

Working paper

Participatory Approaches to Rural
Development and Rural Poverty
Alleviation*

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1 Introduction

The term 'participation' has recently come to play a central role in the discourse of rural development practitioners and policy makers. At the same time, people's interpretations of the term – and criticisms of other people's interpretations – have multiplied, and the intentions and results of much participation in practice have been questioned or even denounced. In other words, participation has become a hotly contested term, in a debate with deep implications for the ways in which community, society, citizenship, the rights of the poor and rural development itself are conceived, and for the policies that are formulated about and around some of these concepts and the social realities to which they refer.

This paper considers participation in rural development and rural poverty alleviation. It examines Asian experience and provides brief overviews of past interpretations and practices and of current debates. Its main purposes are to identify some of the main challenges facing the use of participatory approaches to rural development and poverty alleviation in Asia, and to propose a number of topics for discussion.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a briefly sketched background to participation, both historical and conceptual, and examines the range of uses of participation in development projects. This section also includes a short discussion of a particular family of methods, broadly associated with rapid and participatory rural appraisal (RRA/PRA), which has acquired considerable prominence in recent years. Then follows, in section 3, a discussion of some main themes of participation in rural development in Asia. Section 4 then gives an overview of recent and not so recent criticisms and debates of and around participation. Finally, Section 5 draws some lessons and puts forward some points for discussion.

The paper is based exclusively on secondary materials. Although this allows a much wider coverage of perspectives and case experiences than would otherwise be possible given the limitations of a paper of this nature, it also has the disadvantage of possibly neglecting some of the most innovative approaches, because they are too recent, or were not adequately researched and written about, or simply escaped notice.

The length of the paper does not allow detailed descriptions, thorough analyses or completeness of coverage of what by any standards is a vast and evolving field. Instead of those, the paper must rely on short characterizations, the use of examples, and the discussion of themes and ideas rather than of individual cases.

2 Background to participation in RD

2.1 Historical background

A form of participation can be traced back at least to colonial times:

In Eastern Nigeria in the late 1940s and early 1950s British colonial officials pursued a policy with many similarities to [...] participatory development [...] The chief propagandist of this policy was E.R. Chadwick, the Senior District Officer i/c Community Development. He wrote frequently about how self-help development could transform the capacity of Nigerians (as individuals and communities) to identify their own needs and strengthen their abilities to improve their own conditions. He was puritanical in his refusal to 'deliver' development since this undermined the very transformation that the policy sought to achieve (Page, 2002: 253).

This surprisingly modern view already contains many of the central themes that are still present in current approaches: self-help, the community as well as the individual, transformation and capacity building and, at least by implication, a limited form of empowerment. Not much of significance was added by the community development approach that originated in India after 1950 and spread to other developing countries in the 1960s, with its underlying modernization ideology and its

practical combination of adult education, institution building, social welfare (especially education and health) and development projects. Only in the 1970s were the other main themes of modern participatory approaches added: increasing the awareness of the poor and oppressed of asymmetric power relations and of their own situation, creating or reinforcing networks of solidarity, gradually building up their confidence in their own knowledge and abilities, and consequently also a sense of entitlement (Freire, 1972).

People's participation as a concept was formulated – or rediscovered – in the 1970s, in response to the growing awareness that the various approaches then employed for rural development, such as community development, integrated rural development or basic needs did not often lead to significant rural development and especially poverty reduction, largely, as was then thought, because there was little involvement in development projects of those undergoing 'development', and particularly the poor.

An important milestone in people's participation in rural development was the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD – Rome, 1979), which declared participation by rural people in the institutions that govern their lives 'a basic human right':

If rural development was to realize its potential, the Conference said, disadvantaged rural people had to be organized and actively involved in designing policies and programmes and in controlling social and economic institutions. WCARRD saw a close link between participation and voluntary, autonomous and democratic organizations representing the poor. It called on development agencies to work in close cooperation with organizations of intended beneficiaries, and proposed that assistance be channelled through small farmer and peasant groups (IWG, no date).

After WCARRD, and throughout the 1980s and 90s, participation in rural development – as well as in development at large – gradually became more established among governments, donors and international organizations, to such an extent indeed that, as Stirrat (1996: 67) put it, 'it is now difficult to find a rurally based development project which does not in one way or another claim to adopt a participatory approach involving bottom-up planning, acknowledging the importance of indigenous knowledge, and claiming to empower local people'.

