

# Beneficiary, Consumer, Citizen:

Perspectives on Participation for Poverty Reduction

BY ANDREA CORNWALL



‘Participation’, ‘Empowerment’, ‘Partnership’ – these are often heard concepts in the development discourse. As Andrea Cornwall 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.





## **Beneficiary, Consumer, Citizen:**

Perspectives on Participation for Poverty Reduction

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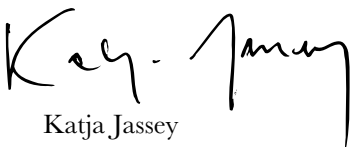
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## Foreword by Sida

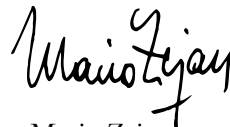
Sida has been a strong advocate of the inclusion and participation of poor women and men in development activities for more than 20 years. We have supported a number of institutions and organisations in their efforts to promote and learn from participatory development and have been actively engaged in discussions on this topic with other bilateral and multi-lateral development agencies.

With the proliferation of participatory approaches, and the apparent success story of poor peoples' participation in mainstream development, it has become increasingly clear that there is a need to put the machinery on hold for a moment. We must 'look back in order to look forward' as the last chapter of this study says. We need to stand back and give careful consideration to what we, and others, have done, are doing and claim to be doing.

It is Sida's intention to continue to look forward. The goal is that the stakeholders who have the most at stake, i.e. poor women and men, shall be able to exert an influence over the choices we make in terms of priorities, strategies, directions and partners. We hope that this paper will help us understand how social, political and economic contexts have an impact on and are influenced by the various participatory approaches and their advocates. This understanding is essential if we are to strive towards clarity about the purpose and content of participatory development. We need this clarity to enable us to transform today's rhetoric into tomorrow's reality. It is also hoped that this paper will help not only ourselves but that it will be of use to a wider audience interested in this subject.



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# 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 paper 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 explores the ways in which participation discourses dovetailed with and departed from mainstream development thinking, and examines the practices associated with ‘community participation’, ‘participatory development’ and ‘participation in development’ over this period. 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’.

Within the shifting landscape of development, the paper suggests, diverse and divergent purposes and intentions came to shape the embrace of ‘participation’ by mainstream development. 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 benefit 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 par-

ticipation 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.

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 efforts 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. Discussing new conceptions of citizenship and new perspectives on rights, it explores the challenges and possibilities of (re)focusing attention on participation as a right, and as the fundamental precondition for claiming and realising other rights.

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.



## Introduction

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, calls for more active engagement of poor people in development have come of age. Participation in development has gained a new respectability and legitimacy, and with it the status of development orthodoxy. For some, the proliferation of the language of ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ within the mainstream is heralded as the realisation of a long-awaited paradigm shift in development thinking. For others, however, there is less cause for celebration. Their concerns centre on the use of participation as a legitimating device that draws on the moral authority of claims to involve the poor to place the pursuit of other agendas beyond reproach. According to this perspective, much of what is hailed as ‘participation’ is a mere technical fix that leaves inequitable global and local relations of power, and with it the root causes of poverty, unchallenged.<sup>1</sup>

The widespread adoption of the language of participation and the scale on which some of the methods associated with participation are now used would seem at first sight to offer evidence of a sea change in development practice. Looking back over the last three decades, there appear to have been a series of clear shifts. Calls for ‘popular participation’ of the poor and excluded to gain access to and control over development resources and benefits in the 1970s appear to have been slowly, and incrementally, heeded. The domestication of participation in ‘projects with people’ in the 1980s and the rapid rise in popularity of the use of participatory approaches in projects and programmes in the 1990s bear witness to a rising wave of interest in participation. Over the last decade, forms of invited participation have multiplied, expanding into spheres – such as policy reform – that were once almost completely closed off to legitimate

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1. See, for example, Rahnema (1995), Rahman (1995), Leal and Opp (1999).

public involvement. The ‘scaling out’ and ‘scaling up’ (Gaventa, 1998) of participation throughout the 1990s would suggest a growing acceptance of an alternative approach to development.

Looking at these shifts, a compelling storyline emerges: one in which consensus on the importance of participation gradually grew and spread from the margins of development practice to the very heart of the development mainstream. Yet closer inspection of the uses and understandings of ‘participation’ and associated terms such as ‘empowerment’ over the course of these three decades would suggest a rather different story. Set within a broader context of currents in poverty-focused development assistance, this paper traces discourses of participation over this period. It highlights both the striking similarities in these discourses and just as striking differences that emerge in the ways in which key terms and concepts have come to be redefined. Taking a closer look at practice, the paper explores some of the implications of the embrace of participation, asking who participates, in what and how. Setting these questions within the new arenas for participation that have emerged in the last decade, it concludes by highlighting contrasts and continuities in participation discourses and their implications. Partial and preliminary as this review inevitably is, given constraints of time and scope, it seeks to begin to identify a preliminary series of entry points for further analysis aimed at closing the gap between rhetoric and practice, which are explored in the final sections of the paper.<sup>2</sup>

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2. I was commissioned to spend three weeks identifying, analysing and attempting to synthesise an enormous body of literature to produce this preliminary review. Given time constraints it is necessarily neither comprehensive nor representative. While some primary source material was consulted, accessible archival sources were found to be limited. This review, therefore, relies heavily on secondary sources for the period of the 1970s in particular, and to some extent the 1980s and 1990s. My own positionality in these debates is not simply as an observer, but from engagement in participatory development for over a decade, principally as a critical practitioner of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). This has inevitably shaped my understanding of many of the issues raised in this paper.



# Echoes from the Past? Perspectives on Participation in the 1970s

## CHAPTER 1

The mid-1970s witnessed a profusion of high-level commitments to what was then termed ‘popular participation’. As the ‘basic needs’ approach to development came to be defined, with the shift from capital formation to human resource development, the scene, it seems, was set for change. The welter of declarations that emerged in this period promised a decisive shift, away from top-down, technocratic and economic interventions towards greater popular involvement in the development process. Taking these statements of intent as a starting point, this chapter explores emergent versions of participation and their resonance with contemporary debates.

### 1.1 Statements of Intent

As a central pillar of the basic needs approach to development, ‘popular participation’ gained prominent support in the 1970s. Donor governments passed legislation and defined goals that put ‘popular participation’ on their agendas. The US Foreign Assistance Act, passed in 1973, argued for American aid to involve intended beneficiaries in planning and implementation of projects, and in sharing the gains of development; an array of bilateral aid agencies followed suit in pledging commitment to this intention (Cohen and Uphoff 1980). In 1978, the Swedish Parliament adopted the goal of ‘democratic development’ and stated that it should comprise broad popular participation in the development process at all levels.

At the same time, a number of international organisations passed declarations that further supported the move towards popular participation. In 1975, the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) urged governments to:

...adopt popular participation as a basic policy measure in national development strategy... [and] encourage the widest possible active participation of all individuals and national non-government organisations in the development process, in setting goals, formulating policies and implementing plans. (cited in Cohen and Uphoff, 1980:213)

A 1978 ILO strategy paper, cited by Cohen and Uphoff (1980), argued that 'participation is by itself a basic need' (ILO 1978:2), further embedding participation in the basic needs approach.

Two major World Conferences offered support for this new agenda. The 1976 World Employment Conference issued a programme of action that included 'the participation of the people in making the decisions which affect them through organisations of their own choice' (ILO 1977:25). The World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCCARD), in 1979, agreed the following definition:

Participation by the people in the institutions and systems which govern their lives is a basic human right and also essential for realignment of political power in favour of disadvantaged groups and for social and economic development. (cited in Oakley 1995:3)

The WCCARD statement emphasised the involvement of rural people at the grassroots in the conceptualisation and design of policies as well as programmes, and in creating administrative and social, as well as economic, institutions that could implement and evaluate them.

Comparing these statements from the 1970s with current thinking, the feeling of *déjà vu* is overwhelming. They contain direct echoes of contemporary rhetoric and all the 'right' language. Here we find talk of people participating in decisions that affect their lives (cf. Blackburn et al. 1999), people making those decisions through organisations of their own choosing (cf. World Bank 2000), and policies being formulated through the widest possible engagement of individuals and non-governmental organisations (cf. Tandon and Cordeiro 1998). Participation 'by the people' is defined not just as a basic need, but as a basic human right (cf. Rudqvist 1993, DFID 2000). Popular participation is advocated not only in projects and programmes, but also in evaluation, priority setting, policy design and implementation: indeed, the very issues that participation debates in recent years have centred around (see, for example, Holland with Blackburn 1998, Estrella et al. 2000, McGee with Norton 2000).

The documents of the 1970s contain more than echoes of contemporary discourses on participation. They also offer insights that, again, seem

to have considerable currency. Two passages, both written in 1974, are particularly interesting in this respect. The first reflects on the advantages of a form of development practice that has become pervasive in intervening decades:

Self-help efforts, usually associated with the establishment of village development committees in former British Africa, can serve a wide variety of purposes. The notion of self-reliance and local participation in development can mobilise the rural populace, provide the masses with a broader understanding of the national development effort, and increase support for the regime. Demands for provision of increased services may be met with minimal investments of central government funds. Village development committees build such things as school teachers' houses... all with voluntary labour and for the most part with local materials. Such projects may be economic and actually improve the quality of life in rural areas. All three functions tend to be supportive of the regime. (1) delaying the need for allocation of government funds. (2) by generating mass participation. (3) by diverting local demands for development from the central government to local initiative... From the perspective of the administrator... participation becomes... highly desirable. (Vengroff 1974:304)

Vengroff's account would seem to parallel much of the contemporary practice of participation, particularly the emphasis on creating and strengthening local institutions in order to increase their involvement in the management of resources and delivery of services. The echoes of colonialism in his account gain contemporary salience in the embrace of similar mechanisms for purposes that remain far from distant from colonial antecedents. As Ribot argues, participation through non-representative and unaccountable committees of this kind might be well be viewed as a 'modern reproduction of indirect rule when it uses non-state authorities to legitimate and carry out external projects of the state and international organisations' (1996:44). Indeed, the persuasive logic of Vengroff's argument might not have been lost on some of today's advocates for 'community-driven development'.

The second passage, from an influential book on managing rural development by Chambers, offers a series of insights into issues that, again, have considerable contemporary relevance:

The way in which words are used in the rhetoric of self-reliance and participation encourages the idea that increased participation will mean a more democratic, egalitarian and equitable society...[Yet] There are many ways

in which “participation” accentuates inequity. Greater local participation in planning tends to widen regional inequalities. It favours those areas which are better able to produce plans and to implement them... Participation in planning is also likely to mean plans drawn up either by civil servants or by civil servants together with a few members of the local elite. Participation in development committees can mean that those who are already well off approve projects and programmes which favour and support those who are already well off. Participation in self-help labour can mean that the women, already overworked, turn out while the men find excuses. Participation through “voluntary” contributions can mean an income-regressive flat rate tax which hits the poorest hardest; and failure to pay... may be penalised through the denial of public services. (Chambers 1974:108-9)

Read in the context of initiatives such as Social Investment Funds and ‘community-driven development’, Chambers’ analysis provides a salutary caution that resonates with the assessments of other more contemporary commentators (see, for example, Siri 1996, Abbot and Covey 1996).

## 1.2 Making a Case for Participation

### 1.2.1 *Efficiency and Effectiveness*

The arguments made for participation in the 1960s and 1970s form three distinct tributaries. The first, based on increasing evidence that projects stood a better chance of success if people were involved more directly in them (see, for example, Lele 1975), argued for participation on grounds of efficiency, effectiveness and equity of access to benefits. This position is perhaps best illustrated by a strand of World Bank thinking that began to emerge in the 1970s, as poverty-focused lending began to emphasise access by the poor to project benefits. Paul, for example, reports operational guidelines from this era that stressed reporting and monitoring of impact on poverty alleviation, and included advocacy of local involvement as ‘simpler, less costly’ and as engendering ‘a greater commitment to implementing the project and achieving its objectives’ (1987:62). This argument came to gain increasing legitimacy over the following decades, to the point at which it has become a virtual truism. Stated and restated, time and again, it emerges in virtually identical form over three decades in the documents of the same institutions.<sup>3</sup>

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3. To give an example: the 1975 study that first argued the case to the World Bank for people’s involvement in projects (Lele 1975) was echoed, almost directly, in a 1985 review of World Bank projects (OED 1985) and again in World Bnk (1988). In 1994, an evaluation of World Bank »

### 1.2.2 Self-Determination

The second set of arguments arose directly from the struggles of popular movements of the 1960s and 1970s for rights, recognition and a more equitable distribution of resources. The broader vision of participation embraced by the influential United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) research programme on popular participation, initiated in the late 1970s, defines participation as:

The organised efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations on the part of groups and movements hitherto excluded from such control. (Pearse and Stiefel 1979, cited in Stiefel and Wolfe 1994:5)

This vision of participation is less about institutions involving their users or clients in the design or delivery of programmes, than about the kinds of social change that are needed for self-determination and self-governance. These ‘organised efforts to increase control’, then, are not only about informing or collaborating with the institutions that determine projects and policies, but being able to make, rather than simply seek to influence, the decisions that matter. Resonant as it remains with the ‘alternative development’ school, and particularly with its emphasis on self-determination (see Rahnema 1994, Rahman 1995), contemporary echoes of aspects of this position can be found across a spectrum of mainstream development institutions.

### 1.2.3 Mutual Learning

A third argument for participation is captured in a powerful statement made by Julius Nyerere:

Rural development is the participation of people in a mutual learning experience involving themselves, their local resources, external change agents and outside resources. People cannot be developed; they can only develop themselves by participation and co-operative activities which affect their wellbeing. People are not being developed when they are herded like animals into new ventures. (Nyerere 1968, cited in Oakley et al. 1991:2).

Nyerere’s statement asserts the dignity of poor people and at the same

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» financed projects with community participation came to similar conclusions (Gopal and Marc 1994). In countless subsequent documents it emerges as a justification that has gained the status of a truism.

time evokes the responsibilities of those who would work with them to enable them to improve their lives. He affirms the importance of people's engagement as active subjects who participate, co-operate and contribute their own resources to the process of their own development. Yet he also recognises the role of external resources and agents of change in facilitating development processes. Casting participation as a mutual learning experience, Nyerere's argument resonates with the widespread adoption in recent years of a form of participatory development that focuses on enhancing communication, respect, listening and learning between development workers and those they serve (see, for example, Chambers 1983, 1997).

### 1.3 For, By and With 'The People': Three Perspectives on Participation

From these trajectories, a set of perspectives on participation might be identified. In the first, people participate as the 'beneficiaries' of development and are called upon to help make contributions to interventions that are intended to benefit them, so as to increase the effectiveness of these interventions. Participation is done *for* people: it often consists in people being invited to take part in consultative processes and enjoined to play a role in shouldering costs, for their own good. The second argument turns the tables in positioning participation as a process owned and controlled *by* those whom development is supposed to benefit. As such, it can be associated with broader struggles for democracy and equity, in which the otherwise excluded participate in order to gain rights over and entitlements to resources. The third position emphasises the need for a closer relationship between those who work in development and those whom it is intended to benefit. Participation involves working *with* people, rather than on or for them.

