show that interests reflect power relations outside the project itself. The rest of this section discusses each of these dynamics in turn.

Figure 1 The politics of participation
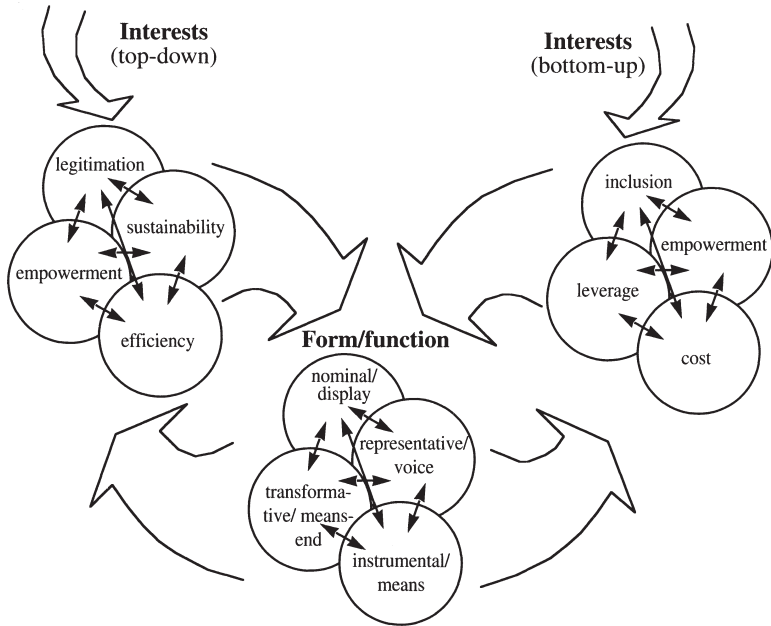
The diversity of interests

In all the cases cited above, the Zambian women, the African villagers, and the fishing and hillside families are presented as though they were homogeneous groups. In reality, they are diverse, with differing interests and expectations of participation. This is clearest to see in the Zambian case: it is in the hope of individual gain that the women occasionally 'check in' to the groups. Also, those women who do remain more active — the chair, secretary, and treasurers of the groups — are likely to identify their participation as instrumental, and may even have some expectations of its being representative.

For outsiders, similarly, there is a mix of interests. The NGO in the Philippines case certainly gains legitimacy by having large numbers of group members. Its interests in efficiency and sustainability, as well as empowerment, are met by the hillside families developing and managing their own projects. In addition, there will be different interests among the local organisers and the NGO management. National leaders, for example,

may talk more readily of empowerment than field workers who are aware of the dangers of reprisals from the local elite. The NGO may also 'package' the form and functions of participation differently for different 'markets'. In dealing with their radical Northern funders, they stress the transformative aspect. When engaging with the local elite and the national government, they may place more emphasis on the efficiency and sustainability dimensions. There is politics, therefore, not simply in the form and function of participation, but also in how it is represented in different quarters.

Changes in participation over time

As participation is a process, its dynamic over time must be taken into account. Seen at its simplest, there is a strong tendency for levels of participation to decline over time. This is clearest in the Zambian case: thirty years ago, or even twenty, those same groups were highly active, with the enthusiasm of project workers matched by that of the women themselves. This change may be due to disillusionment with the project, but it can also mean that people choose positively to use their time in other ways. There is a tendency in the rhetoric of participation to assume that it is always good for people to take an active part in everything. People do, however, have other interests, such as in leisure. People often participate for negative reasons: they do not have confidence that their interests will be represented unless they are physically there. One can grow tired of being an 'active citizen'!

Withdrawal from participation is not, however, always a positive choice. Women with heavy domestic responsibilities, for example, may find that they cannot sustain the expenditure of large amounts of time away from home. Also, even if power relations have been challenged by a successful exercise of participation, there is a danger that new patterns of domination will emerge over time. This is particularly so where the project itself creates new positions, with some people being far more involved than others. The Bangladeshi fishing co-operative has a relatively good chance of sustaining representative participation, because all of the members are actively involved. In other projects, which rely on management by a few leaders, wider participation over time is much more likely to dwindle to a point where it becomes nominal.

Alternatively, it may be that the level of participation increases over time. All their lives the fishing families had taken loans from a middle-trader, and had to sell their catch back to him. He then kept a proportion of the sale price as profit, before selling on to a larger trader. Through their

co-operative, the fishing families could apply for loans to the local NGO. By-passing the middle-trader, they then took loans from their own group, and sold the fish back to it. The co-operative itself then accumulated the profit, and they were able to use the money for other collective projects. Their successful exercise of representative participation led to transformation.

In a similar way, the Philippine families first encountered the NGO in a health-education programme. After a year, an evaluation was held and they approved the programme. They saw that poverty was the underlying cause of their poor health. Having gone through the initial programme largely out of the interests of inclusion, they developed the confidence to move to representative participation, in stating that their more immediate need was a co-operative store. The action and reflection process of organising and managing the store involved them in transformative participation. This affected not only their economic position, but also their political consciousness.

