

Do participation and the use of participatory approaches in development projects and programs really matter?

Abstract

The promotion of participation and participatory process in development projects and programs is not new, but the evaluation of participation is still in its early stages.

Concepts of participation have been introduced in projects and programs in the late 1970s and early 1980s after lack of beneficiary participation was identified as a reason for the failure of many development efforts. Initially, emphasis was on popular participation. Popular participation was, in essence, the empowerment of the people to effectively involve themselves in creating the structures and in designing policies and programs that serve the interests of all. In the past quarter-century the promotion of participation in development has become more widespread and the focus has widened to include other stakeholders as well.

Participatory approaches that involve local communities in their own development have gained substantial support among donors and have become increasingly important in their work. Specifically, the World Bank support for community participation has been manifested in the design and implementation of either community-based development (CBD) or community-driven development (CDD) projects. The share of projects in the Bank's portfolio that include CBD/CDD component grew from 2% in 1989 to 25% in 2003. In the last decade, AusAID has started to promote local initiatives that enhance community capacity by building social capital and fostering empowerment through its projects. Research into the AusAID White Paper identifies empowering poor people to participate in development, as one of the four priorities in the fight against poverty

However, while donors support to participatory projects has increased significantly over the years and community involvement has long been recognised as a valuable approach to promote development at a local level, recent reports by the World Bank's research and social development departments note the lack of donors' rigorous evaluative evidence on the development effectiveness of these approaches (World Bank OED, 2006). A convincing evaluation of donor funded projects and programs would need to validate (or invalidate) the participatory model itself, the relationship between the process of participation and the impact project has made, and, more importantly, and very often missed in any evaluation, the correlation, if any, between the quality of participation and impact.

Introduction

As donors become more aware of the seriousness and growing dimensions of the development challenges they realised that better aid is needed for greater development impact.

The failure of many conventional development projects and programs and growing poverty around the world brought a shift away from the modernisation paradigm of development: people were very often identified as the missing element in development efforts. One of the donors' first response was increase in participatory projects.

In the 1970s the limited success of many development initiatives was attributed to failure to involve people in the design and implementation of projects and programs. By the mid-1980s critics of "big-development" were complaining that many large-scale government-initiated programs, from schooling to health, to credit, to irrigation systems, were performing poorly, while rapidly degrading common-pool resources were creating significant negative environmental and poverty impacts. These complaints reawakened interest in the local management of resources and decisions.

The participatory development movement, led by Chambers (1983) and others, was important in applying participatory ideas to small-scale development in ways that would allow the poor to be informed participants in development,

with external agents acting mainly as facilitators and sources of funds. Further support came from the increasingly strong critique of development from academic social scientists, such as Freire (1993), Escobar (1995) and Scott (1998), who argued that top-down perspectives were both disempowering and ineffective. Meanwhile, projects like the Self-Employed Women's Association in India, the Orangi slum improvement project in Pakistan, and the Iringa Nutrition project in Tanzania were generating interest as highly successful instances of community-driven development that could provide important lessons for large donors (Krishna, Uphoff, and Esman 1997).

Sen's (1985, 1999) influential effort to shift the focus of development from material well-being to a broad-based "capability" approach also deeply influenced the development community. Central to his approach were strategies to "empower" poor people, an agenda taken by the World Bank and other donors as part of their response to critiques of top-down development. Arguments for "participatory development", as advocated by Chambers (1983) and others, led to the inclusion of participation as a crucial means of allowing the poor to have control over decisions.

The inclusion of participatory elements in large-scale development assistance came quickly at the World Bank. Initially focussing on targeting, projects have moved toward a more holistic attempt at introducing participation through institutions that organise the poor and build their capabilities to act collectively in their own interest (Narayan 2002). The World Bank's (2001) *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty*, focussed on empowerment as a key priority of development policy. This led to a broad-based effort at the World Bank to scale up community-based development and to make it an important element of programs that seek to improve delivery of services (World Bank, 2003).

In the last decade, AusAID has started to promote local initiatives that enhance community capacity by building social capital and fostering empowerment in communities through its projects. Research into the AusAID White Paper identifies empowering poor people to participate in development, as one of the four priorities in the fight against poverty.

However, while donors support to participatory projects has increased significantly over the years and community involvement has long been recognised as a valuable approach to promote development at a local level as the above examples prove, recent reports by the World Bank's research and social development departments or by Penelope Hawe note the lack of donors' rigorous evaluative evidence on the development effectiveness of these approaches (Mansuri & Rao, 2004; Wassenich & Whiteside, 2004; Hawe, 2007).

