The Power of Participation

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Abstract:

I reflect on the preceding five contributions in this issue by focusing on the power dimensions of participation. I emphasize how power underlies and frames not only the activities and management of participatory development, but also our own personal/institutional involvement as development researchers and workers. I end with some thoughts on where these inescapable power dynamics leave our engagement with participatory development.

Introduction

"The power of participation" has two senses to it. The first points to the popularity of, and attraction to, the notion of participation. Thus, in development circles these days, it would be difficult to find many organizations that are not at least trying to integrate "beneficiary participation" into policy or programming. Even the World Bank, once the object of severe criticism regarding its relative neglect of civil society, has taken participatory development up with enthusiasm. But such appeal should perhaps give us pause. For, "participation as empowerment" can easily slide into "participation as power." Here, it can be deployed to wield authority, helping to maintain and further elite or institutional hegemony. This is the second meaning of "the power of participation," and I would like, in what follows, to tease out several of its dimensions. I will be greatly helped, in this endeavor, by the preceding analyses by Adely, Burde, Clemons & Vogt, Grant Lewis & Naidoo, and Makuwira.

Consensus-Making

Power is integral to consensus-making. In my article (2002), I underline that community consensus is an insufficient indicator of participation; much depends on how that consensus is achieved. Who institutes the rules of discussion and consensus-making? For what purpose? And what is the quality of the consensus reached? These are key questions for scrutinizing the power dynamics of participatory development. Thus, simply consulting people, adding up individual votes, or as Grant Lewis & Naidoo mention in the case of school governance in South Africa, fastidiously following election rules without regard for the establishment or quality of deliberation among participants, impoverishes the meaning and value of participatory decision making.

Even *with* appropriate discussion rules and lively debate, there can be "micro power" processes at play. Rhetorical devices - sensationalist arguments, technical or esoteric language, misrepresentation of evidence, loud or aggressive speech - can all unduly sway opinion or silence and intimidate participants. While often subtle, these devices may also be intentional, as when government or NGO officials bring in scientific "experts" to speak to (read: persuade) community members about, say, the viability of a hydroelectric dam.

Consequently, reaching consensus is compromised when the quality of deliberation is itself compromised by power inequalities. But it is important not to take for granted the very condition of having to achieve a consensus. The concern here is not just that consensus-making may be coerced, but also that the consensus must be *single*. As the case studies by Adely, Burde, Clemons & Vogt, and Grant Lewis & Naidoo all reveal, the demand for a single policy direction or decision risks stifling social plurality. It sets up an all-or-nothing equation in which some community members win and others--usually minorities or the disadvantaged--lose. It assumes a monolithic community, prescribing one formula for all women, classes or racialized/ethnicized groups, irrespective of differences, inequalities and tensions between and among these groups. In post-conflict situations, Burde shows how this problem may be even more serious, "aggravat[ing] rather than assuag[ing] the social divisions that are particularly dangerous and pronounced."

In all the above instances of power-induced consensus-making, the political result may well be that elites win. Indeed, it is precisely the latter's socioeconomic, cultural and patriarchical power that allows them to coerce decisions or force a single consensus, so that the less privileged end up being "asked to put aside their … goals for the sake of the common good" (Grant Lewis & Naidoo) and poor people are effectively "excluded from the decision-making process" (Makuwira; cf. Burde). Thus, despite the trappings of empowerment, participatory processes can end up reproducing or even advancing elite domination.

Managerialism

"Managerialism" in this context refers to the process by which participatory development is subjected to technocratic and institutional demands. For example, Makuwira writes about participatory basic education in Malawi, not as empowering for communities, but as a "tool for achieving better [i.e., more efficient] project outcomes." Participation is thus molded to fit bureaucratic or organizational needs: people can meet, but decisions have to be taken quickly to obey budgetary or reporting deadlines; community input is good, but quantitative information (e.g., counting votes) is privileged over qualitative information (e.g., women's narratives); or, as Clemons and Vogt state, participation takes place, but it is supported by insufficient technical and financial capacity, or is even used instrumentally to "legitimize the implementing agency as 'grassroots oriented'." In this scheme of things, participation is "managed" (Adely; Grant Lewis & Naidoo) and "institutionalized" (in the same way that mental patients are said to be); it becomes "tokenistic," with the alleged beneficiaries treated "largely [as] objects rather than subjects" (Makuwira).

But managerialism can be more than just bureaucratization. Indeed, if institutions merely pay lip-service to beneficiary involvement, if they hijack participation for organizational needs, then what really matters is not whether or not participation works, but whether it helps improve and advance the organization (cf. Ferguson, 1990). Under the managerialist cloak, then, participation stands far from community empowerment, wherein facilitating organizations are meant to work themselves out of a job; it stands, rather, for the aggrandizement of institutional authority. Such a stance is particularly ominous in the context of foreign "aid": for, participation can be deployed to become yet another western conditionality, a further means to make demands, or perhaps even exact penalties, on communities in the Third World.

Panopticism

Faced with these decidedly negative dimensions of participation, it is not surprising, as Adely points out, that some communities have resisted being part of participatory development projects. But what if, with enough persistence on the part of the "facilitating" organization, such resistance eventually gives way to acquiescence, conscious or unconscious? This indeed is the import of Foucault's notion of "panopticism" (1984, p. 239), whereby the surveillance of people in modern societies (for example, in the form of TV monitoring, the creation of social security "dossiers," or more recently, "security assessments") is so pervasive that people, even those who do not like it, end up internalizing it.