As I go on to suggest, what appear here as three distinctively different kinds of argument emerge in later versions of participation in forms that either merge features of them, or offer 'both/and' versions. Against this backdrop of contrasting perspectives on participation and apparent continuities between the discourses of the 1970s and the 1990s, the following sections trace some of the principal themes of the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. Focusing in more depth on the visions and versions of participation that emerged over this period, I situate changes in thinking and practice within a wider context of shifting discourses of development.

# 'Projects with People': Perspectives on Participation in the 1980s

## CHAPTER 2

Influenced by community development initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s, 'community participation' became a channel through which 'popular participation' began to be actualised in the mainstream development initiatives of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Colonial community development had sought to 'modernise' its subjects, transferring technologies that sought not only to secure compliance with their particular vision of rural development but also to fashion them into 'good citizens'.<sup>4</sup> So too 'community participation' came to serve as a means to enlist people in initiatives geared at similar goals.

### 2.1 Contrasting Visions of 'Community Participation'

A glance at the project literature from within mainstream donor and lending agencies from this period reveals a wide spectrum of views about what exactly 'community participation' entailed in practice. The very discontinuities that rapidly become evident indicate the co-existence of divergent, even competing, understandings within the same donor agency. These differences notwithstanding, 'community participation' came to be associated in the mainstream primarily with the sharing of benefits by the poor, project efficiency, project cost-sharing and increasing project effectiveness (see, for example, Paul 1987, Bamberger 1986). In the process,

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4. The roots of many of the initiatives that emerged as part of international agencies' 'community participation' projects and programmes can be traced directly to the colonial era. In colonial Congo, for example, the Belgian authorities instituted a programme aimed at inculcating in women domestic habits and domesticated identities, as an attempt to deal with the perceived problem of unruly 'femmes libres' (Hunt 1991). In Kenya, the establishment of a community development unit in 1954, served to address the concerns of the colonial government with women's activism in nationalist struggles by attending to the needs they expressed about access to basic services (Presley 1988).

‘the people’ were recast as targeted ‘beneficiaries’ of anti-poverty initiatives. And, as ‘beneficiaries’, they were enlisted and enjoined to participate in development programmes and projects designed by others to benefit them, as a matter of pragmatism rather than principle: to achieve cost-effectiveness, compliance and sustainability.

Yet the 1980s also saw the rise of popular organisations for whom ‘participation’ implied an entirely different set of understandings and practices. The distinction between ‘participatory development’ and ‘people’s self-development’ (Rahman 1995) came to capture the tension between mainstream and alternative approaches to development. Within the mainstream, participation was largely seen as a means to involve people in activities initiated by development agencies or the state. In contrast, ‘people’s self-development’ involved a process of collective action and mobilisation that could lead to self-reliant development and the capacity to negotiate on new terms with those with power, including the state (Stiefel and Wolfe 1994).

Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (1972), this alternative approach was taken up by adult educators and gave rise to the Participatory Action Research (PAR) movement (Hall 1993). PAR placed an emphasis on living with the people and working to ‘animate’ critical analysis so as to enable people to articulate their own identities and concerns, and on mobilisation through collective action. The use of folk media, oral histories and problem-posing methods to enable oppressed and marginalised people to reclaim their agency and assert their identities (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991) challenged the authority of conventional forms of ‘expertise’ and the guise of professional neutrality that cloaked conventional development solutions (Gaventa 1993). Approaches such as Development Leadership Teams in Action (DELTA), originating in East Africa (Hope et al. 1984), sought to enhance people’s capacity to develop themselves through critical analysis and leadership training. From early experiments in the 1970s, theatre workers drew on similar principles to engage people’s creativity in analysing their situations and enacting their visions for change (Boal 1979, Mda 1993, Abah 1997).<sup>5</sup>

Until the mid-1980s, ‘participatory development’ and ‘people’s self-development’ remained relatively discrete. Indeed, the alternative development perspective was articulated in active opposition to the technocratic tendencies of mainstream ‘community participation’. Yet, as neo-liberal economic policies began to take hold, a curious confluence was to emerge.

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5. The diversity of practices associated with what has come to be termed ‘Theatre for Development’ is considerable, and goes beyond the scope of this review (see Epskamp 1989).



As the discourse of grassroots self-reliance and self-help met the exigencies of neo-liberal economic reforms in the 1980s, ‘do it by yourself’ became ‘do it for yourself’. In this emergent paradigm, all of the three perspectives on and arguments for participation identified earlier were to find a place.

## 2.2 From ‘Do it By Yourself’ to ‘Do it For Yourself’

The 1970s emphasis on self-sufficiency gained a new resonance in the context of prescriptions for rolling back the state in the 1980s. No longer simply the passive recipients of the benefits of development assistance, ‘beneficiaries’ were increasingly seen as more active participants in implementation, and increasingly in meeting the costs of development. The World Bank Health Sector Policy Paper of 1980 captures the ways in which ‘community participation’ came to be cast: as a means of eliciting self-help in the construction of facilities, contribution of material inputs, co-operative mechanisms to finance drug purchase and unpaid volunteer workers. This was to give rise, over the course of the following decade, to the growth of cost recovery, co-financing and co-management schemes, such as the Bamako Initiative (Knippenberg et al. 1997). Some were to argue that ‘participation’ in this form might be better described as taxation (see, for example, Salole 1991); such initiatives have continued to raise concerns about issues of equity, both in terms of where the burden of contributing falls and their implications for access to services.<sup>6</sup>

The confluence of interest in self-reliance and self-provisioning in the ‘do it yourself’ ethos of 1980s brought together distinctively different perspectives. For some, it meant that services that were formerly the provenance of the state could be taken over by local people, shunting costs away from government. For others, the increasing role of local institutions offered the promise of giving people a stake in managing the resources and services on which their lives and livelihoods depended. Both of these perspectives came to shape emergent initiatives, which in turn embodied a range of interpretations of ‘participation’. With this came an apparent paradox. On the one hand, the instrumental use of participation was regarded by some as a way of serving other agendas, such as neutralising grassroots resistance to reforms (Rahman 1995). Striking echoes of Vengroff’s colonial perspective emerge, for example, in a UNICEF report from the late 1980s, which argues for community participation as

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6. A continuing concern with these initiatives, one that remains largely unresolved, is the question of exemptions from payment for the poorest (Nolan and Turbat, 1995, Galland 1997).

‘an essential ingredient’ of structural adjustment ‘with a human face’:

On the one hand, it can help generating the political support needed to overcome short-term political and bureaucratic opposition. On the other, it is essential for the planning, implementing, and success of the approaches devised, as well as for keeping the cost of the programmes down by means of community contributions. (Cornia et al. 1987:295)

Yet by recasting users as ‘choosers’ rather than simply as passive recipients, initiatives inspired by neo-liberal concerns also opened up opportunities for more active local engagement in development processes (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000).

During the 1980s, terms that formed part of the discourse of self-reliance of the 1970s gained a rather different resonance. The concept of ‘ownership’ was stripped of any association with a transfer of power and control. Instead, it became associated with people ‘buying in’ to development initiatives intended for their benefit through contributions of cash or kind. Few inroads were made into extending local control beyond implementation. It is perhaps entirely unsurprising that, as Paul’s (1987) review of World Bank experiences reveals, cost-sharing and efficiency emerge as the principal objects of ‘community participation’ initiatives.<sup>7</sup> Barely any attention was paid to two further objectives identified by Paul, which emerge directly from the alternative development current of the 1970s: ‘capacity building’ and ‘empowerment’. Yet over the course of the 1980s, the language of ‘empowerment’ came to gain more visibility in mainstream development discourses. Like ‘ownership’ and ‘participation’, it evoked a feel-good factor amidst considerable vagueness about what exactly was implied.

### 2.3 Beyond the Project?

Amidst rumbling discontent with the straitjacket of the project cycle and its implications for planning (Korten 1980, Chambers 1983), experiences with community participation brought about further questioning of the project approach to development. Bamberger, for example, notes in his 1986 review of World Bank community participation projects, that the project cycle framework:

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7. Where ‘capacity building’ did appear, it was primarily in the guise of support for the formation of user groups, principally in irrigation projects and often as a route to ensuring maintenance of introduced technologies.

... limits the possibilities for discussing community participation as many of the key ways in which communities are involved occur *before* the scope and objectives of the project have been defined (i.e. the community is involved in the initial decisions on resource allocation and choice of types of projects) or *after* the project is completed (evolution of community organisations, sustainability of benefits etc.). (1986:3, original emphasis)

Indeed, a World Bank workshop in 1988 went one step further, concluding that the project approach severely limits the scope for popular participation (World Bank 1988). As with arguments for participation, however, the case needed to be made again and again to impinge on development practice. So axiomatic were some of the assumptions that underlay the project approach, and so embedded was this approach in the entire machinery of development assistance, abandoning it entirely was barely even thinkable. Instead, over the following decade, attempts were made to address precisely the issues Bamberger raises: involving communities more actively in defining projects, both in the identification and appraisal stages and in evaluating their impact.

Concerns about sustainability offer one of the reasons for a renewed emphasis on local institutional development in the mid-1980s (see Esman and Uphoff 1984, Uphoff 1992). Community Involvement in Health (CIH), community-based natural resource management, Joint Forest Management (JFM) and other various other sectoral initiatives emerged in the 1980s as the ‘users as choosers’ (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000) perspective gained ground.

These initiatives spawned thousands of new institutional forms, from sectoral user groups to village development committees, to adhoc committees formed to oversee the outcomes of appraisals. In some places this reached almost absurd proportions: one small West African rural community, for example, was found in the mid-1990s to have some 17 committees (Irene Guijt, pers. comm.). This would seem to confirm Esteva’s complaint that in 1980s-style appropriations of participation, ‘democracy turns into bureaucracy’ (1985:79).

## 2.4 Whose Decisions, Whose Voice?

The use of the term ‘community’ in these initiatives evokes the ideal of a homogeneous social group who would recognise their shared interests and work together harmoniously for the common good. Paul (1987), for example, argues:

Beneficiaries, as individuals, can be made to participate in many ways. Their needs and preferences can often be ascertained through individual interviews and they can be made to share in the project costs individually through a government order. But community participation can be said to occur only when people act in concert to advise, decide or act on issues which can best be solved through joint action. Hence the use of the qualifying term “community”. (1986:45)

Yet as is evident from project documents from this period, traces of concerns that were to re-emerge in the 1990s with issues of equity disrupted some of the romanticism associated with developers’ ideals of harmonious, co-operative communities (see Stirrat 1996). As Guijt and Shah (1998) were to point out, the potent myths of community that informed ‘community participation’ served to deepen the exclusion of some actors, notably women. A prevalent concern in SIDA documents from this period relates directly to the tensions between participation and gender equality objectives (see, for example, Andersson 1985, Larsson 1986, Dayal 1987 and Olsson 1987). Little attention was paid to gender difference in the vast majority of participatory development interventions in the 1980s, mirroring the neglect of women in the mainstream (Moser 1993). The effective exclusion of women from ‘participatory’ projects formed the subject of a number of critiques (see Mosse 1995, Agarwal 1997, for example). Maguire reflects on the implications:

If women had unequal access to project participation, then women no doubt had unequal access to any project benefits. How can you share in the supposed empowerment from a project which continues your silence and marginalization?’ (1996:30)

These issues remain largely unresolved, highlighting a paradox inherent in participatory development: that ‘handing over the stick’ to ‘the community’ might serve, as Chambers (1974) argued, to benefit the already powerful and further marginalise those with little agency or voice.

## **2.5 A Leap of Faith: NGO’s, Participation and the New Policy Agenda**

The 1980s was not only a decade of ‘projects with people’ (Oakley et al. 1991), but also one in which what has been described as an ‘associational revolution’ (Salamon 1993:1) was taking place. Faced with a challenge that appeared virtually insurmountable, a consensus, buttressed by the blos-

soming romance between donors and NGOs (see Hulme and Edwards 1997), emerged that smaller-scale organisations with relative autonomy from the state were better placed to operationalise ‘community participation’. That this was based on a leap of faith, rather than empirical evidence, has been pointed out by a number of commentators (see Oakley 1995, Rudqvist and Woodford-Berger 1996). Indeed, across a spectrum from relief and service delivery organisations to radical people’s movements, NGOs embrace a staggering diversity of understandings and practices when it comes to ‘participation’, including in terms of their own governance and accountability (Tvedt 1998).

Over the course of the 1980s, the exponential growth in NGOs was fuelled by donor funding that was aimed at bolstering their capacity to deliver health, education and credit services to the rural poor (Fowler 1988, Hulme and Edwards 1997). Perceived by mainstream development agencies as ‘more participatory, less bureaucratic, more flexible, more cost-effective, with an ability to reach poor and disadvantaged people’ (Robinson and White 1997:4), NGOs came to take on an increasingly instrumental role in the delivery of development. Significantly, NGOs were also cast as important actors by another discourse on development that was to emerge in the 1980s. The ‘New Policy Agenda’ (Robinson 1993) highlighted the efficiency of markets and private initiative for service provision and economic growth (Moore 1993). Within this, NGOs had a role to play not only in achieving cost-effective delivery of social services, but also in providing welfare to those outside the reach of markets (Fowler 1988). Democratisation and a vibrant civil society were seen as essential to these economic goals (Moore 1993).

The activities of many NGOs overlapped with, and some would say supplanted, those of the state in the delivery of services; their adoption of community participation remained for the most part firmly within the ‘participatory development’ paradigm. The paradoxes of participation were to become increasingly evident as initiatives aimed at enabling communities to ‘own’, manage and provide their own services intensified (see Cleaver 1999). Participatory rhetoric asserted that local people knew best, emphasising the importance of engaging them in making and shaping development initiatives. Yet the strikingly similar form that ‘participatory’ projects of this era took serves as an indication that despite rumours of its demise, the blueprint approach to development was far from dead. The very nature of the choices available to local people were so circumscribed by the processes used to determine avenues for action, that it was barely possible to imagine, let alone articulate, alternatives (Craig and Porter, 1997).

The growth of NGOs engaged in ‘people’s self-development’ over the course of this decade, however, provided an additional spur to efforts to engage people in more active processes of self-determination. As the 1980s gave way to the 1990s, the innovative participatory practices seeded and developed by some of these organisations came to gain greater visibility within the mainstream.