In an examination of several participatory projects promoted by various donors, the author finds that, as yet, there is very little hard evidence on the impact of these projects in reducing poverty or enhancing community capacity. The upshot of any analysis seems to be that a project may deliver many things that both recipients and project implementers consider beneficial, but what can actually be ascribed to participation is unclear. This is mainly because: (i) stakeholders perception on what is meant by participation varies; (ii) inadequacies in the design of the donors' projects monitoring and evaluation systems to systematically assess changes in community capacity resulting from the donor's intervention, (iii) lack of consistent monitoring tools to assess participation across the project life cycle.

Moreover few evaluation frameworks developed, based solely on one dimension of participation, could not provide an adequate basis for a comprehensive assessment of involvement processes and outcomes across the different dimensions of community involvement. The analysis should recognise all the dimensions of participation. The enduring argument that the extent of community control should be central to any assessment of community involvement processes must not be forgotten (Barnes, 1999; Yorkshire Forward, 2000). The analysis of power and extent of community influence in participatory actions often conceptualised as the 'ladder or rungs of participation' (Arnstein, 1969, Choguill 1996, Paul 1987), has undisputed theoretical and practical significance, but it is almost always missed in any participatory project evaluation.

What is Participation?

The new cornerstone of any project or program in the development community is the active involvement of members of a defined community in at least some aspects of project design and implementation. **Participatory projects** rely on communities to use their social capital to organise themselves and participate in the development process. Terms such as participation, community empowerment, social capital or community engagement are often used interchangeably in project documents.

For example, **empowerment** is presented as the highest form of participation in some designs. But what empowerment means, as empowerment is a term with its own history. In community psychology it was first put forward in the early 1980s by Rappaport as a way to build a bridge between community development and social action, in terms of ways of working with communities (Rappaport, 1981, 1984). Community development had been criticised at the time for being too politically conservative, for possibly focusing people on solutions which were over localized and not getting at the root causes of problems. Empowerment was originally defined as “to enhance the possibilities of people to control their own lives” (1981) and then was revised to become “the process by which people, organisations and communities gain mastery over their lives” (1984). **Social capital** is defined as the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively. It is a term that became popular after Robert Putnam wrote his book ‘Bowling Alone’ in 2000, which conjured up the idea of a future America where people have lost connection with family and friends. Although Putnam’s original work examined social capital in terms of things like voter turnout to elections, Ichiro Kawachi (a social epidemiologist) was the route to social capital’s prominence in research because he showed a relationship between social trust and death rates measured at a state level, opportunistically in a large scale USA national survey (arguing that social trust is part of social capital). Since that time the definition of social capital has been further developed. The World Bank has invested a lot in the development of social capital research and they define social capital as norms and networks that enable people to act collectively (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). The alternative view is that social capital is the resources that people get from their social networks (e.g., information, practical aid, role models for ideas, etc) (Moore *et al*, 2005; 2006). Trust is an important social variable, as is collective behavior, but it is believed these are concepts best understood and studied as variables with integrity of their own.

Two points should be made about these terms:

Firstly, each of the above terms, once introduced in project design and implementation, often means different things to different people. Distinctions in views should be considered and definition of the term agreed because how you would design an intervention to “increase social capital”, for example, and how you measure an increase in social capital as a result, would be different if one person was essentially talking about trust, but another meant collective action, and another mutual aid and. Precision in the design, implementation and therefore measurement really matters.

Secondly, participation can occur at many levels. When potential beneficiaries also make key project decisions, participation becomes self-initiated action, what has sometimes come to be known as the exercise of voice and choice of empowerment. There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process. *“Participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the powerholders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo”* (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). She was the first scholar to provide “a ladder of citizen participation”, the title of one of the most influential articles on citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969). Her ladder of citizen participation was divided into eight rungs that range from non-participation (therapy and manipulation) to tokenism (informing, consultation, placation) to citizen power (partnership, delegated power, and citizen control). Other scholars too have analysed levels of participation: Samuel Paul in 1987, Marisa Choguill in 1996, and Abad in 2004. Sherry Arnstein work,

often presented as the *theoretical base for participation*, recognized that participation has gradations that depend on the extent of the *power* that governments give citizens in determining development outcomes.

