

Participatory Research Methods: Importance and Limitations of Participation in Development Practice

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Abstract Since more than four decades ago, the need to adopt participatory approaches in development planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation has increased exponentially. More precisely, there has been a demand by both state and non-state actors to undertake development interventions using both top-down and bottom-up approaches to promote a balanced participation and empowerment of various stakeholders including the marginalised poor. This article espouses the importance and limitations of participation in development practice. In order to achieve that objective, the study takes a critical consideration of participatory research methods. The case made herein is that ‘participation’ is crucial for any development process—it increases efficiency and sustainability of interventions; leads to empowerment; enhances achievement of development goals; and it also transforms the development actors’ paradigms. Conversely, the study also argues that participation inasmuch as it possesses clear benefits and empowering effects, it is without disadvantages. Some contentious viewpoints are that participation lacks proof to cause empowerment and sustainability; it fails to resolve the power relations problem; and that it only works well with small projects while another view is that PRA tools are usually over praised. Regardless, this study recommends that i) participation should be considered as a strong alternative to development; ii) participation must draw its boundaries clearly; and iii) participation should also be taken as a catalyst for knowledge and skills transfer.

Keywords: participation, participatory methods, evaluation, monitoring, research, development, PRA, Zambia

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1. Introduction

Participation has become a ‘resounding’ word in the development world today. With increasing inadequacies for governments and agencies to provide desired development to the people, particularly the poor and marginalized, participatory approaches have been advocated for and considered suitable vehicles for pro-poor development and poverty reduction. Over the years, many methods and tools such as the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) have been developed to enhance people’s participation in development practice.

The aim of this study was to discuss the importance and limitations of participation in development practice. The paper is divided into five parts. Firstly, a brief historical perspective of the concept of participation is discussed. The second part will discuss PRA as a set of tools used to enhance participatory processes and thirdly, the core arguments made in support of the importance of participation are discussed. Part four highlights critical limitations of participation in development practice and lastly, we provide personal recommendations and conclusion.

2. Historical Perspective of Participation

Since the late 1970s, there has been a range of definitions for participation. [1] says, “participation [...] refers to an empowering process that enables people to take command and do things themselves” while the [2] sees participation as “a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them”.

The main goal of development is to improve the quality of life for people, particularly for the poor and marginalized in society. For over 50 years now, literature records that participation was already an issue in the early initiatives of development assistance to undeveloped countries. As years went by, the need to involve local people in efforts to improve community development was sought.

Since then, there have been a number of shifts in perspectives with regard to how participation was to be implemented. According to [3,4,5,6,7], community development in the 1960s built the infrastructure of rural and urban communities. It developed local skills and

abilities and encouraged local people to play a part in and take some responsibility for supporting and implementing a range of physical infrastructure works.

Nevertheless, while community development as a basic strategy of community involvement persisted in the 1970s, another need to shift focus began to emerge. Changing analyses and examinations of underdevelopment in the late 1970s and 1980s by scholars and practitioners accelerated the demand for a new way of looking at participation. This led to a call for people's participation in development projects. From the 1990s onwards, participation became a worldwide phenomenon in most development interventions.

3. Participatory Rural Appraisal as Tool for Participation

PRA methods, according to [8] Chambers include, "mapping and modeling, transect walks, matrix scoring, well-being grouping and ranking, seasonal calendars, institutional diagramming, trend and change analysis, and analytical diagramming, all undertaken by local people. Among many applications, PRA has been used in natural resources management (soil and water conservation, forestry, fisheries, wildlife, village planning, etc) agriculture, health, nutrition, food security and programs for the poor".

Before being called PRA, [8,9] explains that it was initially known as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) in reaction to the lengthy and expensive survey research. However, in the mid 1980s, RRA made way for PRA which is acclaimed to be empowering, a process of appraisal, analysis and action by local people themselves. When working with PRA, the researcher or outsider hands over the stick and takes the role of facilitator and convener and assumes the role of a catalyst to enable people undertake and share their own investigations and analysis. PRA is a source of useful information for institutions like governments, NGOs and other development agencies with its principles revolving around continuous and open ended learning.