Inevitably, at the same time as participation became a 'good thing', there was also a trend towards greater diversity in the interpretations of what it really means and in the forms of its application in practice, as the various actors involved – ranging from consultants and academics to developing country governments, NGOs, bilateral donors and international organizations – chose from the different approaches, principles, methods or simply emphases available, to fit their own missions or interests. Participation thus became what some describe as a 'new orthodoxy of development', but one lacking an ideology (Henkel and Stirrat, 2001: 168). We will review here some of the main definitions and typologies of participation before going on to discuss its applications in practice.

2.2 Definitions and typologies of participation

2.2.1 Definitions

The diversity mentioned above may best be illustrated by a brief analysis of some of the many definitions of participation that have been proposed. The FAO Informal Working Group on Participatory Approaches and Methods (IWG) transcribes some useful definitions in a web site dedicated to participatory project formulation¹. First, two definitions from the 1970s:

With regard to rural development ... participation includes people's involvement in decision-making processes, in implementing programmes, their sharing in the benefits of development programmes and their involvement in efforts to evaluate such programmes (Cohen and Uphof, 1977).

¹ http://www.fao.org/Participation/english_web_new/content_en/definition.html, accessed June 2007.

Participation is concerned with . . . the organised efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from such control (Pearse and Stifel, 1979).

Cohen and Uphof were among the first to stress the importance of participation in the various stages of the project cycle, particularly decision making and evaluation, rather than simply sharing in the benefits of projects. Pearse and Stifel complement this by stressing control and, by implication, also issues of power. Power and empowerment are brought in explicitly in the following characterization:

Participation can be seen as a process of empowerment of the deprived and the excluded. This view is based on the recognition of differences in political and economic power among different social groups and classes. Participation in this sense necessitates the creation of organisations of the poor which are democratic, independent and self-reliant (Ghai, 1990).

Two other definitions are associated with international agencies:

Participatory development stands for partnership which is built upon the basis of dialogue among the various actors, during which the agenda is jointly set, 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 beneficiaries (OECD, 1994).

Participation is a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them (World Bank, 1994).

The OECD definition adds useful elements by stressing dialogue and negotiation between the 'developers' and the 'developed', as well as the fact that through participation people become actors in their own development rather than just passive beneficiaries. Along similar lines, the World Bank definition broadens participation from just the poor to other 'stakeholders', a term that has become almost widespread 'participation' itself.

Together, the definitions above clearly illustrate the diversity mentioned in the preceding section. The IWG combines several of the elements in the five definitions above and gives its own definition of participation in development as

... a process of equitable and active involvement of all stakeholders in the formulation of development policies and strategies and in the analysis, planning and implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development activities. To allow for a more equitable development process, disadvantaged stakeholders need to be empowered to increase their level of knowledge, influence and control over their own livelihoods, including development initiatives affecting them.

2.2.2 Typologies of participation

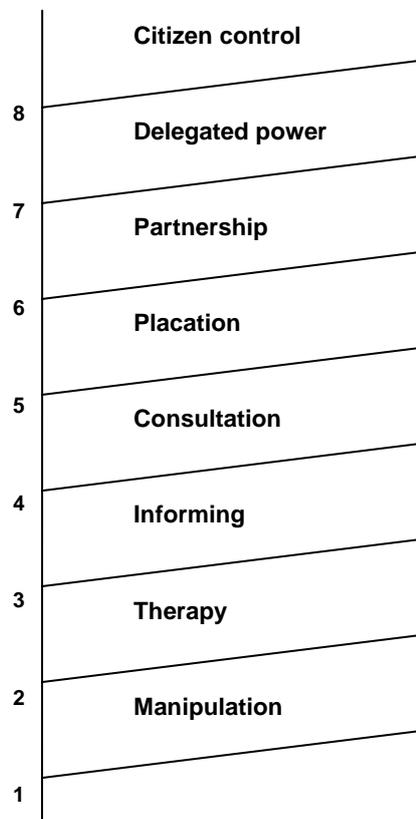
Degrees of participation

An influential participation typology has to do with degrees or levels of participation. Writing in North America, Arnstein (1969) defines participation as

... the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future [...] It is the strategy by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society (p. 216).

