

## **The Importance and Limitations of Participation in Development Projects and Programmes**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the importance and limitations of participation of local people in development projects and programmes while making suggestions on how to enhance such participation. The paper reveals that participation resulted from the paradigm shift that emerged from the failure of ‘top-down approaches’ or growth models of development. It also arose due to development actors’ realization that approaches to development needed to be adapted to local conditions that are shaped by different socio-cultural, economical and political realities. The paper adopts a desk review, conceptual analysis of the importance and limitations of participation of local people in development projects and programmes, placing particular focus on two 1994 publications by Robert Chambers, as key sources of literature on the origins of participation. Using Sherry Arnstein’s understanding of participation where she equates it with the concept of power, participation can enhance empowerment of the locals and can provide local people with the opportunity to think and develop solutions for themselves. Participation can also allow the incorporation of local knowledge, skills and resources in the design of interventions, it can ensure project/programme responsiveness to people’s needs, it can enhance the goal of sustainability and assist breaking the mentality of dependency. Critics assert that participation does not lead to locals’ empowerment, because participatory methodologies fail to change and challenge the bureaucratic, centralized and administrative structures that control decision-making and resource allocation. Also, through participation, what could be considered to be local knowledge might just be a construction of the planning context that cover a complex micro-politics of knowledge production and use in local communities. Domination also limit participation since participatory activities take place in groups. Participatory techniques conceal traditional local relationships of power and fail to deal with situations where local culture hinders participation by being

oppressive to certain people. Therefore, participation is affected by spatial, temporal, political, social and cultural contexts. Thus, to ensure successful participation, there is need to contextualize it within the existing local environment. It is important to situate efforts whose aim is to engage communities in context if they are to be successful. This is because contexts in which different development organizations and agencies operate are complex and diverse. Participation must be informed by carefully done political and social analyses. By so doing, an examination of the practices and social relationships that determine local knowledge production and use can be made. Participation should be considered as political as it is conditioned by the institutional framework and political backgrounds of the participants.

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**Keywords:** Participation, Development, Projects, Programmes

### **Introduction**

In contemporary development practice, there is a general feeling that the process of development through the implementation of projects and programmes will only acquire full meaning if the local population participate fully in their planning and implementation (Sapru, 2002). Thus, the notion of local people's participation in development practices that affect their lives has been gaining momentum in the process of human empowerment and development. Since emerging in the 1980s and 1990s (Chambers 1994a) as a reaction against conventional ways of doing research and due to the failure of the 'top-down' or growth models of development, participatory approaches, methodologies and techniques that emphasize the importance of participation of the local people in development processes through the medium of development projects and programmes have emerged and evolved overtime and space.

As such, contemporary development scholars and practitioners have been advocating for the inclusion of local people's participation in development practices. The underlying idea behind this is the belief that consideration should be given to poor people to participate in projects and programmes that affect their lives. Involving poor people in some aspects of those projects and programmes would lead to better results through the connection between development aid and its intended beneficiaries (Mansuri and Rao, 2012). Thus, the locals are expected to make an input in development interventions (Perez, 1999) that affect their lives backed by the belief that they are creative beings that are capable of conducting their own analysis and planning (Chambers, 1994b). However, in spite of the perceived importance of participation in development processes, there are arguments that it does not always lead to empowerment of the marginalized.

## **Origins and Meaning of Participation**

### **Evolution of Participation and Participatory Techniques**

The concept of people's participation is not new and cannot be traced to one source. Literature documenting lack of people's participation in development projects began appearing in the 1970s (Perez, 1999) and represented a reflection of a gradual evolution in the paradigm of development. The paradigm shift resulted from the failure of 'top-down' or growth models of development which did not live up to their expectations, and from the realization that approaches to development had to be adapted to local conditions that are shaped by different, socio-cultural, economical and political realities that favor greater individual and social control over project and programme interventions (Brett, 2003).