4. The Importance of Participation

Expressing the importance attached to participation, [10] reveal that "the World Bank has allocated close to US\$80 billion to participatory development projects at the local level over the last decade. Other development agencies – bilateral donors and regional development banks, have, in all probably, spent at least as much as have the governments of most developing countries". Further, in his 1998 annual meeting speech as president of the World Bank, James D. Wolfensohn remarked; "participation matters - not only as a means of improving development effectiveness, as we know from our recent studies, but as the key to long-term sustainability and leverage. We must never stop reminding ourselves that it is up to the government and its people to decide what their priorities should be. We must never stop reminding ourselves that we cannot and should not impose development by fiat from above, or from abroad" [11,12].

4.1. Participation Increases Efficiency and Sustainability

The participation of community members is assumed to contribute to enhanced efficiency and effectiveness in development implementation. [13,14] when reviewing World Bank studies found that investments in participation tended to pay off in terms of increased efficiency and sustainability of development interventions. Equally, after using participatory methods in the development work of the SPEECH project in India, [15] observed that "in Kottam district, participation had engendered a sense of ownership over both participatory processes and PRA tools, which had given community members the skills and confidence to use PRA after SPEECH withdrew".

4.2. Participation Leads to Empowerment

Some proponents of participatory development argue that participation is both a means and an end and promotes processes of democratization and empowerment. [16] states; "participation is empowering and enables local people to do their own analysis, to take commend, to gain confidence, and to make their own decisions". Similarly, [12] notes that "in the broadest sense, participation may be thought of as an instrument of empowerment, where development should lead to an equitable sharing of power and to a higher level of people's, in particular the weaker groups', political awareness and strengths. Any project or development activity is then a means of empowering people so that they are able to initiate actions on their own and thus influence the processes and outcomes of development".

4.3. Participation Enhances Achievement of Development Goals

Through participation, various communities around the world and particularly in developing countries have managed to initiate, implement and improve their livelihoods. [10] hold a view that local participation has become the means to achieve a variety of goals such as poverty targeting, improved public service delivery, better maintained infrastructure, greater voice and social cohesion and strengthening accountability in government. Further, [17] review that "studies of agricultural development show that participatory platforms such as farmer field schools and farmer research teams not only support a wide range of production outcomes but also point to broad socio-economic benefits, including empowerment".

4.4. Participation Transforms the Development Actors' Paradigms

The process of participation can cause paradigm shifts among its users. An Indian project staff remarked; "PRA enabled us as project staff to see ourselves differently, and place our partners (community) at the centre. It helped us to recognize their analytical abilities, and their expertise and coping mechanisms. We realized that we did not understand the depth of the problems or their root causes. In our context, PRA helped the people become the masters

of their own development” [15]. In this case, participation creates spaces of innovative development for people.

5. Limitations of Participation

There has been increasing demand for participation in development action for many years. However, the support for participation has not gone without criticism. Some scholars and development practitioners have argued that those who support and advocate for participation have not been critical, thus, creating unnecessary and practically oriented challenges in implementing the participatory approach. [18,19] observes that “participation has therefore become an act of faith in development, something we believe in and rarely question. This act of faith is based on three main tenets: that participation is intrinsically a ‘good thing’; that a focus on ‘getting the techniques right’ is the principal way of ensuring the success of such approaches; and that considerations of power and politics on the whole should be avoided as divisive and obstructive”.

5.1. Participation Lacks Proof to Cause Empowerment and Sustainability

The argument that the engagement of the poor in development activities would result into empowerment and sustainability of projects has been contended. In essence, most evaluations do not find strong support for empowerment and sustainability of development interventions on the part of the poor and marginalized. Therefore, it becomes difficult to claim and prove that participation lead to empowerment and sustainable development. [18] argues that, “it is often unclear exactly ‘who’ is to be empowered, is it the individual, the ‘community’ or categories of people such as ‘women’, the ‘poor’ or the ‘socially excluded’. The scope of and limitations on the empowering effects of any project are little explored; the attribution of causality and impact within the project alone is problematic”.

5.2. Participation Fails to Resolve the Power Relations Problem

[14] suggests that questions of power relations must be taken seriously in participatory processes because neither are they systematic, totalizing and irresistible in the sense expressed by some of participation’s detractors. The process of participation fails to address conflicting interests that occur between and among the researchers, the poor, and development agencies. Although different PRA methods are used in attempt to resolve such matters, there is no agreement. In fact, different factors such as culture, social status and religious inclinations influence the attitudes and behaviors of the participants in both private and public domains. [10] argue that without firm inducement to make everyone participate, a few wealthy and politically connected and usually men will always lead in making important decisions in community meetings at the expense of the poor.