She puts forward a model that consists of a ladder with eight rungs, as illustrated in Figure 1 below. Arnstein stresses that the ladder is a simplification and that the eight rungs are an imperfect representation of what is really a continuum, where a clear distinction between levels is not always possible. Still, she claims, it helps to illustrate the fact that there are different degrees of citizen participation.

Figure 1: The ladder of participation



Source: Arnstein, 1969

This model is not neutral: as pointed out by Hayward et al. (2004: 99), ‘reading the ladder from bottom to top, it suggests a hierarchical view that promotes full participation as the goal to be achieved. This value-laden view deligitimises non- and/or peripheral participation’. Something similar may be said of the typology of participation presented in Figure 2 below, although of course here, unlike in Figure 1, lower generally tends to be ‘better’.

Figure 2: A participation typology

Type of Participation	Some Components and Characteristics
Passive Participation	People are told what is going to happen or has already happened. Top down, information shared belongs only to external professionals.
Participation in information giving	People answer questions posed by extractive researchers, using surveys etc. People not able to influence the research.
Participation by consultation	People are consulted and external agents listen to their views. Usually externally defined problems and solutions. People not really involved in decision making. Participation as consultation.
Participation by material incentives	Provision of resources, e.g. labor. Little incentive to participate after the incentives end, for example much farm research, some community forestry.
Functional Participation	Groups are formed to meet predetermined objectives. Usually done after major project

	decisions are made, therefore initially dependent on outsiders but may become self dependent and enabling. Participation as organization.
Interactive Participation	Joint analysis to joint actions. Possible use of new local institutions or strengthening existing ones. Enabling and empowering so people have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
Self-Mobilisation	Already empowered, take decisions independently of external institutions. May or may not challenge existing inequitable distributions of wealth and power. Participation as empowering.

Source: Pimbert and Pretty, 1994.

Efficiency and empowerment views of participation

Both Arnstein's ladder and the typology in Figure 2 carry the implicit assumption that different positions correspond to different degrees of one and the same thing (i.e. participation) and that therefore it would be possible to move gradually from one level to another. However, much of the theorizing of participation is based on a distinction that for some people implies a rejection of this assumption. This is the distinction between the *efficiency argument* and the *equity and empowerment argument*. The former envisages the use of participation instrumentally, to achieve better project outcomes or greater sustainability in rural development terms, for instance by mobilizing beneficiaries' contributions through their involvement in implementation, or by increasing project acceptance, local ownership and sustainability. The latter regards participation as a process that empowers the poor and strengthens their capacity to take independent collective action in order to improve their own situation (and can, in some cases, even lead to changes in the distribution of power, as successful collective action and the associated increase in awareness and self-confidence lead the poor to claim a larger share of power and resources in the rural community). Its advocates dismiss instrumental uses of participation as inadequate, since they rarely if ever lead to the effective empowerment of the majority, particularly the poor and oppressed. Against this, some people argue that some beneficiary involvement is usually better than none, and that instrumental forms of participation may, over time, lead to more comprehensive and more empowering participation, particularly if care is taken to protect rural development projects from elite capture. In other words, they claim that it may be possible to move gradually from the forms of participation mentioned at the top of the table in Figure 2, towards the deeper forms below. Social scientists caution that institutions do not usually work like that, and that processes of empowerment can stop or move backwards as much as they can move forwards.

Scope and applications of participation

Participation is in practice used in various contexts and for different purposes, as we shall see in section 3.2 below. In the project cycle, the diagnosis of situations and problems, leading to project identification and formulation, is a field where the current trend is towards the use of various participatory approaches. As van Heck (2003: 46) puts it,

Participatory research is to be included in any participatory project as it is indispensable firstly for the collection and analysis of the necessary information on the action areas and the disadvantaged people and secondly for project expansion and replication.

Other stages of the project cycle where participation is used include project planning and design decisions, project implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

In addition to these forms of participation at the *micro* level of projects, participatory approaches are also used at other levels. For instance, participatory poverty assessments (PPAs) are designed to influence policy at the *macro* level, particularly in relation to development and poverty reduction strategies (Norton *et al.*, 2001). Exercises of this kind have acquired a new importance with the

introduction of poverty reduction strategy papers by the Bretton Woods Institutions in 1999 and the virtual imposition of the obligation to formulate them, supposedly with the active participation of the poor, upon a considerable number of developing countries.