Before the paradigm shift, at a micro-level, governments and other development agencies had the same attitude towards their populations. Development strategies were built around the conception of a preconceived model where the State or any other development agency defined the orientations and the most appropriate actions as well as the way these actions should be led. Such an approach, centralized and vertical, from top-down left no place for the people's participation in the processes of decision-making. The development agency positioned itself as being capable of defining the needs of the populations and of deciding on necessary actions to address them. The results of such strategies were not satisfactory and the considerable means invested in development projects and programmes did not produce important impacts. The delivered services sometimes did not fit with the needs of the local people and cultural norms or in some cases aggravated the problem which it was supposed to solve. Within such situations, it appeared useful to reconsider the way development programmes were conceived in order to take into account local people's needs and their aspirations. Such a conception gradually led to the emergence of the participatory approaches

Thus, the switch from advocating participation to generating approaches and methodologies to include the perspectives, voices and resources of the disadvantaged emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. This was stimulated by the desire to move away from the extractive survey questionnaires to more cost effective methods of learning that could take into account indigenous technical knowledge (Chambers, 1994a). Five streams of approaches and methodologies that later influenced the evolution of a more participatory approach emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, namely: Activist participatory research, Agro-ecosystem analysis, Applied Anthropology, Field research on farming systems, and (RRA) Rapid Rural Appraisal (Chambers, 1994a; 1994b). Participatory Rural Appraisal, which is considered to be more participatory and empowering to the local people

evolved in the 1990s from RRA which was regarded as too extractive (Chambers, 1994b). Therefore participatory methods that developed in the context of PRA became the central tool for national governments and other development agencies to embrace participation in development projects and programmes.

Chambers (1994b:1253) defines PRA as “a family of approaches and methods to enable local (rural or urban) people to express, enhance, share and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act”. However PRA is continually evolving, depending on ongoing practice and experience (Kapoor, 2002) such that having a secure and final definition would be unhelpful (Chambers, 1994a). PRA uses visual representations and analysis by the local people such as mapping or modeling, transect walks, estimating, matrix scoring and ranking, seasonal calendars, trend and change analysis, venn diagramming, and presentations for checking and validation (Chambers, 1994a:959; 1994b:1253). These methods and techniques mainly involve group-based learning and planning, placing emphasis on visual inputs to enable all community members to participate irrespective of their literacy levels and expressive styles. To ensure and maximize participation, these techniques are sequenced to gradually build a local knowledge base on a particular issue (Kapoor, 2002).

### **Understanding Participation**

Participation means different things to different people in different settings. This is basically because the concept has been defined differently by different scholars and organisations. For instance, the World Bank (1994, p. 1) defines participation as “...a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources which affect them.” On the other hand, IIED (1994:18) defines participation as “empowering people to mobilize their own capacities, be social actors, rather than passive subjects, manage the resources, make decisions, and control the activities that affect their lives.” Brett (2003:5) defines participation as “an educational and empowering process in which people, in partnership with each other and those able to assist them, identify problems and needs, mobilize resources and assume responsibility themselves to plan, manage, control and assess the individual and collective actions that they themselves decide upon.” Despite all the many and different definitions, there seems to be a common denominator in the sense that they all seem to reduce participation to mean concepts like people’s involvement or people’s engagement.

A popular and most used definition of participation was given by Sherry Arnstein in which she equates participation to the concept of power. In a nutshell, power simply means the ability to influence decisions. The use

of the word power is critical because involvement or engagement alone does not necessarily or automatically mean being able to influence decisions. Power is what gives ability to influence development outcomes. According to Arnstein (1969) participation is about redistribution of power in which the have-nots of our society who are presently excluded from the political and economic processes are given power to have control and influence over matters that affect their lives. It is about the have-nots taking part in how information is shared, how goals and policies are arrived at, as well as determining how benefits are shared in various development projects and programmes. In this sense, she describes participation as citizens' power.

In providing clear understanding of participation as power, Arnstein came up with an eight staged framework which she calls 'a ladder of citizen participation'. The ladder has eight rungs and is illustrated as follows;

Level (from the top)	Type of participation
8	Citizen's control
7	Delegated power
6	Partnership
5	Placation
4	Consultation
3	Informing
2	Therapy
1	Manipulation

(Adopted and modified from Arnstein, 1969)

This ladder shows how much power is embodied in each rung, denoting the amount of power citizens have in influencing development outcomes. The higher one moves on the ladder, the more power citizens have in terms of influencing development outcomes. Stage eight which is citizen's control implies the highest level of participation. In here, citizens have absolute power to influence development outcomes. On the contrary, level one which is Manipulation entails fake participation in which there is no power at all. Citizens are just deceived as if they are involved, when in actual sense; development outcomes are influenced and determined by the power holders. This is nothing but a window dressing ceremony in which there is no participation at all.

Notwithstanding all the different definitions and understandings, true and effective participation should be anchored on principles such as; promotion of accountability and transparency, allowing for participation at all levels and ensuring participation is accessible to all stakeholders, valuing diversity, ensuring participation is voluntary and should encourage stakeholders to create their own ideas and solutions among others (Asian Development Bank, 2012). The ultimate goal is to ensure that citizens have the power to determine and influence development outcomes.