This aspect is rarely captured in evaluations of participatory projects. Paul's work in 1987, a World Bank discussion paper entitled *Community Participation in Development Projects: The World Bank Experience*, looked at the levels of participation. Interestingly, he found that participation in World Bank projects ranged from information, the lowest level of community participation, to a limited participation in decision making. Over 80% of the projects, he argues, did not go beyond consultation. In contrast to Arnstein, Paul recognises only four levels of community participation: information, consultation, decision making, and initiating action.

What monitoring tools to assess participation exist?

A literature search was conducted and, despite the importance attached to **community participation**, there are relatively few robust measurement frameworks. Most of the work comes from the UK in health government funded programs. For example, a tool developed in the UK for evaluating health alliances included process indicators for community involvement (Funnel 1995). Further, the increased interest in urban regeneration has led to work on the assessment of community participation in planning and managing regeneration activities (Burns, Taylor, 2000). The Active Partners benchmarks, produced by Communities and Organisations-Growth and Support (COGS), assessed community involvement in four areas: influence, inclusiveness, communication and capacity. In addition, in 2002 the UK Audit Commission gathered a set of performance indicators for community involvement in public service organisations, with a focus on local government (Audit Commission, 2003). More recently, the Well Connected tool, developed in 2004 by Bradford Health Action Zone, provides a means for organisations to evaluate their progress on community involvement through a series of questions covering six aspects of community involvement: diversity, procedures, communication, staff support, opportunities and resources (South, 2004). None of these tools has been applied in development projects.

However, the World Bank produced a book on measuring **social capital** (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, 2002) that is used in a number of developing projects. Their Social Capital Assessment Tool (SOCAT) assesses social capital at three different levels: household, community and organisation. Many of the items in the SOCAT are based on well researched concepts that have existed in the sociology and community psychology literatures for some time, such as sense of community, community attachment, collective efficacy, community confidence in problem solving together (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974; Craig & Maggionto, 1982; Chavis & Pretty, 2000). The household questionnaire asks about: demographics, the house's building materials and amenities, membership of groups and associations, the characteristics of up to 3 of those groups and organisations, the decision making style, the effectiveness of the group or organisation's leadership, the extent to which respondents think they have gained skills from being members of the group. They are useful and valid. However questions have been raised about whether this collection of separate constructs could be called "social capital" (Hawe, 2007). How you define the term is important.

Empowerment measurement tool development predates much of the social capital work as well. The accomplishments in this field are best exemplified in the work of Barbara Israel, Amy Schulz, Marc Zimmerman and colleagues, who have been developing ways to assess and capture the effects of community development interventions in low income racially segregated Detroit neighborhoods for a period of 20 years. They have developed measures at individual, organisational and community levels (Israel *et al*, 1992; Israel *et al*, 1994; Parker *et al*, 1998; Parker *et al*, 2001; Schulz *et al*, 1995; Schulz *et al*, 1997; Schulz *et al*, 1998; Schulz *et al*, 2002; Zimmerman *et al*, 1988; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1990; Zimmerman, 1992). They appear to have done the most work of research teams anywhere trying to disentangle 'real'

community-level effects from what could just be thought of as the aggregated responses of individuals. However the same problems has occurred: how you define the term. An example of how broad empowerment concept is and what is meant by empowerment, and which aspects should be evaluated, are presented in Hawe's paper (1994), Capturing the meaning of "community" in community intervention evaluation. The central objective was "to empower residents to take control of the issues which affect their lives". But to make this valuable, each assumption and idea in the objective had to be dissected and talked about in order to decide exactly *what the intervention could achieve in the time frame and how that effect could be captured in the evaluation design*. The advantage of this process is that once the appropriate measure appears to have been identified, program planners can go back and check that everything that they are doing in the program makes sense in terms of having a likely effect on that measure. It can be a very positive and valuable process. At the end of it agreement should be reached on what is to be measured, and why, and people should be confident that this will capture the true 'essence' or value of the program. This process makes the program and evaluation stronger.

Conclusion

Despite the importance attached to participatory project, there are relatively few robust measurement frameworks that are used by donors to evaluate the impact of these projects. Moreover none of the tools would look at the dimensions of participation. Therefore there is limited evidence that shows to what extent these projects have achieved their objectives due to the participatory process used. No answer could be given if communities/groups/individuals have or have not been empowered by these approaches. Is participation valuable for these groups? The conclusion of this paper is that a convincing evaluation of donor funded projects would need to validate (or invalidate) the participatory model itself, the relationship between the process of participation and the impact the project has made, and, more importantly, and very often missed in any evaluation, the correlation, if any, between the quality of participation and impact.

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