Between the micro and the macro level, a number of exercises in participation at an intermediate or *meso* level have also been carried out. These include participatory budgeting in local governments and various forms of territory-based rural development, among which the LEADER programmes of the European Union are notable for their support for decentralized development and participation of the local communities.

2.3 The special case of Participatory Rural Appraisal

Because of the role that it has played in spreading ideas of participation in rural development and in recent debates on participation, participatory rural appraisal (PRA) deserves a special mention here.

PRA has been described as

... a family of approaches, methods and behaviours that enable people to express and analyse the realities of their lives and conditions, to plan themselves what actions to take, and to monitor and evaluate the results. Its methods have evolved from Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA). The difference is that PRA emphasizes processes that empower local people, whereas RRA is mainly seen as a means for outsiders to gather information. The key elements of PRA are the methods used, and – most importantly – the behaviour and attitudes of those who facilitate it (Chambers and Blackburn, 1996: 1).

Poverty and the powerlessness of the poor are central concerns of PRA. PRA uses a wide range of methods developed by practitioners specifically to help local people, rural and urban – many of whom are not literate – express and share information, and also has several methods in common with RRA (see Box 1 for an example of a method where modern and community knowledge are combined into a tool with considerable potential). Many of these methods are visual, and they include participatory mapping and modelling, transect walks, flow diagrams, seasonal calendars and matrix scoring, institutional diagramming and analytical diagramming, all undertaken by local people². Triangulation, i.e. the use of several methods, types of information, investigators and disciplines for purposes of cross-checking and progressive learning and approximation, is also a key principle of both RRA and PRA.

Box 1: Participatory three-dimensional modelling

Participatory three-dimensional modelling (P3-DM) is an innovative PRA technique conceived to support collaborative processes and help resolve conflicts of interest related mainly to land and resource use and tenure. It starts with the production of an accurate relief map of a particular territory, upon which community knowledge composed from the mental maps of the local participants is superimposed. Because the base map is accurate, it becomes possible to combine local knowledge with additional geo-referenced information obtained from field surveys, Global Positioning Systems' readings, and secondary sources. Castella *et al.* (2005), Hardcastle *et al.* (2004) and Rambaldi and Le (2003) describe applications of P3-DM in Viet Nam, aimed at increasing public participation in problem analysis and decision-making at community level.

An influential finding of PRA is, in the terms of one of its most proponents, that 'villagers have a greater capacity to map, model, quantify and estimate, rank, score and diagram than outsiders have generally supposed them capable of' (Chambers, 1995: 20).

The success of PRA depends critically on facilitators maintaining very high standards of personal and professional behaviour:

... as convenors and catalysts, but without dominating the process. Many find this difficult. They must take time, show respect, be open and self-critical and learn not to interrupt [...] In PRA, facilitators act as a catalyst, but it is up to local people to decide what to do with the information and analysis they generate. [...] there must be a commitment on the part of the facilitating organization

² Strele *et al.* (2006: p. 8 *ff.*) has a very clear presentation of some main PRA techniques, in the particular context of results-oriented participatory livelihoods monitoring.

to do its best to support, if requested to do so, the actions that local people have decided on (Chambers and Blackburn, 1996: 2).

The use of PRA has helped involve communities in the various decisions concerning their own development, including appraisal, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The ‘developers’ have also benefited from the interactions of PRA, in the sense that development practitioners have become more open to and respectful of local knowledge and more receptive to local priorities for research, action and policy. This has also helped development and research-oriented organizations move away from top-down, standardized procedures and towards a more open culture of learning (Guijt and Cornwall, 1995: 1).