## **Methodology**

This paper adopts a desk review, conceptual analysis of the importance and limitations of participation of local people in development projects and programmes while making suggestions on how to enhance such participation. It places particular focus on two 1994 publications by Robert Chambers, that is, “The Origins and Practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal” and ““Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): Analysis of Experience” in its discussion as key sources of literature on the origins of participation. Focus has been on conceptually analysing the arguments raised for and against such local participation in development projects and programmes and providing an insightful conclusion to that effect. This paper was written based purely on secondary sources of data. It mainly employed the use of published books, articles and reports.

## **Importance of Participation**

Despite people’s participation being operationalized differently depending on the context and field in which it is studied and applied, it has become a popular concern among academics, (NGOs) Non-Governmental Organizations, development partners, UN agencies and most of the Third World governments. For instance, the World Bank has allocated about \$80 billion towards participatory development projects over the last decade (Mansuri and Rao, 2012:2) thereby demonstrating the momentum towards participation in development with a view to give the marginalized a greater say in decisions affecting their lives.

Participation can be viewed both as a means and an end in itself (Cornwall, 2008; Jaitli and Brown, 1999). As such, Jaitli and Brown (1999) contend that when focusing on participation as a means to an end, its importance to the goals of the project may be higher in projects that rely much on the dedication and involvement of the locals, than in those projects in which important but scarce resources are in the hands of few grassroots actors at the local level. Jaitli and Brown (1999) further argue that if the focus of the project is on participation as an end in itself, then empowerment of the local people is enhanced. Consequently, participation can lead to empowerment of the weak and disadvantaged as it enables local people to be in command of investigations, it creates a sense of ownership of the development process and strongly places local people in positions to identify, determine and control their priorities for action (Chambers, 1994b). This can be achieved if the locals are put in a position where they are able to negotiate and engage with local power holders so that they are able to make decisions that are binding as indicated by Arnstein. The ability to engage, negotiate and make binding decisions implies that the disadvantaged will have the power and control over projects (Arnstein, 1969) and therefore, will

create an element of empowerment. However, Jones et al (2001) argue that empowerment resulting from participation is dependent upon both the actions of the outsiders and the consciousness and capabilities of the local people to shape transformative processes for themselves. Furthermore, empowerment is considered contextual such that empowerment in one arena does not mean empowerment in another.

Through approaches such as PRA, participation can increase project effectiveness (Oakley, 1991) and success by providing local people with the opportunity to think and develop solutions for themselves. As Chambers (1994b:1257) argues, participatory methods “enable local people to use their own categories and criteria, to generate their own agenda, and to assess and indicate their own priorities.” Therefore, participation allows the incorporation of local knowledge, skills and resources in the design of projects and programmes which leads to project and programme effectiveness as it is now viewed as a precursor to successful project and programme completion. In this way, participation can ensure that the project or programme that is being implemented responds to people’s needs. Furthermore, Chambers (1994b) supports this argument by arguing that participatory approaches are more valid, less costly, more timely and useful. However, Jones et al (2001) are cautious of this process and argue that participation is temporal and spatial meaning that it is affected by time and space where the participatory activities take place which determines inclusion and exclusion of certain sub-groups of the population or community from the process such as the women and children.

Furthermore, participation can enhance the goal of sustainability (Oakley, 1991) which is an important factor in ensuring long-term development. Sustainability is enhanced through developing local people’s capabilities which is achieved for instance, through PRA which allows local people to dominate processes of agenda setting, information gathering, organizing, analyzing and planning (Chambers, 1994b) of the interventions. In this way, participation generates diversity and creativity (Chambers, 1994b) and allows local people to own and share information, thereby sustaining both the project or programme and the participatory process itself. In the end, participation can enable the community to view a project as theirs and not belonging to the implementing agency, and reduce the likelihood of project or programme failure once funding ends or when the implementing organisation pulls out or relocates to another project site.

Additionally, as Oakley (1991:17) asserts, “participation help to break the mentality of dependency which characterises much development work and as a result promotes self-awareness and confidence and causes rural people to examine their problems and to think positively about solutions.” As such, it can increase people's self-reliance by enhancing their

control over resources, by enabling them to plan, to implement and to participate in development efforts at levels beyond their community (Oakley, 1991). For example, Jones et al (2001) argue that PRA can lead to conscientisation among community members as local people can develop the ability to organise themselves and engage with development officers to discuss their needs with development agents. Therefore, participation offers local people an opportunity to move from being passive dependants waiting for others to solve their problems to being active participants who are capable of solving problems they experience themselves (Oakley, 1991). In the process, this extends the coverage (Oakley, 1991) of development interventions by drawing more people within the direct and indirect influence of development initiatives. This can be realised if development actors move away from just informing the locals where there is a one way flow of information from development actors to the locals without any feedback from them (Arnstein, 1969), which deprives the disadvantaged the power to negotiate. However, the challenge here is on how to ensure that some powerful individuals or local elites do not dominate the process of participation so that the weaker members of society can not only be heard, but also to influence the outcomes of development interventions.