Participation as a site of conflict

In practice, the interests from 'top down' and 'bottom up' do not match neatly. Probably more often, the interests that one group identifies are not served by the participation that occurs. The first example, of the Bangladeshi NGO leaders and the official agencies' plan, gives an instance of this. The NGO leaders desire representative participation, to gain leverage. The official agencies, however, require their presence simply for legitimation. This is probably the dominant pattern, but it is not always the 'top-down' interests that prevail. While participation may be encouraged for the purposes of legitimation or efficiency, there is always the potential for it to be 'co-opted from below', and for a disadvantaged group to use it for leverage or empowerment.

The Philippines election boycott gives an instance of this, though with a twist. Here, the interests of President Marcos and his cronies in the nominal participation of the villagers is frustrated. The hillside families see the Mayor's visit as an opportunity for representative participation. When they see there is no opportunity for dialogue, they simply refuse to play the game. This draws attention to another important point. It shows that participation is not always in the interests of the poor. Everything depends on the type of participation, and the terms on which it is offered. In cases like this one, exit may be the most empowering option.

Power and the construction of interests

The final dynamic in participation is more complex and more abstract. It is clear that power is involved in the negotiation to determine which interests 'win out' against others. What is less clear is that *power is involved in the construction of interests themselves*. This has two dimensions, which will be discussed in turn. The first is external to the model, represented in Figure 1 by the arrows coming from the far left and the far right. These show that interests are not just 'there', but reflect the power relations in wider society. The second dimension is shown by the arrows coming from the form and function cluster back into the 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' interests. These indicate that the participation process itself shapes the constitution of interests.

When asked why they joined the women's groups, many of the Zambian women say they hoped to get fertiliser or credit from them. Their interests in inclusion therefore reflect their practical interests as village women with a major role in food production.[4] These interests are determined by the local, gender-based division of labour, as well as by their class positions. Limiting their involvement to nominal levels also reflects their wider social context. With their domestic and productive responsibilities, many have little time to spend 'sitting around'. The timing of the groups' meetings recognises this: most are (even nominally) inactive from November to March, the main agricultural season. It is no coincidence that it is mainly groups whose members are older, and thus freer of responsibilities in the home, that continue to meet throughout the year.

In practice, access to credit or fertiliser rarely comes through the groups. Instead, most of them spend their time working on handcrafts, which they sell locally at marginal profit. The women's acceptance of this work again reflects the wider, gender-linked division of labour, in which control over significant resources is reserved for men. It is also shaped by the limited marketing opportunities in the rural areas. The women have other potential interests, for example in using the groups to put pressure on government departments to provide real services to the rural areas. The fact that women do not express these interests — and may not even recognise them — is not by chance, but reflects their low expectation of any change, born out of a general sense of powerlessness, or earlier disappointments. While the women may identify their interests as semi-detached inclusion in the existing project, therefore, this is not a free choice. To understand it, we have to see it in the wider social context in which the women live their lives. From the other side, the government departments' interest in legitimation comes from their competition with

each other for resources. Also, however, it expresses their complacency that no real demands will be made on them, either from the poor or from the powers-that-be.

The other cases tell a similar story. In the shadow of the SAP, the local people's participation in building the school clearly shows their absence of other options. It is probable that those who do have alternatives (such as a relatively well-paid job) are able to evade participating, perhaps by paying someone else to do their share. Whatever the collective rhetoric, it is well recognised that it is rare for the whole community to take part equally. Some will be excused for being too young or too old. But others will be able to call on their status: it is no coincidence that such 'community' labour projects in practice often fall to the women and poorer men. Wider power relations condition the interests of the outside agency, too. Its concern for efficiency might indicate its limited budget. But it also clearly draws on the international supremacy of free-market ideology, and the awareness that it could easily take the funds elsewhere if the local people do not co-operate.

It is easiest to see the experience of participation acting upon the construction of interests in the cases of the fishing and hillside families' co-operatives. In both instances, undertaking successful projects enabled them to see new opportunities they had not at first imagined. There are less positive examples. It is quite common, for example, for agencies, when they 'ask the people' what kind of project they would like, to get very conventional answers. Women do ask for sewing machines, however much feminists wish that they would not! This may in part reflect the wider, gender-determined division of labour, but it also draws on what people have seen of development projects, and so what they expect them to look like. The NGOs' negative experience of co-option through the official agencies' 'consultation' processes, in the first example, similarly shapes their choice as to whether to participate in discussions of the latest plan.