# From Beneficiary to Stakeholder: Participation in the 1990s

## CHAPTER 3

Throughout the 1990s, shifts in development thinking gave rise to the re-casting of familiar terms within an emerging paradigm that lend them new meanings. Consonant with the drive towards economic liberalisation, ‘ownership’ gained a new resonance in a context of the increasing marketisation of public services. With this came the reframing of the concept of ‘empowerment’ as liberation from an interventionist state, providing a direct link between popular participation and economic liberalisation (Leal and Opp 1999). Significant shifts of emphasis in mainstream discourses on participation were to move participation debates beyond the bounds of ‘the community’. Consonant with neo-liberal appropriations of participation, advocacy of participation was extended beyond the realm of projects, dovetailing with mainstream development’s romance with civil society.

### **3.1 Liberation through Liberalisation: The Emergence of a New Participation Discourse**

A close reading of UNDP’s Human Development Report (HDR) of 1993 offers insights into just how far the reshaping of the discourse of popular participation had been taken by the early 1990s. With resounding statements about people’s ‘urge’ to participate, the report situates ‘people’s participation’ as ‘an imperative – a condition of survival’ (1993:99), as ‘an overall development strategy... [that] enables people to gain for themselves access to a much broader range of opportunities’ (1993:21). Economic liberalisation, freedom of association and democratic governance are presented as inextricably intertwined: ‘without one, the others will be incomplete and ineffective’ (HDR 1993:21). Access to a free market economy thus becomes a *sine qua non* of popular participation:

People should guide both the state and the market... actions must be taken to allow people to participate fully in the operations of markets and to share equitably in their benefits... untrammelled by arbitrary and unpredictable government controls. (1993:2)

Placing an emphasis on the role of civil society in providing a check on the controlling tendencies of the state, and on decentralisation as the motor for democratic transformation, the report celebrates routes to 'positive change' in the transition to market economies and privatisation. NGOs and 'people's organisations' are identified as the vehicle for enhancing participation, providing models of good practice for others to follow.

### 3.2 'Empowering the Powerless'

Often associated simply with taking part in development projects and narrowly interpreted in terms of individual gain, the language of 'empowerment' had, by the early 1990s, become comfortably ensconced in the domain of mainstream development. Oakley comments:

... the term 'empowering' has come to be very loosely used to describe any development project, process or activities which might have some impact upon people's abilities to relate to different political and administrative systems; to skills training, management techniques, organisational abilities and so on. Many development projects talk of 'empowering' in the sense of specifically enabling people to cope more effectively with and play a part in the every-day administrative and bureaucratic demands of a development project's life. (1995:6)

In many contexts, participatory development activities sought to 'empower' people by linking participation with economic activities. Drawing on fieldwork in Sri Lanka, Woost suggests that in this setting 'participation' came to be cast as 'the act of partaking in the objectives of the economy, and the societal arrangements related to it' (1997:240). Describing the extensive concern of NGOs with income-generation activities, he goes on to comment:

The... schemes they sponsored were represented to me by staff members in terms of 'empowerment' and 'people's participation'. Such programmes were said to be empowering because they taught individuals how to operate systems of credit successfully and to start their own businesses. This



would in turn create jobs so that others who work for these new entrepreneurs could also take control of their lives. The programmes were said to be participatory because they obtained people's participation in the market-led development strategies. (1997:243)

For some, 'empowerment' had a wider semantic range still. A 1994 World Bank report on best practice in 'people's participation' in environmental assessment in Latin America, for example, gives 'empowering the powerless' as one facet of participation, described thus:

Offering information to the public and decentralised decision-making in government agencies automatically empowers different stakeholders and interest groups, provided final design decisions are not yet taken or if agencies are flexible enough to modify design decisions already taken. (Partridge 1994:10)

The not considerable 'ifs' of this statement aside, a vivid contrast emerges between the implication that offering the public information 'automatically empowers' them and the versions and visions of 'empowerment' that form part of the alternative development discourse (see Friedmann 1992). This is not to say that access to information might not in itself serve as a basis for people to empower themselves (see, for example, Goetz and Jenkins 1999). Nor, indeed, to deny that transparency is a prerequisite for meaningful engagement. But what seems to be lost here is any acknowledgement of the relations of power that might prevent people from taking up, or making use of the political spaces that might be opened up by efforts to 'empower' them. Or, indeed, that 'empowerment' is not something that can be done to people, but something people do by and for themselves.

### **3.3 Partners, Customers, Stakeholders**

Bolstered by a recapitulation of efficiency arguments (Fensterbusch and van Wicklin 1989, Bhatnagar and Williams 1992), the process begun in the 1980s in which 'popular participation' was recast within the broader parameters of neo-liberal thinking had secured its place in the mainstream by the early 1990s. Papers by IMF and World Bank economists sought to theorise popular participation within prevailing economic paradigms, drawing attention to the facilitative role of market mechanisms (see Gerson 1993, Picciotto 1992). Participatory interventions were positively eval-

uated for their cost-effectiveness and cost implications (Hentschel 1994).

In the 1990s, amidst what appears to be widespread agreement that participation was a Good Thing, a new round of definitions and declarations of intent was once again to emerge. In many of them, a new language is evident: that of stakeholders, partners and customers. In the following discussion, I unpack some of these definitions, returning to explore some of the ways in which they came to inform practice.

### **3.3.1 Customer Focus: USAID**

In 1993, USAID Administrator Brian Attwood issued a formal statement of principles on participatory development. In this, and subsequent USAID documents, USAID's 'customer focus' is elaborated (LaVoy 1999). The shift from 'beneficiary' to 'customer' carries with it a cluster of associated meanings: from the implications of a 'customer service' ethos for development practice to the ironies of viewing recipients of aid as active consumers.<sup>8</sup> USAID's statement of principles captures the shift from the project to the broader terrain of participation in development. Arguing that 'there is nothing more basic to the development process than participation', the statement highlights 'broad access by people to their country's economy and participation in their society's decision-making processes' (Attwood 1993:1). Drawing on efficiency arguments, the statement argues for an approach to participation as end and as a means. It focuses not only on the local level but also on the need for social consensus by national governments to carry out and sustain policy change.

With echoes of recent World Bank rhetoric on 'country ownership', USAID's statement puts forward a bold and striking vision of participation in which 'the country' and 'the community' are firmly in the 'driving seat':

It is their country, not ours. It is their community, not ours. We can advise, we can assist, and we can choose not to assist, but the decisions about development priorities and policies must be reached by that society at large, not us... Let us start with that basic truth.... Too often in the past, we in the development business have acquired a stake in a project we have designed and our procedures make it difficult to modify. Sustainable development means that the local recipients have the only stake that counts. (1993:2)

The statement goes on to emphasise ownership, accountability, strengthening the capacity of the poor for self-reliance and partnership.

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8. On this theme, see an interesting e-mail exchange between various commentators and USAID staff in [www.usaid.gov/about/part-devel/docs/anthol6.html](http://www.usaid.gov/about/part-devel/docs/anthol6.html).

Since 1993, USAID has been energetic in promoting fora for participation within the organisations (La Voy 1998), and in making internal discussions available for public inspection (see [www.usaid.gov/about/part\\_devel](http://www.usaid.gov/about/part_devel)).

### **3.3.2 Stakeholders Influencing and Sharing Control:**

#### ***The World Bank's Learning Group on Participation***

A major landmark in the landscape of participation in the 1990s was the work of the World Bank's Learning Group on Participation, initiated with SIDA support in 1991. Giving rise to a wealth of studies and papers exploring different dimensions of popular participation (see especially Bhatnagar and Williams 1992), the Group arrived at the following definition of participation in 1994. Participation is described as a:

... process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources which affect them. (World Bank 1994, cited in Rietbergen-McCracken and Narayan 1998:4)

Here are echoes of the UNRISD definition of 1979 (see section 1.2.2). It is worth, however, noting the shrinking scope of participation: to influencing and sharing, rather than increasing (popular) control, and over development initiatives, decisions and resources rather than in society as a whole. Indeed, as Rudqvist and Woodford-Berger report, internal review within the Bank made some fairly significant substitutions in a statement that originally read: 'a process by which people, especially disadvantaged people, influence decisions that affect them' (cited in Rudqvist and Woodford-Berger 1996:11).

The substitution of 'stakeholder' and insertion of 'development' in this definition transform its meaning. Who are these stakeholders? Rietbergen-McCracken and Narayan include under this umbrella term: 'borrowers (elected officials, line agency staff, local government officials, and so on); directly affected groups (including the poor and disadvantaged); indirectly affected groups (such as NGOs and private sector organisations); and the World Bank management, staff and shareholders' (1998:4-5). Obvious as it is, it is worth pointing out that there may be some differences of opinion and indeed of bargaining power between these groups. Things are complicated enough within communities. The privileging of 'primary stakeholders' in more recent definitions (see Tandon and Cordeiro 1998) has helped to put these issues on the agenda. Yet it remains entirely unclear how the participation of this rather unwieldy collection of actors might actually be managed.

Further insights into the implications of this definition arise when we look more closely at what ‘participation’ is taken to mean. Rietbergen-McCracken and Narayan suggest: ‘Participation can take different forms, ranging from information-sharing and consultation methods, to mechanisms for collaboration and empowerment that give stakeholders more influence and control’ (1998:4). ‘Participation’ is defined, then, in the broadest of terms, extending the reach of previous definitions to encompass information sharing, along with three more commonly found understandings of the term: consultation, collaboration and empowerment. The use of the terms ‘methods’ and ‘mechanisms’ in this description make participation something that is done to or for people by outsider agencies, narrowing the scope of activities to forms of invited participation. ‘Participation’ thus becomes possible to claim if at least some ‘stakeholders’ have been informed about a development project intended to benefit them.

### **3.3.3 Participation as Partnership: OECD**

The definition adopted by the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD in its 1993 guidelines on participatory development and good government draws on the initial version of the World Bank statement. Participation is described as a process by which people take an active and influential hand in shaping decisions that affect their lives. Two justifications are given: that it strengthens civil society and the economy by ‘empowering’ groups, communities and organisations to influence public policy and check the power of government; and that it enhances efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability. These are, of course, directly consonant with the discourse emerging in the 1993 Human Development Report from the UNDP.

In a 1994 document, *Promoting Participatory Development Through Local Institutions*, the by now familiar theme of local institutions is revisited. The definition of participatory development that is given, however, introduces the new language of partnership. With it, beneficiaries are re-defined as ‘actors’:

Participatory development stands for a partnership which is built upon the basis of a dialogue among the various actors (stakeholders), during which the “agenda” is set jointly, and local views and indigenous knowledge are deliberately sought and respected. This implies negotiation rather than the dominance of an externally set project agenda. *Thus people become actors instead of being simply beneficiaries.* (1994, cited by Rudqvist and Woodford-Berger 1996:12, my emphasis)

With its emphasis on dialogue, indigenous knowledge and the agency of local people, this statement echoes some of the language of Participatory Action Research. Yet its focus on negotiation, joint agenda setting and partnership, evokes a rational process of consensus building in which deliberation enables all agendas to be accommodated.<sup>9</sup>

### **3.3.4 Stakeholder Participation: ODA**

In 1995, the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA, now DFID) issued internal guidelines on ‘stakeholder participation’, defined as ‘the process whereby all those with an interest (stakeholders) play an active role in decision-making and in the consequent activities which affect them’ (1995:94). Going beyond simply listing kinds of stakeholders, the guidelines focus in some depth on exploring different kinds of participation that different stakeholders might be involved in, firmly situating the aid agency as ‘just one of the stakeholders, with its own interests and perspective’ (1995:94).

A number of key issues emerge. Recourse is made to the ‘participation for’ argument identified earlier, set firmly within the framework of planned intervention in the form of development projects. In this respect, it clearly echoes the 1980s ‘projects with people’ discourse. Yet the language of ‘stakeholders’ shifts the focus beyond beneficiaries to consider the constellation of actors with an interest in the project, extending the frame beyond ‘the community’. ‘Participation’ is cast as a ‘spectrum... of possibilities... from being informed through to consultation, partnership, delegation and ultimately, to being in control’ (1995:95). Through closer attention to the interests and agency of different stakeholders, ODA offer a more nuanced perspective on each of these forms and their implications. For example, the guidelines discuss situations in which the aid agency may be content to be kept up to date with what is going on, devolving control to others.

What is, however, particularly compelling about ODA’s approach is an explicit recognition of unequal relations of power between stakeholders, and with it, of potential conflicts. In contrast to the tendency to conjure up a harmonious, consensual picture, ODA note:

Decisions about the extent and type of participation are not only technical but also political... stakeholders have varying degrees of power to influence outcomes – and also to decide which other stakeholders may be invited to participate and to what extent... Participation of all or some of those

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9. This, in turn, has echoes of Habermas’ (1984) ‘communicative rationality’ and with it the idealised assumption that consensus can accommodate competing and conflicting agendas.

affected may not be in the political interests of other stakeholders... stakeholders forming a politically “dominant” culture may ignore the values and knowledge of other stakeholders and effectively prevent them from participating in decision-making. (1995:95-8)

Perhaps most significant of all, there is implicit recognition of the limitations of the ‘business as usual’ approach to participation, where donor pressure results in setting up user groups or committees without any fundamental changes in management structure at higher levels.

### **3.3.5 Participation As Democracy: Sida**

SIDA’s (as from July 1995 Sida’s) involvement in promoting popular participation predates those of most, if not all, international and bilateral agencies. Its Strategy for Rural Development, adopted in 1980, called for ‘people’s participation’ in the planning, design and implementation of rural development projects, with particular attention to be paid to the participation of women. The guidelines contain the tantalisingly vague intention that ‘an increasingly larger degree of people’s participation should be strived after during the implementation of such projects’ (cited in Rudqvist 1993, Appendix 3). Well within the project frame, ‘popular participation’ was conceived of as fulfilling SIDA’s commitment to democracy goals.

The Popular Participation Programme at the University of Stockholm, led by Anders Rudqvist, made a series of contributions to fleshing out what ‘participation’ might mean for SIDA from 1986 onwards. While not representative of an institutional position, a report by Rudqvist on a workshop in Tanzania on popular participation offers a particularly interesting view of participation, bridging all three perspectives discussed earlier in this paper: It is worth citing in some detail:

Popular participation... can be viewed, with reference to the democracy and equity goals [of SIDA] as an objective in itself – that is a basic democratic right that should be promoted in all development projects... For political conditions to change in a more fundamental way, a great many social, cultural and even personal relationships must become transformed in a democratic direction... Evaluations (e.g. World Bank, FAO) have demonstrated that projects with a participatory approach tend to be more cost effective and sustainable in the long term. Such studies provide an empirical foundation for another, more utilitarian or instrumental justification for popular participation i.e. as a means to increase effectiveness, efficiency or sustainability in development projects. This argument is also brought out in the strategy where popular participation is viewed as a means to

achieve goals such as resource growth, economic and social equality, and sustainable use and protection of the environment, in addition to the goal of democratic development. We believe that these arguments are complementary and equally valid as a foundation for the promotion of popular participation in development projects. (Rudqvist 1993:5)

Clear strategic links are made with issues that offer broader appeal for mainstream development: resource growth, equality and sustainable development. Where this statement is particularly interesting is in the ways in which it bridges efficiency arguments with a series of alternative streams of thinking on participation. The case is made for regarding participation as a 'basic democratic right' as 'complementary and equally valid' to those for effectiveness and efficiency. In doing so, Rudqvist grounds participation in broader processes of democratisation. Extending its reach into the domains of the cultural and personal, this vision of participation also bridges the emphases on personal and structural change that serve to mark out distinctive differences between participatory methodologies in the 1990s. Going beyond the ends/means distinction that has been so often invoked with reference to participation (see, for example, Nelson and Wright 1995), this statement offers an all-encompassing definition that captures the multiplicity of positions and meanings that had come to be associated with participation by this time.

The links between participation, democracy and equity emerge in a number of SIDA (and Sida) documents in the 1990s, although as Rudqvist and Woodford-Berger (1996) point out, participation itself is neither formulated as a goal of Sida activities nor the focus of a specific policy. The following statement, issued by Sida's Poverty Programme in 1996, comes closest to an institutional position on participation. In it, a less nuanced version emerges:

Sida particularly supports the full participation of poor women and men in defining and combating their own poverty. Sida will also help to increase the opportunities for active participation and thus to contribute to a process of democratisation at all levels of society. Those who live in poverty have unique knowledge about their own situation and its causes and can contribute relevant experience, ideas and proposals for solving the problems. Initiatives, planning and controls should, as far as possible, be managed by the immediate stakeholders themselves. (1996:5)

Quite what 'full participation' or 'immediate stakeholders' refer to remains unclear. But in noting the 'unique knowledge' of poor people

‘about their own situation and its causes’, and arguing for their involvement in managing initiatives, planning and control, this statement affirms much of what advocates of participatory development had been arguing for.

### **3.4 Shifting Rhetoric, Familiar Arguments**

This profusion of statements on participation, in many ways strikingly similar to those issued in the 1970s, might perhaps be seen as a recasting and remaking of similar arguments, rather than a radical paradigm shift. What is however most interesting about statements that would, on the face of it, seem to be adding to a growing consensus on the importance of participation, is the contrasts that emerge between the positions taken by different institutions. Perhaps the most immediate is that between USAID’s avowed commitment to acknowledging the primacy of the local stakeholder and the position of other agencies, such as ODA, OECD and the World Bank, in situating themselves as stakeholders with voices that count. A contrast, too, can be noted between the political realism of the ODA statement and the idealised harmony invoked by the World Bank’s use of the language of stakeholders and OECD’s vision of partnership.

The clearest contrast of all emerges in the range that the term ‘participation’ acquires in some of these definitions. For the World Bank, for example, it is subsumed under an umbrella so broad that it could comfortably accommodate most forms of development practice. At the other end of the spectrum come those definitions in which participation is intimately bound up with politicised questions of exclusion, rights and control. ODA’s guidelines stand out, in this respect, for their careful attention to relations of power. While definitions of participation within the aforementioned SIDA documents are not official statements, they are interesting precisely for putting participation as a democratic right back on the agenda and for their focus on the personal and cultural dimensions of democratic change.

While definitions offer some insights into the ways in which participation has come to be framed by instrumental international actors, it is important not to confuse statements of intent with the realities of development practice. As the subsequent experience that came out of the proliferation of similar statements in the 1970s makes clear, implementation is quite a different matter from making elegant-sounding prescriptions. A cursory glance at agency documentation from the period subsequent to these evocative declarations reveals a chasm between rhetoric and reali-



ty. A decade earlier, Cohen and Uphoff noted: 'There is a real danger that with growing faddishness and a lot of lipservice, participation could become drained of substance and its relevance to development programmes disputable' (1980:213). Cernea, commenting on the 'sudden declarations of fashionable support for participatory approaches from politicians, planners, economists and technocrats' in the 1980s, contends that 'under the cloud of cosmetic rhetoric, technocratic planning continues to rule. The rhetoric of intent is still far ahead of the design for action to promote participation' (1991:25). While the very faddishness and lipservice that Cohen and Uphoff drew attention to continue to prevail with the enthusiastic adoption of participation across the board, it was precisely this 'design for action to promote participation' that absorbed participation advocates from the early 1990s onwards.

## Participation in Practice

### CHAPTER 4

Debates in the 1990s came to be concerned less with why participation might be a good thing, but how to do it and do it at scale. Professed commitments to participation had dissolved in practice, again and again. With the spectrum of meanings that had come to be associated with ‘participation’, ‘partnership’ and ‘empowerment’, a great deal of latitude was possible in interpreting and implementing policy. Turning enabling policy into effective practice required far-reaching changes, involving a complex tangle of development actors who brought their own perspectives on participation to bear on attempts to close the gap between rhetoric and field reality. New technical solutions were needed; and a new approach, built on older foundations, appeared to provide an answer.

The currency that the language of ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ had gained within mainstream development discourse was unmatched by enthusiasm for older participatory practices, those associated with the alternative development paradigm such as PAR and DELTA. These approaches required not only intensive, open-ended and long-term engagement at a highly localised level, but were also explicitly concerned with radical social transformation. For many governments, donors and banks, these approaches held little appeal. The quest for an operational solution to the dilemma of how to do participation provided a fertile terrain that fostered the exponential growth of interest in Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). Out of a modest, low key and low cost solution to perennial development dilemmas was born an approach that offered a tangible way to put commitments to participation into practice. Moreover, it held the promise of transforming a humble data gathering exercise into a process that had what Chambers (1992) termed ‘empowering effects’.

#### **4.1 'Organised Common Sense' with 'Empowering Effects': The Advent of Participatory Rural Appraisal, PRA**

As Lal (1994) points out, 'best practice' in most areas of conventional development practice long included some form of consultation with beneficiaries. With the rise of social development in the 1980s, qualitative research had gained a degree of respectability (see Cernea 1991, 1992). The principal instruments for development research, however, continued to reflect the hegemony of economics: 'soft' social science was regarded as woolly and impressionistic, lacking the rigour and appeal of 'real data'. Yet conventional development research approaches, be they quantitative or qualitative, took time, cost a lot of money and often failed to capture rapidly changing situations on the ground.

From the late 1970s onwards, Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) had provided an alternative. Based on the principles of 'optimum ignorance' (find out as much as you need to know now) and 'appropriate imprecision' (there's no need to know everything exactly), RRA was an eminently common sense approach. Alongside other rapid approaches such as Rapid Anthropological Assessment Procedures (Scrimshaw and Gleason 1992) and Rapid Epidemiological Assessment (Selwyn et al. 1989), RRA sought to provide planners with timely, relatively reliable information. Over the 1980s, RRA had moved from using the standard tools of qualitative research into the use of innovative diagramming methods, taken up from agro-ecosystems analysis (Gypmantasiri et al. 1980). By the late 1980s, RRA had become synonymous with the use of visual representations – maps, models, calendars – by multi-disciplinary research teams. A range of forms emerged, one of which, Participatory RRA, engaged people more actively in the research process (McCracken 1988, Kabutha and Ford 1988). It became apparent that illiterate, poor, marginalised people could represent their own lives and livelihoods through this medium, do their own analysis and come up with their own solutions (Chambers 1992). PRA was born.

Seeking to draw on local people's creativity and capabilities in the kind of 'mutual learning experience' that Nyerere talked of in 1968, PRA offered accessible, pragmatic, methods for finding out about local conditions and needs and for building consensus on potential courses of action. As such, it fitted the needs of the development mainstream like a glove. It could be slotted directly into discrete phases of the project cycle. It could be applied in such a way that donor time frames and priorities could be accommodated. And the apparent ease with which skills in doing PRA could be acquired made training and capacity building requirements associated with it amenable to rapid spread within agencies and departments.

If the challenge of participatory development was how to do it, PRA provided an answer, and one that appeared not only cost-effective and convenient, but one with a ring of solid common sense. Within a matter of a few years, the numbers of people trained in PRA had leapt into the thousands. Demand for training was so intense that trainers trained people who went straight on to train hundreds of others. Everyone wanted PRA; and, in no time, everyone claimed to be doing PRA. PRA had become almost mandatory by the late 1990s: practitioners of other participatory methodologies could find themselves competing unsuccessfully with newcomers into the consultancy marketplace if they were unable to show that they, too, could ‘do PRA’ (Cornwall et al. 1999). Multiple interpretations and uses of PRA were to emerge from this period, facilitated by an approach to training that eschewed the prescription of formulas and encouraged people to ‘use your own best judgement’ in adapting PRA to suit a variety of purposes.

## **4.2 Square Pegs in Round Holes? Fitting Participation into Development**

Hot on the heels of the initial waves of exhilaration that spurred the frenetic promotion of PRA in the early 1990s came debates about how to move beyond the small-scale projects that offered a wealth of success stories of participation, to institutionalising participation in large donor-funded sectoral programmes (Thompson 1995). As mechanisms were sought and tested for the rapid scaling up of participatory approaches, a welter of critical issues emerged (see Absolom et al. 1995, Guijt and Cornwall 1995, Adhikari et al. 1997). These ranged from the mechanical use of packages of methods, to the frequent failure to impinge on other aspects of institutional culture, to accommodation within bureaucratic procedure that stripped away much of the transformational promise of this new approach (see Thompson 1995).

### **4.2.1 Magic Bullets and Technical Fixes**

The beauty of PRA lay in its simplicity. Yet what the ‘magic bullet’ approach to training tended to rely on was the transfer of techniques, alongside group dynamics exercises aimed at spurring individuals towards reflective practice. Other change mechanisms such as conflict resolution, leadership training and advocacy remained neglected. And the focus on individual agency left issues of structural power relations, as well as bureaucratic structures such as budgetary and planning procedures, largely

untouched (Brown 1997). It became clear that what might be characterised as the ‘add PRA and stir’ approach was rather hit and miss; in the absence of an enabling institutional and policy environment, participation all too easily became domesticated to business as usual.

In a development mainstream dominated by technocratic tendencies, participation became amenable to being seen as ‘yet another input to be programmed and managed along with other inputs’ (Oakley et al. 1991:10). As with gender (Goetz 1994), ‘participation’ became something that could be translated into operational frameworks and promoted through training: a primarily technical corrective. Indeed, some were to argue that the very focus on instruments, guidelines and techniques that came to dominate the concerns of those engaged in mainstreaming participation in development served to render technical what were essentially political problems. Stephen Biggs describes a commonly found sentiment in the mid-1990s, commenting on the way in which the new development orthodoxy of participatory methods

...is placing an emphasis on techniques as the missing ingredient for development rather than helping us to investigate the more difficult personal, agency and political issues of how methods and techniques are used selectively to gain personal, cultural and political ends. (1995:7)

Others argued that the adoption of participation by the mainstream simply provided non-challenging support for orthodox development solutions, side-stepping the relations of power that keep people poor (Rahnema 1992, Leal and Opp 1999).

Rudqvist and Woodford-Berger’s (1996) review of donor evaluations of participation concludes that popular participation often remained limited to inputs into design and often remained at the level of participation in implementation. Indeed, what is striking from their review is that across the board, the very commitments that were so evident in the statements reviewed earlier dissolved into forms of practice that limited popular participation in decision-making, especially by more marginalised groups. Donor time-frames, sectoral policy priorities and internal procedures for accounting and accountability created potent barriers to moving beyond participation in implementation to engaging people more actively in setting priorities and evaluating projects or programmes according to their own criteria. Rhetorical commitment to participation flourished amidst unchanging bureaucratic procedures and instruments associated with the project cycle, such as the LogFrame.

#### 4.2.2 Side Effects

Many organisations came to operationalise ‘participation’ by adopting PRA for information gathering, as an alternative to conventional forms of development research. Yet these simple techniques did more than produce information. The use of these tools began to open the space for other kinds of change, spilling out beyond the boundaries set by the project, almost as side effects. Visualisation techniques proved a powerful way of affirming people’s knowledge, often to the initial surprise of all involved. Giving people whom had never thought of themselves as ‘researchers’ simple tools that enable them to interact, communicate and learn in new ways was a radical move. Field-level workers whose work often involved telling people what to do, or enforcing rules, were suddenly cast in an entirely different role: for some this unleashed their creativity and energy, transforming their practice. Yet old habits die hard. For those with technical training, it was all too easy to steer towards methods that resembled familiar ways of working and much harder to move beyond entrenched biases (Holmes 1999).<sup>10</sup>

Abetted by trainers who brought diverse approaches to bear on what they taught and by cascade training, multiple versions of ‘PRA’ soon began to emerge. Encouraged to experiment, innovate and ‘use your own best judgement at all times’, the sheer freedom of this approach enabled practitioners to take methods and apply them to a diversity of contexts. Within a few years, no single definition would have captured the range of forms and practices associated with PRA. Amidst more negative side-effects (see Adhikari et al. 1997), there were some unexpected positive effects. Training courses proved to have other uses: providing new opportunities for horizontal and vertical linkages within institutions and across sectors, bringing managers and bureaucrats into direct contact with the people whom their decisions affect, and giving confidence and voice to lower level workers (Cornwall 1999). Ripple effects have been reported in other aspects of people’s working lives. As a recent study of the diversity of meanings and uses of PRA in Nepal found, PRA tools have been put to diverse purposes, from designing work spaces to defining the characteristics of partnerships (Pratt 2000). Indeed, as practitioners in Nepal and Kenya pointed out, the practice of PRA may in itself promote more personal changes in the ways in which an individual relates to family, colleagues and employees (Cornwall et al. 1999, Pratt 2000). In this respect, some practitioners speak of PRA as a ‘way of life’ rather than simply a form

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10. Indeed, as I argue elsewhere (Cornwall 2000b), Mosse’s (1995) much-cited critique of PRA offers a revealing glimpse into the ways in which a particular set of actors – male fieldworkers – approached their first experience of using PRA with exactly these kinds of technical biases.

of practice that is confined to the technocratic domain of development work.

#### **4.2.3 PRA in Context**

As ‘doing participation’ became increasingly conflated with doing PRA, some of its limitations were to become evident. As a set of techniques, PRA could be absorbed into just about any methodology and still be claimed as ‘empowering’. While increasing attention was paid to attitudes and behaviour, skills in facilitating analysis and indeed the processes of critical analysis that underpinned other participatory methodologies were neglected (Guijt and Braden 1999). Donor agencies commissioned ‘PRAs’ and received reports replete with diagrams drawn by ‘the community’ about ‘the community’, with barely any narration or analysis. Lifted out of context, many of these visual representations were virtually meaningless; treating them as statements of empirical fact obscured the politics of the encounters that gave rise to their production, with all their potential distortions (Jonfa et al. 1991). A wealth of critique arose, both of those who misused the approach and of the approach itself (see Guijt and Cornwall 1995).

Much came to depend on who used PRA, their views about development and their existing practice. For some organisations, it proved an effective enough substitute for surveys to replace other forms of information collection as a way to save time and money. Used with appropriate rigour, it contributed effectively to purposes that might be more closely associated with RRA: providing timely, relatively reliable, information for planners. Others added PRA to existing practices, using it to help develop or update plans, target new clients or evaluate interventions. It is, however, in creative combination with other participatory methodologies that its potential is most effectively realised. For some, PRA provided useful methods for use in a longer-term change process that included advocacy, visioning and capacity building (Guijt et al. 1998). For others, it proved useful in combination with popular education and related approaches like DELTA or Training for Transformation (see Hope et al. 1984, Archer 1995). Others still overcome the limitation of simply generating lots of information by combining it with other participatory planning approaches, such as MAP (Bergdall 1993). Finding ways of more directly enabling people to record people’s versions and voices, others used participatory video to capture the richness of participatory processes (Braden 1998), and bring local issues directly to the attention of authorities, unmediated by other people’s versions of them (Johansson and de Waal 1997).

Setting PRA within the wider context of development practice, it be-

comes clear that just as multiple, and sometimes conflicting, understandings of ‘participation’ exist in any setting (Stiefel and Wolfe, 1994), so too is ‘PRA’ associated with an entire spectrum of practices. As is evident once a closer look is taken at what people actually do, PRA is rarely, if ever, a stand-alone approach. Yet critics rarely take this into account: the actual part the approach plays in particular processes of development is, it would seem, out of all proportion to the outpouring of critique that has accompanied PRA’s rise in popularity (see, for example, Richards 1995, Cooke and Kothari 2000). Setting PRA in context, however, depends on taking into account more than the kinds of development agent or process in which it is used. Rather, it requires closer attention to the broader context and to the issues of agency that are at stake in participatory processes. It is to this that I now turn.

### 4.3 Making Waves

As participatory development practices came to be adopted by development organisations as varied as radical NGOs and supranational lending organisations, meanings and practices multiplied. While systematically documented, contextualised, accounts of participatory interventions remain sparse, amidst a sea of instrumental uses of participation, some genuinely transformative experiences emerge. In some cases, change has been led by ‘champions of participation’ with the organisational vision and the clout to challenge the boundaries of conventional development practice, to take risks and experiment (Musch 1998). In others, it is fieldworkers who have shaped the emergence of new forms of practice, which gradually filtered up through the organisation or were seized on by policy entrepreneurs to create further spaces for participation within the organisation (Keeley and Scoones 2000).

Processes of change have often unfolded over a longer period, spurred or constrained by wider policy shifts and the exigencies of conditions on the ground. As Long and van der Ploeg point out:

... conceptualising intervention as a discrete and clearly localised activity (i.e. as a ‘project’) obscures the theoretically important point that intervention is never a ‘project’ with sharp boundaries in space and time... Interventions are always part of the chain or flow of events located within the broader framework of the activities of the state and the activities of different interest groups operative in civil society. (1989:228)



Development projects play a fairly marginal role in people's lives, for the most part. They involve a dynamic of enlistment in which participants actively shape 'the project' to fit in with their projects. How participatory initiatives unfold on the ground is, then, as much a product of those who engage in them as it is of the intentions of the implementing agency (Jackson 1997). Participation in practice is rarely a seamless process. Rather it consists in the interaction of agents with their own meanings, identities and projects on a shifting and contested terrain. And, as the examples I give here show, while there is much that agencies can do to foster participation, much depends on how people take up opportunities or spaces that are made available to them.

#### **4.3.1 Transforming Institutions**

Transforming the attitudes and behaviour of development agencies and their workers has been a major focus for advocates of participation over the last decade. This reflects the view that transformative participation is only possible if institutions themselves change (Thompson 1995, Blackburn with Holland 1998, Bainbridge et al. 2000). These kinds of changes take time. After years of sustained engagement, there is increasing evidence of some very real changes in practice. While these examples remain isolated 'islands of success', they offer valuable insights into what might be achieved with a flexible, longer-term, collaborative vision. In many of these cases, an initial process of 'invited participation' has paved the way for productive collaboration with government agencies which, in turn, has led to organic improvements in service delivery.

The Rural Integrated Support Programme (RIPS) in Tanzania is one such example (Freling 1998). As a story of the transformation of a programme spanning decades of limited impact into a vibrant integrated development programme, the RIPS example offers important lessons. Responding to concerns about limited participation in programme delivery, the programme has sought, since 1994, to actively incorporate participatory planning methodologies to engage a variety of interest groups, including young people, poorer people and women. Key to its success has been a longer-term vision and careful, incremental, support for extended phases of planning, iterative and accelerated learning through implementation, and building supportive linkages with local government, through Regional Commissioners. This has borne fruit in considerable achievements in agriculture, health, education and natural resource management.

### **4.3.2 Opening Spaces**

While longer-term vision, flexibility and commitment are important ingredients for change, the intentionality of development agencies is only part of the story. Once participant and fieldworker agency is painted into the picture, participation emerges as a more complex terrain of contestation that is shaped by multiple influences, understandings and processes. These stretch beyond the bounds of 'the project'. There are numerous cases where the introduction of a participatory approach as a 'technical fix' has opened small windows of space that have been seized by local people to pursue their own projects. Too few of these stories are told in all their complexity. Jackson's (1997) account of the transformation of a conventional 'participatory' agricultural development project in Orissa is a notable exception.

Telling a story of the interactions that turned an agricultural technology intervention into a process that led women to take collective action on alcohol abuse and domestic violence, Jackson's analysis focuses beyond 'the project' on the interface between fieldworkers and participants, and their evolving relationship. For all the formal mechanisms established by the project for securing participation and meeting women's needs, her analysis suggests that project outcomes were largely due to women making active use of the leverage that a commitment to gender and participation offered, to create opportunities for change. By enlisting workers in their projects, women shifted the entire frame of the project towards their concerns. Jackson's account provides a vivid illustration of the ways in which participants' own projects and own agency shape the boundaries of action.

### **4.3.3 Sparking Change**

While the Orissa case is testimony to a programme that was flexible enough to accommodate a significant shift in focus, in other cases people have been able to use the chinks of space opened up by sometimes formulaic, partial and overly rapid applications. In one Kenyan sectoral programme, for example, the instrumental use of a limited version of PRA for information-gathering provoked one group of villagers to block the road when their local Member of Parliament came to visit, demanding accountability from him and from the local leadership (fieldnotes, 1997). Sheelu Francis (pers. comm.) reports another example, from India, where women who took part in an analysis of cash flows began to recognise the amount of money spent by men on the consumption of alcohol. Within twenty days these women had mobilised others from fifteen other villages. They started with a petition, going on to block the national highway. This

brought a senior police official, to whom women presented their demands for change: to transfer the local inspector, who was getting bribes from those brewing illicit liquor. He responded on the spot. The movement continued to gather momentum, reaching statewide proportions.<sup>11</sup>

Examples such as these illustrate the potential power of participatory methods in enabling people to recognise, and act on, concerns that may have lain dormant for years. Figuring people's agency back into the picture highlights the possibilities that can emerge from the introduction of even the most instrumental forms of participation. For the kinds of spaces that came to be opened up through the introduction of participatory methodologies provided opportunities for engagement for people who had previously simply been 'done to' by development. Yet asking questions about agency inevitably begs further questions: Whose agency? Who participates? Who is excluded? And who excludes themselves? Addressing these questions helps to assess the extent to which the successes of participation actually succeed in going beyond the 'usual suspects' and development business as usual.

#### 4.4 Who Participates?

In a context where calls for 'the empowerment of the poor' now play a central part in mainstream development rhetoric, Robert Chambers' observations from 1974 offer a prescient caution:

All too often participation proclaimed on the platform becomes appropriation and privilege when translated into action in the field. This should scarcely be surprising, except to those who, for ideological reasons or because they are simple-minded, or more commonly from a combination of these causes, reify "the people" and "participation" and push them beyond the reach of empirical analysis. (1974:109)

Cohen and Uphoff called, in 1980, for 'clarity through specificity'. Arguing for the importance of setting 'participation' in context and paying proper attention to what and whom it involves, their analysis was one of the first to seek to unpack 'participation' and look at the claims that surround its use. Yet their call has remained largely unheeded. Degrees and kinds of participation have been the subject of a number of typologies,

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11. Sheelu Francis told this story at a recent workshop in Sussex, which brought together practitioners of PRA to reflect on and share their experiences, as part of the *ms* Pathways to Participation action research project.

that seek to distinguish the intentions and implications of adopting particular modes of participation (see, for example, Arnstein 1971, Pretty 1995, White 1996). Far less attention has been paid to the crucial questions of *who* participates, in what and how.

#### 4.4.1 'Primary Stakeholders'

As agencies have come to focus on the participation of 'primary stakeholders', generally defined as 'the poor and marginalised, including women', perhaps the first question that might be asked is: who, then, are these 'primary stakeholders'? Cohen and Uphoff contend:

If they [the rural poor] are considered in such an aggregated mass, it is very difficult to assess their participation in any respect, since they are a large and heterogeneous group. Their being considered as a group is not, indeed, something they would themselves be likely to suggest. There are significant differences in occupation, location, land tenure status, sex, caste, religion or tribe, which are related in different ways to their poverty. *To talk about 'the participation of the rural poor' is to compound one complex and ambiguous term with another, even more complicated and amorphous.* (1980:222, my emphasis)

Lumped together in a group, the particularities of the interests and identities of 'the poor' become submerged. The 'poor' are constructed as the legitimate object of development attention, an almost residual category into which a multiplicity of different kinds of people can be conveniently shunted. Considerable contention exists about how exactly 'poverty' is categorised and measured, as well as how poor people would define their own situations (Chambers 1997, Moore et al. 1998, Narayan et al. 2000). One important implication of the way the category 'the poor' is defined and deployed is the extent to which it masks the relationships that some 'poor' people have with 'non-poor' others, whether of kinship or patronage and clientage, which may be both exploitative and enabling. In so doing, it removes from view alliances that may play an important part in efforts to address poverty. Missing out on these relationships, as on the views, positions and agency of these other 'stakeholders', isolates 'the poor': it also leads to neglect of relations of power within 'communities' that can serve to mitigate as well as deepen the crushing effects of poverty (Moore et al. 1998).

A failure to identify the particularities of those who might otherwise be classed in this homogenising category 'the poor' can have other consequences. While other participatory methodologies, particularly those

stemming from the PAR tradition, focus explicitly on building an intensive, longer-term engagement with the marginalised and excluded, PRA has traditionally been used to work with 'the community' as a whole. Wealth or wellbeing ranking may be used to differentiate between households, although this technique needs to be used carefully to pick up on supra-household linkages or indeed on intra-household difference. Yet when it comes to creating consensual products, such as Community Action Plans, differentiation disappears: 'the poor' often become everyone, or everyone is at least believed to have their best interests in mind.

As the NGO Redd Barna found in Uganda, even the crudest forms of differentiation – in this case, between the young and the old, men and women – produce distinctively different priorities for change. Guijt et al. (1998) describe a process of conflict resolution and advocacy for the acceptance of the priorities of younger people and women, through which community members came to agreement on shared priorities and 'agreed to disagree' on priorities specific to particular groups. Without attention to difference, however, 'community' consensus can all too easily lead to the exclusion of the concerns of the least vocal and most marginalised (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000). It is important to ask who benefits and who loses out when short-run 'PRAs' give rise to Community Action Plans.

#### **4.4.2 'Women'**

Feminist challenges to the 'myth of community' have highlighted the exclusionary character of many participatory interventions (Agarwal 1997, Guijt and Kaul Shah 1998). It is clearly vital that women's exclusion is addressed and deliberate efforts are made to include women's views and voices. Recognising the multiple constraints that hamper women's participation and adopting active strategies to redress them is equally crucial, if women are to take active part (Mosse 1995, Guijt and Kaul Shah 1998). Yet the category 'woman' is often so loosely used that any woman who participates comes to represent women-in-general. In this regard, bolting on the category 'women' to 'the poor and marginalised' raises a number of concerns. The power effects of differences within the category 'woman' have long been a concern within feminist circles (Moore 1994). Amidst debate about the status of 'women's interests' (see, for example, Moyneux 1985, Jonasdottir 1988, Fierlbeck 1997), one obvious issue is the extent to which a singular voice of 'women' masks the multiple voices of elite, illiterate, rich, young, poor, religious or ethnic majority or minority women.

Treating 'women' – or, indeed, 'men' – as a single category obscures not only these differences within, but also their significance for people's

livelihood options. One consequence is that emergent ‘needs’ may reflect the interests of more dominant members and leave those with least voice excluded. Most forms of gender analysis offer little succour, as by privileging gender difference they may simply serve to compound other forms of exclusion, not least that of marginal men (Crewe and Harrison 1998, Cornwall 2000a). Well-intentioned interventions launched in the name of ‘gender’, such as women’s groups, may be used by elite women as well as by men to pursue their own projects (Harrison 1997).

Issues of difference evoke a number of paradoxes for participatory development (Cornwall 2000b). Perhaps the most compelling is that of the uneasy relationship between the imperative of enabling people to represent and choose for themselves, and development agendas of gender equality, democracy and human rights. For there is no reason to assume that ‘the poor and marginalised, including women’, even if they speak with one voice, necessarily support these agendas. Disarmed of the agency to challenge choices or impose an alternative agenda – ostensibly, at least – committed facilitators may find themselves locked into dilemmas invoked by the liberal notions of consent that provide underpinning principles for participatory development. If ‘they know best’ and if, as USAID’s statement of principles suggests, it is ‘their’ choices and ‘their’ stake that matters, dealing with conflicts of interest and values poses a number of dilemmas for practice. These are anticipated in ODA’s discussion of ‘stakeholder participation’ but remain, for the most part, unresolved either in guidelines or in operational practice.

#### **4.5 Demytholising ‘Full Participation’**

It is not uncommon to read in reports, or hear in policy statements, that there has been, or should be, ‘full participation’ and ‘participation by all stakeholders’ (see, for example, Sida 1996). While ODA’s discussion of ‘stakeholder participation’ draws attention to difference, it would seem that Cohen and Uphoff’s (1980) call for ‘clarity through specificity’ at every level still needs to be heeded. Woodford-Berger and Nilsson (2000), for example, points to a lack of specificity in Sida programme and project documentation that makes it difficult to determine who actually participated in ‘participatory’ interventions. A brief review of documents from other agencies reveals similar shortcomings.

Farrington and Bebbington (1993) propose a simple axis that distinguishes depth and breadth of participation, going one step beyond generalising typologies. ‘Deep’ participatory processes engage participants in

all stages of a given activity, from identification to decision-making. Yet they can remain 'narrow' if only a handful of people, or particular interest groups, are involved. Equally a 'wide' range of people might be involved, but if they are only informed or consulted their participation would remain 'shallow'. This usefully highlights the intersections between inclusion/exclusion and degrees of involvement. As such, it can be an instrument through which to explore claims to participation that turn out to have involved only elite, older, richer members of the 'community', and those from which others might have been excluded. To use it effectively, however, greater 'clarity through specificity' is needed, and with it perhaps a return from claims about 'empowering the poor' and 'full participation' to 'organised common sense'.

#### **4.5.1 From 'Full' To 'Optimum' Participation**

Truism as it is, it is often far from obvious that since most participatory processes do not *and literally cannot* involve 'everyone'. A 'deep' and 'wide' participatory process might be the ideal, in abstract, but in practice it can prove either virtually impossible to achieve, or so cumbersome and time-consuming that everyone begins to lose interest. In this regard, it makes more sense to think in terms of optimum participation. Clearly what might be optimum for one purpose would not be so for another. Contrast, for example, the depth and breadth of participation that might be desired for the development of local institutions and for HIV/AIDS prevention activities. Neither of these purposes can be expected to involve 'full participation'. But if the former sought to include everyone and the latter worked only with a small handful of committed people, they would fail on their own terms. Obvious as this seems, it is precisely this kind of clarity that is often lacking.

Choices are usually made as to who might take part, yet these often remain embedded in the choice of methodology or residual to a host of other factors, most notably time and money. If these implicit choices are exclusionary, as has been convincingly argued for interventions that fail to recognise the constraints on women's participation and provide means of involving them (see Agarwal 1997, Guijt and Shah 1998), then clarity is again needed in order to address their implications. One implication of methodological choice is in differences between approaches that place greater degrees of emphasis on the participation of representatives – those who speak about and for a particular interest group – and those that seek more direct democratic means of participation. In practice, boundaries tend to be blurred. In most participatory consultation and planning work, pragmatism often dictates that the voices of some are to be taken to repre-

sent others, be they ‘the poor’ or ‘other stakeholders’. This brings with it a host of further questions about representation, legitimacy and voice.

#### **4.5.2 The Dilemmas of Inclusion**

A frequently used mechanism to ensure at least some degree of inclusion of a diversity of voices in participatory development work is the identification of pre-determined categories: ‘the poor’, ‘women’ and so on. Sometimes this happens by default: those who participate are those who come to public meetings, where they may be divided up according to sex and, sometimes, age. In such contexts, one of the most obvious strategies for inclusion is to pay closer attention to the conditions under which different kinds of people might take part: from the timing and duration of events, to where they are held. Surprisingly little attention seems to be paid to the differences that make a difference locally, which may render the categories development workers bring into the situation unproductive. Clearly there is a need for pragmatism. But it is also important to examine the implications of the basis from which *defacto* representatives of ‘the community’, ‘women’ or ‘young people’ speak. Where the purpose extends to participation in planning and action, and beyond that to the formation of local institutions, these questions of legitimacy have wider significance (Ribot 1996).

Identifying particular interest groups is clearly important. It also offers operational advantages, as they can then be focused on as ‘target groups’ for work to enhance their confidence, capabilities and access to benefits. Yet it is also important to recognise that these groups do not exist in social isolation. Such a strategy can serve to undermine economically and socially significant relationships that exist between the poor and the better off, or between women and men. Without a dynamic understanding of people’s social networks and the institutions and dimensions of difference that matter in the pursuit of their livelihoods, naïve efforts to bring about equitable change may simply make things worse (see Goetz 1989).

#### **4.5.3 Self-exclusion**

While much emphasis has been placed on the need for processes of inclusion that ensure that particular groups, such as women, are not left out by development workers (see, for example, Mosse 1995, Guijt and Shah 1998), less attention has been directed to *self-exclusion*. The assumption tends to be that getting the mechanisms and methodologies right will bring ‘full participation’. Indeed, participatory initiatives tend to be premised on the idea that everyone would want to participate if only they could. The active choice *not* to participate is barely recognised. That peo-



ple's lives extend beyond the boundaries of 'the project', and indeed that their experiences of previous initiatives impinge on their willingness to become involved in new ones is rarely acknowledged (Long and van der Ploeg 1989). The 'myth of community' invokes a spirit of togetherness, as well as that of homogeneity and harmony. But where local perceptions of what 'community' means to them diverge from the projections of developers, they may have little inclination to spend time on 'community' affairs.

The costs of participation that are incurred by *participants* are rarely taken into account by development agencies, many of who regard voluntary labour as an invaluable way of gaining community 'ownership'. Self-exclusion in these circumstances may deprive people of a chance to exercise leverage, but may release their time for other pursuits. For some, the opportunity costs of taking part may be very high, especially if they care for the sick, elderly or young children and simply do not have the time to attend meetings and perform the duties associated with many participatory interventions. Others may look at what is on offer and decide they would be better off spending their time on their own projects. For others still, the domination of 'community' initiatives by powerful interest groups may mean that they decide to it is simply not worth bothering to engage if the prospects of having any influence, or indeed any share of the benefits, might be limited.

#### **4.5.4 From Involvement to Voice**

There are further issues at stake. Being involved in a process is not equivalent to having a voice: voice needs to be nurtured, people need to feel able to express themselves without fear of reprisals or the expectation of not being listened to or taken seriously. And this, of course, cannot be guaranteed no matter how well-meaning the instigators of the process may be, for while they may create space for people to speak up and out, they have no control whatsoever over what may happen as a consequence. Mukasa (2000), for example, reports the indignance of older men as women involved in a PRA process began to challenge them; she also reports beatings and other forms of abuse that came in the wake of efforts to give women more of a say.

Translating voice into influence requires more than ways of capturing what people want to say; it involves efforts 'from above' and 'from below' (Gaventa and Robinson 1998). From within the authorities, responsiveness is contingent on wider institutional changes and the political will to convert professed commitment to participation into tangible action. And from 'below', strategies are needed to build and support col-

lectivities that can to continue to exercise voice, and exert pressure for change (Houtzager and Pattenden, 2000). Simply asking people what they want or need might make them feel listened to. But, as Kesby (1999) points out, empowerment involves more than being able to speak up in the liminal space of the PRA exercise: it involves wider transformations in the ways in which people negotiate the institutions of everyday life.

#### 4.6 Strategies for Change

The spectrum of practices associated with participation in development is so vast that capturing their complexity would be impossible. What is evident, however, is that certain ‘key ingredients’ are necessary – if not always sufficient – to turn rhetoric into sustainable, positive change. Perhaps the most important is time. The race for tangible products that is imposed by funding cycles and by technocratic instruments for evaluation can, as Mosse (1998) so powerfully illustrates, lead to a resort to top-down practices simply to show value for money. The very uncertainties of participatory processes, captured so vividly in their potential to spark events beyond the frame of the planned intervention in some of the cases discussed here, sits uneasily with the prerogatives and procedures of development assistance. To meet some of the challenges of institutionalising participation, many donor agencies have moved towards a more flexible and open-ended approach in recent years. Longer time frames, a greater degree of consultation, ‘open orientation’ phases, increased inter-institutional collaboration between donors and an increasing focus on sectoral investment have helped promote a more enabling institutional environment for participation (INTRAC 1998, Aycrigg 1998, Forster 1998, LaVoy 1998, Blackburn et al. 1999).

Amidst concerns that ‘the project-by-project’ approach undermined government ownership and capacity to lead sectoral policy formulation, giving rise to isolated islands of success with limited overall impact (Norton and Bird 1998), alternatives that enhanced government capacity and responsiveness were actively sought. This, coupled with a concern with effective and coherent policy approaches to ensure appropriate sectoral resource allocation, gave rise to the emergence of Sector-Wide Approaches (swaps), which were mooted as a way of broadening and deepening partnerships between donors, sectoral ministries and the private sector (Cassels 1997). Norton and Bird (1998) draw attention to some of the challenges and pitfalls of swaps, making at the same time a series of arguments that have wider resonance in participation debates. Their concerns cen-

tre on the dilemmas of inclusion, from what ‘counts’ as a sector and which stakeholders might be excluded or marginalised as a result of dominant interests, to measures to avert the capture of benefits by elites. Noting the danger that the approach may become technocratic and top-down in attempts to improve efficiency in service delivery, they advocate participatory consultation, building civil society capacity and downward accountability as a means of ensuring that the otherwise voiceless gain some opportunity to strengthen the social impact of swaps.

Where changes have been especially marked is in the ways in which the language of participation has permeated arenas that were once almost entirely closed. The framing of poverty reduction policies through the PRSPs (Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers) and consultation with civil society actors on Country Assistance Strategies (Tandon and Cordeiro 1998, McGee with Norton 2000) offer a new terrain in which the contested concepts of ‘participation’, ‘partnership’ and ‘empowerment’ jostle for attention. In the midst of all this, there would seem to be a return to the vision of ‘popular participation’ espoused in 1970s calls for ‘the widest possible active participation of all individuals and national non-government organisations in the development process, in setting goals, formulating policies and implementing plans’ (ECOSOC 1975, cited in Cohen and Uphoff 1980:213). Tracing discourses on participation identified earlier in this paper in this shift into the domain of governance, I suggest that a number of the concerns that marked 1970s discourses on participation re-emerge. Yet apparent parallels and similarities in language belie shifts in the meanings that ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ came to acquire as they were taken up in mainstream development discourse over the intervening decades.

# Bridging the Gap? 'Good Governance', Citizenship and Rights

As the 1990s came to a close, shifts in development discourse extended the meanings and practices associated with participation yet further. Throughout the 1990s, debates on scaling up, mainstreaming and institutionalising participation bordered ever closer on issues of governance (Thompson 1995, Blackburn with Holland 1998). At the same time, the 'good governance' agenda and the moves towards decentralised governance that began to take shape through the 1990s opened up a series of points of intersection. As Gaventa and Valderrama (1999) suggest, social and political participation remained largely discrete in development thinking until the later 1990s. Social participation was constrained to the domain of projects; political participation was conceived in conventional terms as concerned with forms of indirect representation, through elections and the legislative apparatus. As participation spilled beyond the boundaries of the project, the boundaries between social and political participation became increasingly blurred. The participation and 'good governance' agendas began to converge, as growing pressure for institutional reform to make government service delivery more responsive to poor people's needs and priorities met with attempts to enable poor people to have more of a say in determining the policies that affected their lives. This gave rise to growing interest in what Gaventa and Valderrama term 'citizenship participation', defined as 'direct ways in which citizens influence and exercise control in governance' (1999:5).

In recent years, concern with the relationship of citizens and the state has increasingly come to shape the practice of participation in development, particularly in the move towards engaging citizen participation in the policy process. In this section, I explore this move towards governance, in which changing meanings of 'partnership', 'ownership' and 'empowerment' frame a new discourse of participation. I take a closer look

at participation in policy processes, and at direct democratic practices that aim to enhance public sector accountability. In doing so, I highlight some of the ambivalence that characterises contemporary positions on participation.

### **5.1 Converging Concerns? Participation and 'Good Governance'**

With the return to a focus on the state in international development discourse, new entry points have opened up for public involvement in processes of governance. Renewed attention to public sector institutions, particularly those involved in service delivery, has widened spaces for invited participation. Within this context, citizen participation has been regarded not only as a way to ensure greater effectiveness and efficiency in the delivery of services, but also as a means of enhancing accountability. The World Bank's 1997 World Development Report talks of 'bridging the gap between state and citizen'. Setting the boundaries of participation, the report marks off certain areas – most notably macro-economic policy – to public engagement. Yet participation plays an increasingly important role in the prescriptions that are advocated for state reform: broad-based consultation over key policy directions, direct participation of user groups in the design, implementation and monitoring of local public goods and services. And emphasis is, equally, placed on processes that build greater public accountability, from enhancing the efficiency of accountable local institutions, and processes and incentives for building accountability and competition (1997:129-130).

New forms of direct democratic practice, such as the engagement of ordinary people with issues of policy or the involvement of users in monitoring government service delivery (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999, Cornwall et al. 2000), began to fill the spaces that have been opened up for popular engagement. At the same time, the increasingly pervasive language of 'partnership' has come to impinge on the ways in which the delivery of development assistance is viewed. The OECD definition of participation and ODA's discussion of 'stakeholder participation' both highlight some of the implications of a term that has become increasingly slippery. Inequities in terms of power, resources and influence aside, what partnership does imply is a degree of negotiation and mutual agreement on paths of action. The emphasis on partnerships gives rise to increasingly complex interactions of donors, decentralised government structures and the user groups characteristic of many participatory interventions, creating new institutional interfaces in which questions of representation,

agency and voice come to the fore (Loewenson 1999). The next sections take up some of these issues, reflecting on experiences with participatory policy work, efforts to enhance accountability and responsiveness and the (re)turn to a focus on rights.

## **5.2 Participation and Policy: 'Voices' and Choices**

Policy reform was once considered beyond the bounds of participation. Yet since the mid-1990s, the methods associated with gathering information from would-be beneficiaries in the project context have increasingly been used in attempts to influence the policy process. Accounts of these initiatives focus on a desire to directly represent the concerns of poor people and users of particular services to policy-makers (Holland with Blackburn 1998, Robb 1999). Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) are perhaps the best known, and most widely used, form – although questions might well be asked about the extent to which the majority of these PPAs have been 'participatory'.<sup>12</sup> Consisting of rapid consultative exercises that deploy a range of qualitative methods to gather people's views, PPAs have gained such currency that they are now claimed to represent the authentic 'voices of the poor' (Narayan et al. 2000).

### **5.2.1 Generating Information on Poor People's Concerns**

Mirroring early uses of participatory methods in the initial stages of the project cycle, participatory policy research sought to generate and feed information to policy makers in the expectation that more and better information would equal better policy choices (see, for example, Robb 1999). Early Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) used rapid qualitative research through conventional tools such as interviews and focus groups (Norton and Stephens 1995). Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) came to be introduced into PPAs in the early 1990s, in Zambia and Ghana (Norton 1996). With this came a shift towards processes that held the potential of encouraging greater participant involvement in analysis. PPAs produced a rich seam of qualitative information on the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty, helping to shift mainstream perspectives on gover-

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12. Much, of course, depends on how 'participatory' is defined. Often, qualitative research methods are swept up under the participation umbrella and the use of 'participatory' methods for what amounts to short-cut qualitative research is celebrated as 'participation'. Evidence from Robb's (1999) catalogue of World Bank PPAs suggests that a) the vast majority of PPAs to date have used conventional qualitative methods; and b) that where 'participatory methods' have been used, they have been employed simply to gather information rather than to engage stakeholders in deliberative processes within the arena of policy making.

ty beyond narrow income-consumption measures (Chambers 1997, Holland with Blackburn 1998, Brock 1999).

Until recently, the principal focus of PPAS has been on generating information. The high public profile given to PPAS in itself served as a means of influencing policy: as Booth et al. (1998) point out, given the stakeholders involved, findings were harder for politicians and policy makers to ignore. Relatively little attention was given at first, however, to a more active engagement with the politics of the policy process. This is in itself unsurprising, given that PPAS were designed as rapid information extraction exercises on the behalf of a supra-national institution with its own policy goals in mind. Yet it also reveals a rather instrumentalist view of policy processes, which sees policies as 'intrinsically technical, rational, action-oriented instrument that decision-makers use to solve problems and effect change' (Shore and Wright 1997:5). PPAS initially simply sought to feed information into what was assumed to be a linear, rational, process. The very technical language of policy masks what are often moral and political norms; policies often take the form of simple stories that frame a problem in certain ways and invite a bounded set of conclusions that are embedded within the story itself (Roe 1991). In some cases, PPAS have served simply to mirror, rather than question, existing narratives: either by refracting echoes of dominant discourses from 'poor people' or superimposing them through the choice of method, question or mode of analysis.

### **5.2.2 Changing the Frame: Influencing the Policy Process**

Changing the frame and creating alternative visions for policy change requires more than supplying information to policy makers. It involves active engagement with the policy process itself. This, in turn, involves moving beyond a linear view of policy making to a recognition of the complex and contested processes that shape the formulation and implementation of policy (Keeley and Scoones 1999). With growing sophistication in the ways in which the policy process is viewed, it becomes apparent that processes like PPAS are far from neutral attempts to bring the 'voices of the poor' to the attention of policy makers. As these 'voices' are refracted through multiple layers of mediation, as field interactions are transformed into reports and aggregated into national, or even global, syntheses, questions might well be asked about whose versions emerge in the final analysis. Whitehead and Lockwood's (1998) incisive analysis of the disappearance of gender issues in the transition from PPA field reports to national Poverty Assessments (PAS) – and indeed, the mirroring of World Bank policy lines in the final recommendations of these PAS – would suggest that little can be taken for granted.

'Second-generation' PPAs, such as the South African (May et al. 1998) and the Ugandan Participatory Poverty Assessment Process (Uganda Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development 1999) have moved away from a primary and sole focus on information generation to pay greater attention to questions of engagement, ownership and impact. A wider spectrum of actors have been drawn into these processes, which place as much emphasis on the impact of their learning on their agency within the policy process as on the information that is produced. The role of those to whom implementation of policy falls, 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky 1980), and the discretion they exercise (Goetz 1997), is increasingly recognised with efforts to bring these kinds of actors into PPA processes. Here ODA's discussion of 'stakeholder participation' becomes particularly pertinent: for in the policy arena, as much as in the domain of projects, whose versions count and who is able to participate, and on whose terms, becomes vital.

### **5.2.3 Levering Open Policy Space**

Participatory policy research holds the potential to lever open 'policy space' (Grindle and Thomas 1991), for the articulation of alternative policy discourses. To make effective use of public and political space, however, a more deliberative process is needed: one that engages policy actors in critical reflection on pervasive policy discourses and the accepted wisdoms of prevailing policy narratives, rather than simply in finding out about poor people's perceived needs. Equally, greater attention needs to be paid to the terms on which poor people engage in these initiatives. Considerable unrealised potential exists for using these kinds of processes to enable poor people to gain a greater understanding of the institutions and policies that affect their lives. By promoting dialogue, rather than listening, PPAs might take the shape of a genuinely mutual learning experience in which the knowledge, views and experiences of policy actors involved in the process becomes as much the object of reflection and analysis as that of poor people.

## **5.3 Participation and Accountability**

Civil society participation in policy advocacy extends beyond influencing the policy formulation process. Engaging citizens in 'making and shaping' the decisions that affect their lives equally extends beyond involving them in naming needs or priorities (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000). Mechanisms to hold policy-makers and implementers to account open up further ter-



rain for participation in development. It is in this area that a number of exciting initiatives are beginning to create and make use of further spaces for direct democratic involvement in governance. Echoes of the call in the UNRISD definition (see 1.1.2) for increasing popular control over regulative institutions and resources are evident; so too are traces of earlier concerns with participation as a democratic right.

Participatory budgeting initiatives, for example, bring together a range of different arguments for participation, bridging the 'participation for' and 'participation with' perspectives with more recent discourses on accountability (see Goetz and Jenkins 1999). As Budlender (1999) notes, in the context of the Women's Budget Initiative (wbi) in South Africa, budgets are the most important policy instrument a government has, as policy implementation depends on resource allocation. Opening up the budget allocation process to broad-based popular involvement serves efficiency concerns, in terms of the effective targeting of resources, as well as building awareness within government of local needs. Where participatory budgeting has been used, most notably in Brazil (de Souza Santos 1998) and in the wbi initiative in South Africa (Budlender 1999), fiscal decentralisation and transparency have proven a key in enabling a more direct relationship of accountability between citizens and local government (McGee with Norton 2000).

While 'invited participation' in these initiatives have engaged thousands of people in priority-setting, they are inevitably contested, political processes that require more than good will on the part of decision-makers. Here, another dimension of the turn towards accountability becomes significant: popular engagement in monitoring expenditure and, through that, holding officials to account. Goetz and Jenkins's (1999) account of participatory auditing by an activist group in Rajasthan, The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (mkss), offers an example where people take up and make use of their rights – in this case, the right to information – to mobilise collective action. Initially formed out of struggles for the minimum wage, mkss has secured support across a broader sector of society as a movement against the corruption that affects everyone's lives. Records of expenditure are read out in detail to members of the public in the presence of officials, who are literally held to account. In these public hearings, the testimonies of local people are contrasted with the official record, exposing cases in which funds have been misused or appropriated. What is perhaps most striking, and significant, about the mkss is the way in which the issue of transparency has generated a broader struggle to reclaim the principles and practice of democracy, and to refashion people's sense of their rights as citizens.

## 5.4 Participation, Citizenship and Rights

These forms of direct democratic practice not only shift the boundaries of 'development' beyond the project or programme, they also signal the growing importance of focusing beyond 'softer' institutions for participation to the 'harder' apparatus of legislature and governance. Strategies to engage citizens more directly in establishing and negotiating priorities for policy and in holding government accountable become especially significant in the context of an emerging rights-based approach to development, in which new forms of citizenship are beginning to be articulated. These seek to move beyond the limitations of liberal notions of citizenship, in which legal equality masks forms of exclusion that leave marginal groups vulnerable to further marginalisation (Caragata 1999, Taylor 1996).

### 5.4.1 Recasting Citizenship and Rights

Rather than viewing citizenship as inhering in national identities and as entailing a bundle of rights granted by the state, reconceptualising citizenship as the exercise of agency offers a significantly different perspective. Lister argues:

...the right of participation in decision-making in social, economic, cultural and political life should be included in the nexus of basic human rights... Citizenship as participation can be seen as representing an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined; citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents. (1998:228)

Redefining citizenship in these terms creates the basis for a more inclusionary approach, and with it a recasting of rights. As such, both a plurality of identities (Mouffe 1992) and an expanded spectrum of rights associated with them, can be recognised. These extend beyond traditional social and economic rights to embrace rights to service provision, rights to safety and security, and sexual rights. This vision of inclusive citizenship, in turn, provides an entry point for a redefinition of participation as in itself a right and a focus on holding government accountable for its obligations (DFID 2000). With this shift towards rights comes a questioning of the limitations of consensus-based approaches to participation and the promise of a return to the political realism of approaches that actively engage with the issues of difference and power that arise with competing claims and entitlements. As such, it generates a series of exciting new methodological, strategic and operational challenges.

### **5.4.2 Participation as a Right**

Bringing the principles of human rights into the domain of development offers further intersections with debates around participation in governance and policy. Importantly, the rights perspective implies taking a stand on issues of social justice. Ferguson argues that the rights-based approach provides 'a means of strengthening the ability of vulnerable groups to claim social, political and economic resources to meet their needs' (1999:7). The principle of indivisibility of human rights, Ferguson goes on to note, confers the same weight to social and economic as to civil and political rights. She argues that people cannot realise, for example, their right to health unless they can also exercise their democratic right to participation in decision-making processes about service provision. Participation becomes a prerequisite and a starting point for other claims (Hausermann 1998), seen in itself as a basic human right.

In emphasising obligation and responsibility, the rights-based approach opens up the possibilities of a renewed focus on the root causes of poverty and exclusion, and on the relations of power that sustain inequity. Bringing governance squarely into the frame, exclusion becomes in itself a denial of rights and the basis for active citizens to make demands, backed by legal instruments. This shifts the focus from invited participation in the planning and implementation of service delivery to the enhancement of people's capabilities to advocate for their entitlements from those who are charged with service provision, and the right to participate more actively in determining the shape of those services. As such, it transforms the idea of 'demand-driven development', popularised in the 1990s, into a process that involves the creation of new compacts and new relationships between citizens and service providers.

Yet the rights-based approach carries with it as many challenges as it does possibilities. It throws the contradictions of development assistance into sharp relief, resurfacing the inevitably political nature of decisions, choices and priorities. Issues of cultural relativity, the ethnocentrism of a focus on the individual rights-bearer and the implications of these new citizenship debates for women remain a subject of fierce debate (see Nangengast 1998, Huq forthcoming). Questions arise around the definition of rights, negotiation over competing rights and access to mechanisms for recourse where rights are violated. These pose serious concerns and dilemmas in the implementation of a human rights framework. This in turn calls for a renewed emphasis on processes of accountability at every level, whether of the signatories of international treaties to their people or of global corporations to local citizens (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000, Newell 2000).

The concept of rights, however, is too valuable to remain restricted to the legislative domain. Expanding it to embrace entitlements and obligations that can be advocated for and asserted – from women’s right to say no to pressure to have sex, to the right of patients to be treated with respect by health workers – may offer no legal guarantees. But it offers the possibility of shifting the frame of participatory interventions away from inviting participation in pre-determined spaces to enabling people to define for themselves their own entry points and strategies for change. It also shifts the focus from the legislative apparatus to those individuals on the receiving end of prejudice, discrimination and exclusion, providing a starting point for development processes that can actively challenge and redress inequity.

# Looking Back to Move Forward

## CHAPTER 6

As the proclamations of the 1970s find their place in contemporary calls for broad-based consultation in policy processes, as in efforts to promote local self-governance, it would seem that participation debates have come full circle. In contemporary policy discourses, participation is advocated as a ‘basic policy measure... in setting goals, formulating policies and implementing plans’ (ECOSOC 1975) and a ‘basic human right’ (WCCARD 1979, cited in Oakley 1995). ‘The participation of the people in making the decisions which affect them through organisations of their own choice’ (ILO 1977) is once more a headline item on the development agenda.

There seems to be little here that is new. Indeed, some might argue that the repackaging of participation has a ring of the Emperor’s New Clothes about it.<sup>13</sup> As new generations come to engage with participation, arguments are necessarily remade. To spur each wave of enthusiasm, arguments need to be reasserted. As arenas for participation shift and new actors enter, there is every prospect that the wheel will be reinvented. Yet the very familiarity of the arguments and terms that are so insistently repeated belies significant shifts in the ways in which they have come to be interpreted and deployed over the course of the last three decades. Looking back to move forward, this chapter traces some of these trajectories and explores their implications for the present and future.

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13. Lal (1994) points out that drawing on local knowledge and using market mechanisms to provide incentives, such as contributions of cash or labour, was very much part of conventional ‘good practice’ in the 1970s, in some sectors at least. He argues: ‘to label this process as “participation” is to use emotive language, which given the slippery nature of the concept of “participation”... is likely to aid neither clarity of thought nor the relief of poverty’ (1994:10). A similar argument might be made for the transformation of unfashionable qualitative research into highly sought after Participatory Poverty Assessments.

## 6.1 Old Concepts in New Contexts

Looking back to the 1970s, three distinct arguments for participation can be identified: efficiency and effectiveness; self-determination; and mutual learning (see section 1.2). During the 1980s and 1990s, these three lines of argument were meshed in a generalised push towards increasing participation in projects and programmes. Different emphases, by different actors and at different moments ebb and flow through the practices of participatory development over these decades. A gamut of ways of ‘doing participation’ emerged, in which these arguments became nuances rather than poles on a spectrum. Practices ranged from long-term change processes that enabled people to empower themselves and gain confidence and voice, to projects and programmes to which people contributed their time and labour, to consultative exercises to inform decisions taken elsewhere. In the process, terms like ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment’ gained an exhaustive range of associations. Taking three ‘old concepts’ that lay at the heart of 1970s visions of ‘popular participation’ and putting them into context, this section explores their implications for contemporary approaches to participation in development.

### 6.1.1 ‘By the people’...

Articulated in the context of the struggles of those hitherto excluded from control over the decisions that affect their lives, the argument for self-determination by ‘the people’ made in the 1970s has appeared in a number of guises over the last few decades. As ‘the people’ became ‘the poor’, and as a more active conception of participation gave way to forms of enlistment in development projects, self-determination was transformed from ‘do it by yourself’ to ‘do it for yourself’. In a trajectory that can be traced in a relatively unbroken line straight back to the early 1980s, the latest World Bank strategy for ‘community-driven development’ (CDD) serves as an example of the contemporary resurgence of older efficiency arguments. CDD offers communities opportunities to bid for funding and support to design, manage and execute their own projects<sup>14</sup>. Social funds, administered and run autonomously from government to deliver aid directly to ‘the poor’, extend the principles of 1980s-style community participation yet further.<sup>15</sup>

Amidst enthusiasm for what might, on the face of it, seem the realisa-

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14. CDD is explained thus: ‘The goals of community-driven development are to respond to local, priority needs, build problem-solving skills, and promote ownership and care of local assets. Participatory processes are the key building block for achieving these objectives. In community-driven projects, participation implies that communities are in control of initiation, planning, »

tion of the argument for people's self-development, reflection on the lessons from experience provide some grounds for caution. As I suggested earlier, as the ethos of self-reliance became 'do it for yourself' in the 1980s, beneficiaries became seen as consumers: 'users and choosers' who, by buying into these kinds of projects, were to gain greater voice and choice (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000). When closer attention was paid to who was participating and who was benefiting from these interventions, it became evident that myths of community masked potent questions of equity and legitimacy. As Chambers pointed out in 1974, these forms of participation ran the risk of further entrenching inequities *within and between* communities. In some cases, women's rights of access have been eroded by male-run committees (see Agarwal 1997); in others, patterns of exclusion found in traditional forms of governance are reinforced by the creation of unaccountable local institutions that speak on the behalf of 'the community' (Ribot 1996).

A decade of experience shows that without a more careful process in which interests are differentiated and negotiated, the Community Action Plans emerging from brief PRA exercises can mask inequity and dissent (Mosse 1995, Guijt et al. 1998). Measures to address issues of equity have included working with more marginal actors in their spaces, at their own pace, to build confidence and the capabilities to exercise voice (Guijt and Kaul Shah 1998). Yet to do so takes time. It requires other skills: in conflict resolution, mediation, advocacy and negotiation (Mukasa 2000). It also requires a commitment to equity. As Goetz (1994, 1997) points out, techniques and technicalities can do little to redress deep-seated gender biases; much depends on the discretion of individual fieldworkers and their own attitudes and behaviour. Bringing about these changes of attitude and behaviour in institutions remains one of the greatest challenges for participatory development (Blackburn with Holland 1998, Bainbridge et al. 2000).

Enabling the poor and excluded to empower themselves requires not only intensive engagement but also an active recognition of the relations of power involved. This seems to be strikingly lacking in strategies to simply hand over control to 'communities' or in the promotion of rapid PRA-style exercises to generate action plans. Simply asking 'women' or 'the poor' what they want is clearly not enough to ensure that their priorities

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» implementation, operation, maintenance and evaluation of development projects' ([www.worldbankorg/poverty](http://www.worldbankorg/poverty), 2000).

15. This emerges, in turn, from a trajectory that can be traced back to the emergency Social Investment Funds of the 1980s, that sought to stem the devastating effects that Structural Adjustment was having on the poor and subsequently became longer-term strategies (Abbot and Covey 1996).

find any place at all on ‘community’, let alone national or international policy, agendas. There are further issues at stake. With the uncritical celebration of ‘poor people’s organisations’ in recent policy rhetoric come further echoes of the past: of the leap of faith that characterised the embrace of ‘civil society’ in the 1980s. Just as ‘civil society’ embodies a spectrum of interests and perspectives, so too ‘people’s organisations’ span a gamut of institutions, some of which may be both exclusionary and unaccountable. As Ribot (1996) points out, this hardly augurs well for the pursuit of equity and democracy.

What is clear from taking stock of tendencies of the 1980s that have resurfaced in recent policy is that addressing these dilemmas requires more than simply ‘handing over the stick’ to ‘the people’. There is growing recognition of the dangers of leaving the bulk of poor people at sea without access to project ‘islands of success’ and of undermining the coherence of social policy through fragmented support to small-scale projects (Oakley 1995, Norton and Bird 1998). A return to project-based development modelled on the assumptions that pervaded community participation and the ‘New Policy Agenda’ of the 1980s raises a host of questions, which need to be addressed if this strategy is to make any difference to the lives and livelihoods of the poor and excluded.

### **6.1.2 The Widest Possible Engagement...**

Having slipped off the development agenda for more than twenty years, calls for the ‘widest possible engagement’ in informing policy formulation are now much in vogue. Global actors such as the World Bank and even the IMF have enthusiastically adopted the language of ‘participation’, ‘partnership’ and ‘empowerment’, extending it into conditionalities in the latest policy instrument for poverty reduction, the PRSPs. As the ‘voices of the poor’ provide policy directions imbued with unwavering moral authority, participatory policy research seems to have succeeded in its aims to present poor people’s voices directly to policy makers (Robb 1999, Narayan et al. 2000). This would appear to complement efforts at the local level to promote self-provisioning and co-production through instruments such as CDD and social funds.

With this return to a focus on broadening civil society engagement in policy and governance, spaces for participation by invitation are growing ever wider. Yet what ‘participation’ actually involves remains extremely hazy. As I note earlier, claims of ‘full participation’ or ‘participation by all stakeholders’ need to be carefully qualified. With the extended range of ‘participation’ to encompass simply providing information and the vagaries of the term ‘stakeholders’, it is ever more important that questions



are asked about who participates, in what, how and on what basis. In an ironic reflection of what being ‘put in the driving seat’ has entailed for some, a Bolivian NGO worker, one of the few invited to participate in consultations on the World Bank’s Comprehensive Development Framework commented:

It’s like you’re walking down the street and someone you know asks you to go along for a ride. You don’t know what’s going on but you might as well go if you’ve got nothing better to do. (cited in Hartnell, 2000:1)

One dimension of civil society engagement, enhanced through the 1990s as citizens have come to be increasingly involved in monitoring and evaluating government initiatives, is the possibility of holding claims to participation in processes like these to account. As global institutions extend their reach into national and local contexts (Mishra 1998), precisely through ‘participatory’ mechanisms that enable them to mediate popular involvement, new concerns arise. At the same time, other kinds of connections across the globe contribute to the expanding nexus of opportunities for global citizen action (Edwards and Gaventa, forthcoming). These links and alliances cut across old borders, opening up further spaces for demanding accountability at multiple levels (Newell 2000). In this changing context, ‘the widest possible engagement’ takes on an entirely different cast.

### **6.1.3 ‘Empowerment’**

Of all the words in the participation lexicon, ‘empowerment’ is perhaps the most malleable, undergoing the most marked shifts in meaning over the last three decades. Once redolent with the struggles of the oppressed for voice, rights and recognition, it is now used by some as a shorthand for an agenda of economic and institutional reform, largely instigated and driven by supranational institutions. Traces of the contemporary rhetoric of ‘empowerment’ emerge in some versions of community participation in the 1980s, as individual access to economic opportunities – of which microcredit is a quintessential example (Woost 1997) – came to overshadow older associations of the term with conscientisation and collective consciousness. The 1993 Human Development Report, HDR (UNDP, 1993) is a reflection of how far the transmutation of this term had gone by the early 1990s. It sets ‘empowerment’ squarely within development thinking of the time: bound up with liberalisation, decentralisation and democratisation.

While the 1993 HDR made much of empowering ‘the people’ as a means to promoting vibrant civil society and containing the excesses of

government, the latest World Development Report harnesses its potential to embrace an extended agenda, in which ‘good governance’ reforms come to play a pivotal role. It talks of ‘facilitating the empowerment of poor people – by making state and social institutions more responsive to them’ (2000:3). The way ‘empowerment’ is defined offers insights into what is envisaged. The report goes on:

Promoting opportunity through assets and market access increases the independence of poor people and thus empowers them by strengthening their bargaining position relative to state and society. Strengthening democratic institutions and empowering women and disadvantaged ethnic and racial groups – say by eliminating legal discrimination against them – expand the economic opportunities for the poor and socially excluded. (2000:7)

Traces of contestation, glimmers of the older meanings of the term, emerge in the intent to strengthen poor people’s bargaining position. Where 1970s alternative development discourses saw ‘empowerment’ as a process through which people actively engaged in struggles for increased control over resources and institutions, in this version it appears to flow as an automatic consequence of economic and institutional reform. Giving people access to markets and removing legal discrimination are thought sufficient to address inequality and inequity. One need look no further than Washington to place this magic wand in context.

Other international organisations have sought to map out the links between participation and empowerment on a rather different terrain. Again, there are strong echoes of the 1970s in the ways in which participation has come to be cast: as a basic democratic and human right. Sida’s goals have long included human rights and democracy. In recent years, other bilateral agencies have begun to address more explicitly the association between participation and rights. A recent strategy paper for DFID, *Human Rights for Poor People* (DFID 2000), makes an argument for a rights approach that is contingent, as the Secretary of State Clare Short argues in its preface, on three strategic aims: participation, inclusion and obligation on the part of government. The paper contends:

Development involves a process of political struggle over priorities and access to resources... The human rights approach to development reveals these competing claims and legitimises excluded peoples’ efforts to strengthen their voice in the political process. (2000:13)

As I suggested earlier, the then ODA's version of 'stakeholder participation' was virtually alone in donor definitions to highlight issues of power, conflict and contestation. It is precisely these issues that are so notable in their absence from the version of 'empowerment' that emerges in the 2000/1 WDR. Yet it is in the use of other terms that equally significant differences lie. 'Obligation' carries much stronger implications than 'responsiveness'; 'inclusion' comes to mean more than enabling people to gain improved economic opportunities. The language of rights in itself refocuses attention on social justice and with it, for actively taking sides with those whose rights are violated. Arguing for the right to participate as intrinsic to other rights puts a rather different gloss on 'empowerment'. In doing so, it helps to address the paradoxes of the 'bystander' approach to participatory development in which the dilemmas of consent left little space for outsiders to actively challenge choices that shored up an inequitable status quo. Extending the rights discourse beyond the legislative domain invites further opportunities. Yet, as I suggested earlier, it also invokes potent new challenges, from access to justice to adjudication between competing rights.

## 6.2 Pathways to Participation

From the 1970s to the 1990s, a generalised consensus took shape that people's participation in projects was the means to their success. Bridging differences in ideology and approach, participation advocates formed alliances to widen available spaces for participation in development. With the move beyond projects into governance, a new convergence is emerging. It is now widely accepted that bridging the ever-deepening divide between citizens and the state requires intervention at both sides. Bringing government closer to the people through decentralisation and enhancing state responsiveness by promoting transparency and accountability have become the *sine qua non* of governance policies. The importance of strategies that enable poor people to engage more actively in making and shaping development has become a virtual orthodoxy. Yet when it comes to defining the role of poor people in these processes, some clear differences are once again beginning to surface. Two lines of thinking can be identified, with some blurring of boundaries between them. In both, echoes of the 1970s and 1980s are more than evident.

One strand picks up on forms of induced participation that characterise much of the 'projects with people' (Oakley 1991) era. Moving from enlisting communities in implementation, to engaging them in contribu-

tions of labour, time or cash, to involving them in user committees, to handing over control for design, delivery and maintenance of projects, this line of thinking situates communities as ‘users and choosers’ (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000). Their increasing role in co-production and in self-provisioning assumes many of the functions of the state. In turn, the state becomes an enabling force by removing laws, liberalising the economy and opening up access to wider range of services through the encouragement of NGO involvement and private sector investment in basic service provision. Participation is stimulated by loans or grants to community-based initiatives, complemented with a focus on ‘people’s organisations’ as those closest to and best placed to assist with local-level development.

Induced participation is complemented with invited participation, both through user fora at the local level and in processes of consultation over policy. While economic policy remains the cloistered domain of the powerful, social policy is opened up for consultation by going directly to those whom policies affect and listening to the ‘voices of the poor’. The links between community-level projects, listening to poor people’s priorities and governance reforms remain rather oblique, yet the implication exists that through self-development and expanded economic opportunity, poor people will be empowered and in the process will exercise choice by exit from services that cannot or will not deliver. In the process, these services will become more competitive and customer-focused, responding to consumer demand.

The second line of thinking places an emphasis on creating an aware citizenry who are able to assert their rights, engage in holding government to account and organise to make effective use of the spaces made available to them by governance reforms. In this view, participation is itself a basic democratic and human right, the starting point for defining and asserting the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and demanding that the state honour its obligations. Taking the form of citizenship participation (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999), it becomes a means through which people are recognised and recognise themselves as agents (Lister 1998). This extends traditional notions of citizenship beyond a bundle of rights bestowed by the state; in turn, it involves a rather different form of agency from exercising choice as consumers. Through the practice of active citizenship, citizens become the ‘makers and shapers’ of their own development (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000).

Invited participation, again through fora such as committees and consultation over policy, is also complementary to this form of participation. But with it, a corollary of making spaces available is building people’s capabilities to exercise agency and voice within them and pushing the

boundaries of consultation towards a more deliberative process, in which citizens do more than articulate their needs. Enhancing citizenship participation requires more than inviting or inducing people to participate, through incentives or by offering them spaces to speak. It requires an active engagement in nurturing voice, building critical consciousness, advocating for the inclusion of women, children, illiterate, poor and excluded people, levering open chinks to widen spaces for involvement in decision-making, and building the political capabilities for democratic engagement. Through this, people come to create their own spaces and enact their own strategies for change.

There are, of course, areas of overlap between these positions. And just as elements of each approach might emerge in strategies pursued by the same institution, so too care needs to be exercised in associating either position too strongly with the policies of particular development agencies. Yet put like this, the differences in the ways ‘participation’ has come to be defined and interpreted over the course of the last three decades emerge in sharp relief.

### **6.3 Invited Participation and Beyond**

Over the course of the last three decades, every new wave of enthusiasm has brought renewed efforts to enlist people in participatory processes. Invitations to participate have ranged from involvement in user committees, to consultation over projects intended to benefit them, to helping project managers design appropriate interventions, to being involved in monitoring, to being asked about every dimension of their lives to find policies that fit. With the shift from beneficiary to consumer, the voices and choices of those on the receiving end of development assistance have gained more attention. And with a shift from consumer to citizen, the obligations of those who work with and for the poor come under closer scrutiny.

Short-term project cycles, budgetary procedures, a lack of flexibility and transparency over resources, and sectoral or policy priorities dictated from elsewhere served for many years to constrain deeper and wider processes of involvement (Blackburn et al. 1999). A number of agencies have heeded the call for slower, longer-term learning approaches, as for co-ordination to stem what one commentator called ‘carpet bombing’ of communities with an ever increasing array of outsiders eager to ‘do participation’ with them (INTRAC 1998, Forster 1998, LaVoy 1988). As development institutions reform their strategies for involving poor people, it is time that more respect was paid to the time, energy and opportunities that

participation may cost poor people and with it a clearer sense of the limits of different forms of participation.

Making information available, involving people in consultation exercises and widening the possibilities for more active citizen engagement in monitoring and holding institutions to account is a precondition for a more democratic development process. This requires not only institutional willingness, but also active citizen engagement. Who engages and how become key questions. Despite claims that are made about ‘full participation’, it is often neither possible nor practicable. Thinking instead in terms of ‘optimum’ participation might help focus closer attention on what makes sense for different contexts and purposes. Paying closer attention to who actually participates in ‘participatory’ initiatives and who does not, either through exclusion or self-exclusion, might also help determine strategies to optimise the difference externally-initiated participation can make to the lives of the poor and excluded.

It is only by going beyond vague generalities about ‘participation’, ‘the people’ or ‘the poor’, heeding Cohen and Uphoff’s (1980) call for ‘clarity through specificity’ and applying it to practice, that we can gain a better sense of what works and what does not, and for whom. Only then can we reach a clearer understanding of the contribution that different modes of participation can make to poverty reduction. The challenge for participation over the last decades has been to open spaces for public engagement, by transforming institutions and promoting invited participation at all levels. Lessons from experience indicate that inviting ‘the people’ to participate as beneficiaries or consumers is not in itself enough to bring about meaningful change. The challenge for the future is *both* to enable those excluded by poverty and discrimination to take up opportunities extended to them for influence and control *and* to exercise agency through the institutions, spaces and strategies they make and shape for themselves.

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# Glossary

CDD	Community-Driven Development
CIH	Community Involvement in Health
DELTA	Development Leadership Teams in Action
DFID	Department for International Development
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
HDR	Human Development Report
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JFM	Joint Forest Management
MAP	Methods for Active Participation
MKSS	Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan
NGOS	Non-Governmental Organisations
ODA	Overseas Development Administration (now DFID)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAS	Poverty Assessments
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PPAS	Participatory Poverty Assessments
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PRSPS	Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers
RIPS	Rural Integrated Support Programme
RRA	Rapid Rural Appraisal
SIDA	Swedish International Development Authority
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (as from July 1995)



SWAPS	Sector-Wide Approaches
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
US	United States
USAID	us Agency for International Development
WBI	Women's Budget Initiative
WCCARD	World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development

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