Greater participation can also promote interventions that are more responsive to the needs of the underprivileged in communities and that are better adapted to local conditions. Thus, participation is expected not only to improve the exchange of information among actors, but also to develop the bargaining power (RCPLA, 2010) of the beneficiaries through involvement in project activities such as planning and decision making at all relevant levels. Thus, for participation to be beneficial, it must move away from tokenism which just allows the disadvantaged to only hear and have a voice; but it must give power to the locals to negotiate, manage and make decisions, thereby guaranteeing the locals of the ability to govern a project or programme (Arnstein, 1969).

Therefore, importance of participation can be tied to Arnstein's ladder of participation. If participation is to lead to locals' empowerment, self-reliance, as well as to interventions that are responsive and successful, then focus should be on the higher rungs on Arnstein's ladder. For example, enhancing citizens' control mean that locals will have the power not only to be informed, but to influence the direction and outcomes of development projects and programmes. Thus, if the benefits of participation are to be realised, the locals must have absolute power over development projects and programmes and should not just be manipulated or merely informed by development actors.

## **Limitations of Participation**

In demonstrating the limitations of participation, Mosse (2001) argues that “participation no longer has the radical connotations it once had.” Cleaver (2001) also argues that participation has become an act of faith that people believe in and rarely question. The implication therefore is that despite being romanticized by its proponents, participation does not always lead to the claimed benefits.

While participation is important for the incorporation of local knowledge in development initiatives, Mosse (2001) argues against this conception by contending that local knowledge is simply a reflection of local power relations such that what is considered to be local knowledge is just a construction of the planning context that cover a complex micro-politics of knowledge production and use in local communities. Mosse (2001) justifies this by insisting on the public character of participation and also on its open-endedness. These characteristics of participation facilitate the control of knowledge by powerful people. Thus, participation while expressed as the view of the poor or marginalized people, in reality this knowledge is manipulated by power relationships. This brings in Arnstein’s first rung on the ladder of participation where participation is equal to manipulation of the locals. Here, the locals are just used by development practitioners. This implies that negotiations that take place in participatory arenas and claim to produce local knowledge are never between equals as some people (e.g. women and children) and other issues (e.g. gender relations, class) get suppressed. As a consequence, what is claimed to be local knowledge is simply views of the minority powerful local elites who can easily hijack participatory processes.

Furthermore, Mosse (2001) questions the argument that participation can lead to local people’s empowerment, more so that of the marginalised. This is because participatory methodologies such as PRA fail to change and challenge the bureaucratic, centralised and administrative structures in implementing organisations that control decision-making and resource allocation that even exclude participation. Organisational staff in such structures and systems disregard people’s involvement because of the existence of complex, technical procedures and one-way, top-down planning performed exclusively by professionals that hinder genuine participation. Cornwall and Pratt (2010) also argue that PRA practice seem not to be empowering, mainly in a collective sense as it is just used for extracting information of which this is a wrong application and is not supposed to be the case. This is supplemented by Arnstein’s argument that on the lower rungs of the ladder of participation, what is claimed to be participation is actually non-participation. This is because the locals are manipulated and just used for rubberstamping or just for purposes of engineering their support

(Arnstein, 1969). Thus, participation here is turned into a public relations exercise (Arnstein, 1969) for the implementing organisation, thereby replacing genuine participation.

Domination can limit participation considering that participatory activities take place in groups. Chambers (1994b:1260) argue that “in a group, one person may dominate and overrule others.” This can limit the benefits of participation in the event that one or several people (local elites) dominate a group or an activity, which can lead other people to assume passive roles. Domination can be reinforced through the use of participatory methods such as PRA that conceals traditional local relationships of power (Mosse, 2001) and fails to deal with situations where local culture hinders participation by being oppressive to certain people (Cleaver, 2001). Mosse (2001) argues that participatory approaches are subject to domination due to their character as public events. Consequently, leadership struggles and conflict may arise, remain unresolved, and people may lose sight of their original purpose. Therefore, using existing structures of local power and organization in fostering participation can reinforce existing inequalities instead of stimulating the desired social change.