There are further problems with PRA processes that even undermine the community. [19], observe that

“people’s knowledge is also used to advance and legitimize the project’s own development agenda, or even to negotiate its participatory approach with other stakeholders such as funders, technical consultants, and senior management. The fact that PRA information has been set as a new scientific standard by donor and other agencies does not, in itself, democratize power in programme decision-making. Participatory approaches and methods also serve to represent external interests as local needs, dominant interests as community concerns, and so forth”.

5.3. Participation Works Well with Small Projects

Whenever participation is discussed, it is mainly with reference to small scale development projects for the rural and urban poor in sectors such as agriculture, natural resources management, micro credit, education and health management at local levels. [20] notes that “in discourses around sustainable rural development, participation has become a widely advocated methodological principle for intervention practice, and a range of participatory methodologies and techniques have been proposed in order to operationalize it”. This is a crucial weakness because the problems that affect communities are in many ways of bigger magnitudes. To have improved standards of living, communities need transformed systems in road and transport, national electricity grids, national policies, and other capital programs. The engagement of the poor is not practical at these levels. In many cases, the poor lack special skills and expertise to deliberate in such programs.

5.4. PRA Tools are usually over Praised

There is general consideration in the development arena that PRA tools are indeed useful instruments for development action, but many times, it seems they are overrated. [21,26] argue that one obvious problem is the tendency to essentialise and romanticize PRA. As development agencies enter communities to facilitate programs, they seemingly hold a notion that the members of the community are equal and living in harmony which is not the case. [18,22,27,28] point out that some development practitioners excel in perpetuating the myth that members of the community through PRA tools can achieve everything and assert that the missing link is mobilizing them before their latent capacities are unleashed in the interests of development.

6. Recommendations

In spite of the many limitations argued against the participatory approaches, practitioners and scholars alike, need to continue to work together and unpack the concept for the benefit of the fight against world poverty.

6.1. Participation as an Alternative to Development

Participation should not be expected to solve all the development problems. As [13,20,21,23,24] states, “there

are many kinds of participation, not all of them relevant or effective for all tasks. It makes no sense to think in terms of achieving maximum participation, since participating in decision-making or implementation, for instance, entails costs as well as benefits". Essentially, development is a multidimensional phenomenon and will always require a multifaceted approach to effectively tackle it.

Over the years, the participation paradigm has become a new science of investigating poverty and development. Therefore, both the proponents and critics of participation should in the first place accept that like any other development approach, participation has a part to play. This is despite its likely limitations. If participation works well with small projects for instance, it should be employed and maximized. Nevertheless, there is need to harmonize the various opportunities and technical limitations faced in its current applications.

6.2. Participation must Draw Its Boundaries Clearly

Many critics have raised important arguments that participatory development lacks credibility and that in most cases has nothing to point at as its own success. For instance, strong criticism is made around the claims that participation leads to empowerment of the poor, sustainability and that it resolves the power-relation problems at community level. These are very difficult aspects of development to measure given the dynamics of the development arena and the nature of human action. So, in as much as participation may be considered as crucial, it may be practical for users of this approach to accept this complexity. Thus, setting clear boundaries regarding what can be and what cannot be achieved with participation is going to be important and increase validity claims.

6.3. Participation as Catalyst for Knowledge and Skills Transfer

Since participation is a process of engaging, negotiating, consulting, tolerating, and learning, it is important that both the community and the development agencies or researchers take an open approach. This means stakeholders should keep an attitude of desiring to learn from each other as they move towards attaining specific development objectives. The benefits become two-way in this regard. [25] state that "the local people must be considered as the site of empowerment and hence as a locus of knowledge generation and development intervention".

7. Conclusion

This essay has shown the different arguments put forward for and against participation in development practice. Taking it for what it is, the participatory approach can yield positive gains through information generated from it and used to inform policy-making and management of development interventions including projects, programmes and policies.

Finally, PRA has been described as a set of instruments for development with great potential for the poor and

marginalized communities to tackle poverty. However, those involved in development debates and practice should shape it and make it a better tool for development action. Care should be taken not to use and abuse PRA to serve the needs of outsiders, such as the government or consultants. In addition, participants should also be careful not to get carried away and ignore its pitfalls. PRA's potential and pitfalls should be thoroughly analyzed and managed. Otherwise, participation is important in development practice.

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