In the early 1990s, as donor agencies and international NGOs caught on to its potential, the practice of PRA spread very fast to many countries and organizations, initially in the NGO sector but increasingly also in government departments, aid agencies and universities. This was the high point of neoliberalism, and ‘PRA’s potential to deliver “locally owned” and “community-based” solutions led to meteoric uptake – in speed and scale’³ (Cornwall and Guijt, 2004: 164). As often happens in similar cases, scaling up created problems. Abuse and bad practice became common, which prompted a soul-searching on the part of a number of people close to the core of the PRA ‘community of practice’. It seems interesting to mention the concerns expressed at that time, published in *PLA Notes* 22, in 1995⁴:

- the assumption that using PRA methods and/or approach in itself brings about positive change;
- lack of conceptual clarity, transparency and accountability;
- emphasis on information extraction with the rhetoric of political correctness;
- unchallenged assumptions of community harmony;
- lack of in-depth analysis which obscures awareness of political realities within communities;
- one-off training, with no follow-up by trainers or institutions;
- poor integration of PRA into project planning and implementation;
- lack of clarity about reasons for using PRA;
- agendas driven from outside the community, not from within; and
- co-option of the acronym, making it a label without substance (Cornwall and Guijt, 1995: 1-2).

What this list shows is that it is easy to use PRA badly. Aware of this problem, the PRA ‘community of practice’ dedicates considerable time and energy to critical analysis of its own practices and to the search for quality, as is evidenced by the themes of the various issues of *Participatory Learning and Action*.

Modest initial arguments that RRA, with its emphasis on ‘appropriate imprecision’ and ‘optimal ignorance’, was basically ‘organized common sense’ and was preferable to conventional research methods for certain kinds of action-oriented research, gradually gave way to claims that PRA is actually superior to conventional methods in the production of valid and reliable knowledge (see for instance Chambers, 1994). This has generated considerable disagreement and controversy, some of which will be mentioned below.

In recent years, participatory methods have increasingly been used in national poverty assessments, initially for enabling the poor to express and analyse their priorities and realities. Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) are promoted for instance by the World Bank, with the stated aim of

³ Ellis and Biggs (2001: 443) make a related point when they state that ‘While advocates of grassroots approaches to development may like to think that they have nothing in common with World Bank market liberalisers, nevertheless the spaces in which grassroots action flourished from the mid-1980s onwards were created in some measure by the backing off by big government from heavy-handed involvement in the rural economy’.

⁴ This publication, named successively *RRA Notes*, *PLA Notes* and, currently, simply *Participatory Learning and Action*, played an important role in consolidating PRA as a practice, by helping spread information about new methods, techniques and contributions to the PRA ‘basket’ of approaches, and by serving as a vehicle for critical discussion aimed at maintaining quality standards.

helping the perspectives and priorities of the poor influence development cooperation and national policies, particularly in relation to poverty reduction strategies. Norton *et al.* (2001: 11) speak of second generation PPAs, as the early focus on ‘generating textual representations of realities of the poor, to contribute to policy recommendations’, gave way to a concern with ‘creating new relationships within the policy process – bridging public policy, civil society, people in poor communities, donor agencies’. At the same time, the initial aim to influence donor country assessment documents shifted, towards attempting to exert direct influence upon country policy making processes: national budgeting, sector policies, poverty monitoring systems, and local government policy and budget processes.

Another PRA-related development towards the end of the 1990s was the new emphasis on participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E). As Guijt and Gaventa (1998: 1) state, the idea is to place the perspectives of local people, and particularly the poor, at the centre of M&E exercises:

[PM&E] ... involves local people, development agencies, and policy makers deciding together how progress should be measured, and results acted upon. It can reveal valuable lessons and improve accountability. [...] By broadening involvement in identifying and analysing change, a clearer picture can be gained of what is really happening on the ground. It allows people to celebrate successes, and learn from failures. For those involved, it can also be a very empowering process, since it puts them in charge, helps develop skills, and shows that their views count.

The same authors then go on to identify four principles at the core of PM&E: (i) **participation**, to include those most directly affected; (ii) **negotiation**, to reach agreement about what, how and when to monitor, what the data actually means and what will be done with the findings of the monitoring; (iii) **learning**, for improvement and corrective action; and (iv) **flexibility**, to adjust to the various changes in the conditions under which the M&E exercise is carried out (*op.cit.*, p. 2).

Cornwall and Guijt (2004: 165) portray the ‘taking off’ of PM&E as a process similar to that of PRA:

Everyone had to do it, all projects needed a PM&E system or component, it was a conditionality of loan agreements – and yes, the World Bank too, took hold of this phenomenon. [...] Here the slogan shifted from that of PRA – ‘whose reality counts’ (Chambers, 1997) to that of PM&E – ‘who counts reality’ (Estrella and Gaventa, 1998). Just as with PRA, there was and is a huge diversity of understanding what PM&E is, and what it contributes. The wave of critical thinking about PM&E has, however, yet to hit the development discourse.