Also, participation with the very poor is much more difficult since project staff are in a hurry to complete their projects and achieve outcomes. This allows implementing agencies to pay much attention to donors and funders; hence participation is just for legitimization of the organization’s agenda (Mosse, 2001) and is used as a means to an end by different organizations leading to manipulation. There is also the danger that people may only participate to take advantage of participating in a project for instance, in return for cash, food or any other material incentives. This has an effect on beneficiary graduation as people will remain dependent on the activities of the implementing agency and therefore unable to become self-reliant due to lack of empowerment.

It is also imperative to note that beyond the question of participation, outsiders or development practitioners must ensure project efficiency in order to achieve the results or goals expressed by donors. The common discourse in development is related to the imperatives of project efficiency through the visible and tangible results. In that sense, as Cleaver (2001) argues, there is little evidence of the long-term effectiveness of participation to achieve the overall goal of improving living conditions of vulnerable people and be considered as a means for social change. Thus, introducing participation does not ensure the right and predictable outcomes in terms of livelihood impacts even though people express greater satisfaction in decisions in which they are involved (Cleaver, 2001; Mansuri and Rao, 2012). Therefore, what is important is the shift from the lower rungs of Arnstein’s ladder of participation to higher ones where the disadvantaged or

the locals can obtain full managerial power (Arnstein, 1969) and be able to influence the outcome of development interventions.

### **Suggestions Towards Enhancing Participation**

In order for participation to be effective, Mansuri and Rao (2012) argue that there is need for project design and implementation to be informed by carefully done political and social analyses. By so doing, an examination of the practices and social relationships that determine local knowledge production can be made. This will ensure that participatory development agencies understand specific contextual conditions that can influence participation of the voiceless and the marginalised in communities. This will also enable national governments and other development agencies to devise proper mechanisms to deal with problems of participation such as those pertaining to domination.

Furthermore, Cornwall (2008) argues that it is important to situate efforts whose aim is to engage communities in context if they are to be successful. This is because contexts in which different development organizations and agencies operate are complex and diverse such that a homogeneous approach can fail to work in heterogeneous contexts characterized by different cultural, social and political systems. Cornwall (2008:281) justifies this by arguing that “understanding these dynamics calls for an approach that regards participation as an inherently political process rather than a technique.”

Therefore, to achieve empowerment, participation should be considered as political (Williams, 2004) as it is conditioned by the institutional framework and political backgrounds of the participants (Cornwall and Pratt, 2010) that constrains the empowerment of local populations. There is need to examine the effects of participation on networks of power in order to take into account differences in power and interest, so that participatory methods avoid the risk of strengthening power of the already dominant groups or serving only their interests. As Arnstein (1969) indicated, the locals must be given power or control to govern a project or programme and they must be in positions to negotiate conditions and be in charge of managerial aspects of development interventions. Mansuri and Rao (2012) call for significant changes in structures and incentives within development agencies to promote participation and the willingness to learn among personnel.

### **Conclusion**

While participation has its own strengths and weaknesses, it should be encouraged so that local people are given the opportunity to decide on matters that affect their lives. Development agencies should be willing to

adjust their structures and start learning from the local people so that their planned projects and programmes can build on and enhance the strengths and resources that are already at the disposal of the local people. Engaging local people and creating modalities to address limitations associated with participation can benefit both the local people and development agencies in terms of empowerment, project efficiency, effectiveness, responsiveness, sustainability, enhancing local capabilities and promoting self-reliance. There is need for both national governments and development agencies to understand the complexities that underlie local knowledge production and use and also not to treat local communities as homogeneous entities but as heterogeneous entities with different power and social relationships that can constrain the success of any development initiative. Participation should be promoted, viewed as political and planned according to different local contexts for successful project and programme outputs and outcomes. Participation should not be taken as a window-dressing exercise but should aim at giving power to the disadvantaged so that they can shape, control, influence and direct development projects and programmes.

Further, participation does not need to be considered as an end without linking with real strategies of development. For some time, people's attention has been turned to the concept of participation as a means to empower marginalized people and use their knowledge, forgetting the overall objective of development which is to improve the economic and social conditions of people. There is need to encourage genuine participation as indicated by Arnstein by focusing on the higher rungs of the ladder such as partnership, delegated power and citizens control. This is important so that the locals can have power to shape and influence development projects and programmes. Therefore, participation needs to be part of a coherent and global strategy of development.

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