The inherently public character of participation makes such panopticism more than a possibility. Makuwira speaks of the "supervision" of community schools by a host of officials - village leaders, village committees, District Education Officers, NGOs, teachers; and Adely and Burde quote evidence of project beneficiaries feeling obliged, under the scrutiny of government officials and neighbors, to give only the "official story." Rather than fostering information exchange and free debate, then, participation in this case stifles, censors, disciplines or silences participants, particularly those who are already disadvantaged.

While communities may initially dislike or be suspicious of participatory development, it is not inconceivable that, gradually, they develop an "interest" in participation: NGO or government officials may find it helps "monitor" the community; husbands/fathers may use it to keep a tab on their wives/children; elites may see in it an opportunity for keeping dissent in check; and everyone may enjoy it for its production of gossip and rumor about friends and neighbors. Eventually, to follow Foucault's logic, each community member could end up self-disciplining, that is, internalizing the political, social, cultural and patriarchical dos and don'ts.

Panopticism gives a bizarrely menacing twist to the practice of "participatory monitoring and evaluation" (mentioned by Makuwira). Intended for the community to assess its own participatory efforts, the practice would translate, under a panoptic lens, into a community "monitoring itself monitor"! Although of course extreme, this surveillance of surveillance places participatory development squarely in the camp of *1984*.

Self-Implication

But what about our own participation in participation (as academics, researchers, or development workers)? Given the imbrication of elite and institutional interests with participatory development, what is our own "interest" in it? As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) argues, we are all inevitably part of institutions (academic, development-related) that have their own class, geopolitical and organizational demands; so when we carry out research or do field work on participation, we cannot pretend to have "pure" or "objective" motivations (Kapoor, 2004).

There is an unmistakable self-righteousness and benevolence that is part of the culture of development, at least in part due to the pervasive notion that "we" are helping "them." As Adely intimates, such self-congratulation may well be more pronounced when it comes to participatory development, given the "progressive" connotation imputed to "empowerment." Yet, the bureaucratic imperatives described earlier, as well as such constraints as research grant deadlines, the need to receive high grades, pleasing thesis committees, defending one's research/organizational "turf," and tenure/ promotion pressures to publish or perish - all these tarnish

development "assistance" and the pursuit of knowledge. It is problematic, then, to flash participatory development as a badge or romanticize our involvement in it. Innocently or benevolently claiming that one is helping a Third World community become participatory, for example, is not only self-aggrandizing but also risks perpetuating elite, panoptic or institutional power, all at the expense of the disadvantaged. (I cannot help but draw parallels here with the current U.S. and British governments' triumphalist claims of "bringing freedom" to Iraq.)

One of the ultimate ironies of participatory development is that we may well be asking more of Third World communities than we ask of ourselves. Molenaers and Renard (2003) report, for instance, that World Bank poverty reduction schemes in Bolivia not only make civil society involvement a condition of aid, but also have such high expectations of participation as to be unrealistic. Yet, how many of our own poverty reduction programmes in the West, or indeed political, social, educational or work institutions, are participatory in the way that we desire participatory development to be? Very few, if any, I imagine.

I am not arguing that participation programs in Third World communities should be held to any lower a standard than in the West (or Southern metropolitan centers). But when public participation over "there" becomes a conditionality or is unduly ambitious relative to "here," then it is suspiciously disciplinary. When we have such high expectations of the marginalized Third World "other," we are probably doing one or all of the following: (i) trying to control and "manage" disadvantaged communities (in ways that have already been discussed above); (ii) projecting and compensating for our own inadequacies (e.g., lack of meaningful citizen participation in liberal democracies); and (iii) using the Third World as our laboratory, that is, experimenting on marginalized communities for our own edification and perfectibility. In all such cases, participation is once again but a ploy, a decidedly power*ful* instrument.

I thus whole-heartedly identify with Adely's students in their "soul searching" vis-à-vis the dilemmas of participatory development. I would add, though, that it is important not just that we soul search about participation "over there," but that we reverse the anthropological gaze to also ask about our own (personal, historical/colonial, geopolitical, gendered, socioeconomic, cultural, institutional) implications and stakes in participation.

Conclusion: What to do?

> My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism." (Foucault, 1984, p. 343)

Indeed, my point in teasing out some of the many power (and often highly negative) dimensions of participatory development is not to say that it is evil, but that it is dangerous. The idea is not to "write off" participation, as some of Adely's students suspect critics of participatory development have done, but to develop a healthy skepticism about it, or as Burde characterizes it, "to note that it is a complex tool that can be manipulated in multiple ways." Developing an interest in, perhaps even a good deal of political commitment to, participation (viz. "participation as empowerment") is important; but it is equally significant to be aware that these may be vested and interest*ed* (viz. "participation as power").

On the one hand, this awareness means developing a scrupulous vigilance to the power of participation in its many, changing forms (personal, institutional, etc., as well as old and new). But on the other, once identified, the idea in my view is not to try and eliminate power (I don't think one can), but to try and minimize its oppressive and unequal effects by opening it up for collective and democratic contestation and debate. This may be a monumental and tension-filled task, especially given such obstinate problems as class and gender inequalities; but such are the challenges of participatory development. They mean that "we always have something to do."

Acknowledgement

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