Thus PRA, together with the approaches it influenced⁵, has been influential in contributing to bring participation in many forms into the mainstream of development practice.

2.4 The ideologies of participation

A simple perusal of the concepts and/or definitions discussed in the preceding sections is sufficient to bring to the fore the important fact that they are influenced by, or aligned with, different ideological positions. In line with Bastian and Bastian (1996a) we may distinguish three very different ideological positions at the root of various proposals on participation in development:

- A position close to the mainstream – i.e. liberal or neo-liberal – discourse on development, such as that of the World Bank or the Development Advisory Committee of the OECD (DAC, 1995), where participation is proposed as a central element of a coherent model for sustainable development, which is however conceived ‘within a framework of a market economy and a dependence on the private sector as the engine of growth’ (Bastian and Bastian, 1996a: 41). The main argument in favour of participation from this perspective is that it is necessary for the relevance and sustainability of development efforts.

⁵ In addition to RRA, PRA and PLA these include Participatory Interaction in Development and, as we have seen, also, in a different context, PPA.

- A view of participation as ‘a part of a “third way” of development, neither market-oriented capitalism nor state-centric socialism’, a view supported by ‘donor countries with a strong social democratic tradition’ (Bastian and Bastian, 1996a: 41-42), as proposed for instance in the publication entitled *Another Development*, published by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation of Sweden (Nerfin, 1997). In this view ‘people’ were given a central position, both as sources of needs that define the priorities of development and as actors of their own development⁶.
- A set of more or less radical perspectives, characterized by an awareness of the asymmetric distribution of power in society and its consequences for poverty, and seeking in participation a new means of helping bring about social transformation by empowering the poor and ultimately changing the distribution of power⁷. Empowerment of the poor and social transformation are clearly the main reason for participation in this perspective.

The fact that people and organizations with such diverse ideologies can all agree that participation is ‘a good thing’, to such an extent that it has become part of the development mainstream, clearly indicates that the term is used to designate very different practical realities, which inevitably causes some confusion. A first step towards clearing some of that confusion is to review concrete cases of participation in practice, in projects aimed at rural development and rural poverty alleviation. The following section presents such a review, focused on Asia.

3 Participation in Asia

3.1 Poverty, rural development and participation in Asia

In the early years of the new millennium, and despite remarkable progress in its reduction⁸, poverty remains one of the main challenges facing Asia and the Pacific, which is still home to two-thirds of the world’s poor. While some Asian countries experience spectacular growth, certain others, or certain regions within the growing countries, remain poor, and millions of their citizens are afflicted by disease, hunger, malnutrition, unemployment, illiteracy, discrimination, lack of adequate shelter and other manifestations of poverty.

Poverty also remains a predominantly rural phenomenon: it is estimated that 70 per cent of all poor in the region, or approximately 475 million, live and work in rural areas. In some countries, such as Thailand, Cambodia or Viet Nam, more than 90 per cent of all poor people live in rural areas⁹. Rural development, leading to rural poverty reduction, thus appears as a key priority for the region. And that means *participatory* rural development.

The fact that participation is generally seen as the normal way of ‘doing’ rural development, combined with the multiplicity of interpretations of the term and the sheer size and diversity of the region, means that it is impossible, within the narrow limits of this overview paper, even to come

⁶ This perspective has since been absorbed by the mainstream, i.e. liberal or neo-liberal, perspective, but seems to have left behind a somewhat different approach to development, occasionally critical of the mainstream as represented by The World Bank and IMF. This perspective is found mainly among the so-called like-minded donors, a loose grouping that includes the Nordic countries, the UK, Germany and, though less and less as it increasingly follows the World Bank, also the Netherlands.

⁷ The PRA school would fit within this category, as do its left-wing critics, who classify it as ‘populist’, which is never a compliment, especially on the left.

⁸ Between the early 1990s and the early 2000s, the proportion of people in the region living on less than \$1 per day fell from 31 per cent to 20 per cent. The absolute number of poor people also fell, from 931 million to 679 million’ (ESCAP, 2007: 7). Of these, more than half live in South Asia.

⁹ Poverty is also, to a considerable extent, a gender, and increasingly an age, issue. Asian rural women as small farmers and/or rural labourers are among the most vulnerable poor (Polman, n.d.), as is the case, increasingly, with the elderly (Eberstadt, 2006).

close to complete coverage. This section aims instead at trying to give the reader an impression of the range and diversity of applications of participatory rural development, as well as an idea of the magnitude of the participatory phenomenon in Asia, by structuring this overview around a number of *themes* that stand out when reviewing the available literature. The use of the word ‘themes’ serves here to signal that we will not systematically follow any of the accepted typologies of participation. Instead, each of the themes is chosen for its intrinsic interest, without trying to define them in a completely consistent way and without worrying about the possibility that they may overlap to some extent, or that certain other areas or themes may not be as well treated as they deserve.

3.2 Participation in Asia: a partial overview around some themes

1. Diagnosis, community planning, project identification and formulation

This includes all efforts to involve the local population in defining their own problems, diagnosing the situations that give rise to such problems, setting priorities for their resolution, and identifying and formulating project interventions that may help solve some of those problems. An important distinction here is between cases where organizations or projects come into an area with certain interventions in mind and involve the local population in decisions that do not change this broad design, and those where, in line with the principles of PRA mentioned above, local people are called upon to determine even the kind of intervention that is needed. The former case tends to be found more often, because organizations, even in the non-governmental sector, are constrained by their mandate and mission or by conditions placed upon the use of funds at their disposal (see Boxes 2 and 3).

Box 2: Old-style participation: fisherwomen’s activities in Bangladesh

The Bay of Bengal Programme (BoBP) assisted a pilot project that used a participatory approach to improve the standard of living of marine fisher-folk. The project started out with a socio-economic survey of two fishing communities, 40 miles apart. Women from the communities were helped to organize themselves into small groups; income-generating activities were identified and implemented. Education-cum-action programmes on health, sanitation and nutrition were also launched. In the process, women were encouraged to discover and develop their own leadership abilities and to fortify themselves in their effort to better their condition. Net-making was started first as an income-generating activity. Other activities followed, such as the raising of chickens, ducks and goats. Loans were distributed for these as well as for the regular activities of fish drying and marketing. Members of the project received training on preventive health care, basic nutrition and on supplementary and weaning food.

Two women field workers based in Chittagong travelled frequently to the villages to guide project activities. They organized several groups of 5 to 6 members each. Each group had a coordinator selected from the members, called a link worker, usually a young person with the time and inclination to organize project activities. Link workers were paid a monthly wage of Tk 100 to 250 for their part-time effort, depending on performance. In three years, 178 fisherwomen were organized into 13 groups with nine link workers. Apart from the link workers, voluntary leaders also emerged who took on responsibilities like teaching primary health care, for which they received a token wage. When a few link workers left the project, voluntary leaders took their place. The link workers and voluntary leaders became a valuable human resource in the villages (Adapted from Natpracha, 1986).

Box 3: Philippines: Integrated Rural Development with a difference

The Philippines has a long tradition of integrated rural development (IRD) projects. In recent years, some of these projects have had a participatory dimension added to them. This is the case, in particular, of the Cordillera Highlands Agricultural Resource Management (CHARM) Project, implemented from 1996 to 2003 (Estrella, 2002). This project had the usual components of rural infrastructure development, agricultural support services and reforestation. In addition to this, development priorities and sub-projects addressing local needs were identified with the direct involvement of residents of poor communities and the participation of elected officials, NGOs and local government agencies. Subprojects identified by the communities then went through a collaborative screening and selection process involving the stakeholders—including government agencies — at municipal and provincial levels. Despite some imperfections (low participation of women and the poorer households), the consequences of participation included strong commitment to the process, increased ownership by citizens and officials and a strengthening of the collaboration between government agencies and NGOs.

Even with PRA/PLA approaches, however, despite the supposed subordination of the facilitators to the local people, these kinds of organizational constraints sometimes make themselves felt. This was the case for instance in a study in the Punjab, Pakistan (Ahmad, Tabassum and Gill, 2003), where the purpose was to identify the main problems faced by rural women who engaged into

income generating activities such as poultry rearing and sewing. Because the study was carried out in the context of a FAO project, it was possible for the project to do more in support of poultry rearing than in support of sewing, in relation to which the authors simply state (p. 76) that ