

# Beneficiary, Consumer, Citizen:

Changing Perspectives on Participation for Poverty Reduction

BY ANDREA CORNWALL



**‘Participation’, ‘Empowerment’, ‘Partnership’ – these are often heard concepts in the development discourse. As Andrea Cornwall in Sida Studies no. 2 critically traces attributed meanings, arguments**

**and practices through the past decades, she simultaneously puts forward arguments as to whether and when they actually contain seeds for change.**

## FROM THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the 1970s, a series of high-level declarations of support for ‘popular participation’ by international development organisations carved out a part for the poor in the development process. From engagement in policy formulation to broader processes of governance, ‘popular participation’ sought to give poor people a chance to exert greater influence and control over the decisions and institutions that affected their lives. Over twenty years later, similar professions of participatory intent are once more development headlines. As international financial institutions call for the ‘empowerment of the poor’ and governments are enjoined to seek the participation of ‘all stakeholders’ in policy formulation on poverty reduction, participation has come of age.

The study takes the declarations of intent and arguments for participation made in the 1970s as a starting point for exploring changing perspectives on participation for poverty reduction over the last two decades. It tracks the emergence of anti-poverty and poverty reduction measures that sought, often through the instrumental use of participation, to give the poor a part in initiatives designed for their benefit. In doing so, it seeks to disentangle some of the meanings that have come to be associated with ‘participation’, ‘partnership’ and ‘empowerment’.

Seen as a central pillar of the basic needs approach in the 1970s, ‘popular participation’ sought to transform development practice by involving people in projects intended to bene-

fit them. The embrace of ‘civil society’ and emergence of a new language of participation within the context of liberalisation gave rise to a landscape of interventions in which participation was seen in very different terms. With the convergence of mainstream neo-liberalism with participatory development, ‘beneficiaries’ came to be seen as having a more active role to play as consumers of development projects and policies.

By the late 1980s, a generalised consensus had taken root that saw participation in development projects as necessary and desirable to ensure their efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability. The advent of a new methodology, PRA, answered the quest for new technical solutions to meet the challenge of operationalising participation in the early 1990s. The emergence and spread of PRA gave rise to a spectrum of meanings and practices, with implications for equity, representation and voice. Taking up some of the concerns that emerged in a period where the rush to scale up participation created waves of training that sought to apply the ‘magic bullet’ of PRA to development ills, the paper discusses some of the dilemmas of institutionalising participation. In doing so, it explores the implications of a shift towards rendering the contested arenas of decision-making and design of projects and policies amenable to techniques and technicalities, and with it the formidable barriers posed by the nature of development institutions themselves.

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Taking stock of efforts to 'do participation' during the 1990s, the paper points to some of the complexities at stake. Unpacking terms like 'the poor', 'primary stakeholders' and 'women', that have gained such an insistent presence in mainstream development narratives, it explores some of the implications of participation and non-participation in development initiatives. As is evident from agency documentation, these categories are rarely situated in terms of their particularities and differences. Demythologising the notion of 'full participation', the paper argues for greater clarity about who participates, in what and how.

In drawing out some of the complexities of participation in practice, the paper highlights some of its paradoxes. One of these paradoxes is inherent in the project approach to development itself. Despite decades of critique, it would seem that rumours of its demise have been exaggerated: like a phoenix, project-based development appears poised to rise out of the ashes of the 1990s, lifted by the gust of change that Community Driven Development promises. Yet the spillage of participatory initiatives beyond the domain of the project served as a powerful prompt to provoke the realisation that participation was not simply about micro-level interventions, but had macro-level implications.

This, in turn, generates a further paradox. As the 'voices of the poor' are solicited in ef-

forts to gather their views to feed policy makers, critical concerns emerge about the moral claims to authenticity embodied in initiatives such as Participatory Poverty Assessments. The study discusses recent moves to recognise the politics of the policy process, and with it the inherently normative and contested domain of policy, where simply feeding in information is unlikely to open spaces for the emergence of alternatives. Moving beyond the terrain of policy-making into the ways in which participatory mechanisms have been used to hold policy implementers to account, the study explores new directions for participation within the context of the 'good governance' agenda and the recent turn to a rights-based approach to development.

The study concludes that while 'invited participation' has opened up spaces for popular engagement in the development process, the challenge ahead lies in recognising that poverty and exclusion cannot be tackled simply by enlisting participants in projects, programmes or processes. Nor do the answers lie in an uncritical celebration of 'people's organisations' as the new intermediaries. Rather greater attention needs to be paid both to enabling people to make and shape their own spaces for engagement and to processes to enhance the accountability of local and global institutions that affect people's lives. With this, participation comes to mean more than taking up invitations extended by others. \*

## NOTES ON THE AUTHOR

Andrea Cornwall is a Fellow in Participation and Development at the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton. A social anthropologist by training, she has worked in participatory development as a practitioner and researcher over the last decade, principally in the health sector. She has published on gender and participatory development, men and masculinities, performance and participation, accountability through participation in the

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