It may be that the most profound re-negotiation of interests occurs where transformative participation achieves empowerment. While external agencies may genuinely desire the people's empowerment, they may find it rather uncomfortable when empowerment actually occurs. In the Philippines, for example, there is now considerable tension between some People's Organisations and the national NGOs that fostered them. The former wish to communicate directly with the funders, but the NGOs do not wish to lose control. Similarly, some Northern NGOs have found the language of partnership to be double-edged. It can, for example, lead to their Southern counterparts rejecting as 'imperialist' any demand for funding accountability. In some cases this may be legitimate; in others it is

not. But if one takes seriously the fact that both parties have been shaped by unjust power relations, there is no particular reason to expect that the form which empowerment takes will be benign. Former friends, rather than common enemies, may be the first and easiest point of attack. Top-down commitment to others' empowerment is, therefore, highly contradictory. It is likely to lay bare the power dimensions of the relationship that the dominant partner would prefer to leave hidden. If it is genuine, the process must be transformative, not only for the 'weaker' partner but also for the outside agency and for the relationship between them.

The underlying message of this section is simple: however participatory a development project is designed to be, it cannot escape the limitations imposed on this process from the power relations in wider society. That people do not express other interests does not mean that they do not have them. It simply means that they have no confidence that they can be achieved.[5]

Participation: what counts and what doesn't

Before concluding this discussion, I want to point out a final anomaly in the new pursuit of participation. Like the Women in Development (WID) agenda, it is founded on the assumption that those who have been excluded should be 'brought in' to the development process. It represents the people in the bad, non-participatory past as passive objects of programmes and projects that were designed and implemented from outside. As the literature on women in development now recognises, however, the people have never been excluded from development. They have been fund-amentally affected by it. But more than this, people have also always participated in it, on the most favourable terms they can obtain. They await with a mixture of expectation and scepticism what the new agency in their area is offering, and what it will want in return. They have opted in or out of projects as they judged that it suited their interests. At least some of what agencies may see as project 'misbehaviour' (see Buvinic 1986) can from another standpoint be viewed as their co-option from below.

In Bangladesh, for example, an NGO introduced a hand-tubewell programme for irrigation. The pumps were located in the fields to be used for vegetable production. The villagers, however, considered water for domestic use a higher priority. They therefore moved the pumps from the fields to their homes. Rather than recognising this as the expression of people's genuine interests, the NGO began to issue plastic pipes, which could not be re-located. Applications for the tubewells rapidly declined, and the programme was deemed a failure. This is by no means an isolated

example. In the same area, shallow tubewell engines destined for irrigation were adapted by the local people to power rice mills and small boats. People have never been a blank sheet for development agencies to write on what they will.

There is, of course, a need for more space for poorer people to participate in development programmes in representative and transformative ways. They should not need to resort to manipulation and covert resistance — the 'weapons of the weak' [6] — to express their interests. Recognising that people have always used such tactics, however, suggests that the problem is not simply 'enabling the people to participate', but ensuring that they participate *in the right ways*. This underlies, for example, some official agencies' current enthusiasm for programmes in 'community-based resource management'. These explicitly recognise that unless people are 'brought in' to the programme, they may actively sabotage it, by cutting trees or embankments, killing animals in nature reserves, and so on. The fact that the way in which people have participated is so often classified as illegitimate should lead us to question quite carefully: on whose terms is the current agenda, and whose interests are really at stake?

Conclusion

This article suggests three steps in addressing the 'non-politics' of participation. The first is to recognise that participation is a political issue. There are always questions to be asked about who is involved, how, and on whose terms. People's enthusiasm for projects depends much more on whether they have a genuine interest in it than in whether they participated in its construction: participation may take place for a whole range of reasons. The second step is to analyse the interests represented in the catch-all term 'participation'. Table 1 sets out a framework for this. It shows that participation, while it has the potential to challenge patterns of dominance, may also be the means through which existing power relations are entrenched and reproduced.

The third step is to recognise that participation and non-participation, while they always reflect interests, do not do so in an open arena. Both people's perception of their interests, and their judgement as to whether or not they can express them, reflect power relations. People's non-participation, or participation on other people's terms, can ultimately reproduce their subordination. Figure 1 shows some of the dynamics in participation, pointing out that the form and function of participation itself becomes a focus for struggle.

If participation means that the voiceless gain a voice, we should expect this to bring some conflict. It will challenge power relations, both within any individual project and in wider society. The absence of conflict in many supposedly 'participatory' programmes is something that should raise our suspicions. Change hurts. Beyond this, the bland front presented by many discussions of participation in development should itself suggest questions: What interests does this 'non-politics' serve, and what interests may it be suppressing?

Acknowledgement

Notes

1 Point made by Judith Turbyne (1992).

2 Taken from Tiongo and White (forthcoming).

3 Development Alternatives with Women for a New era (DAWN) — see Sem and Grown (1987).

4 This use of 'practical interests' follows Molyneux (1985).

5 For much fuller discussion of this point, see Gaventa (1980).

6 For fuller discussion of such tactics, see Scott (1985).

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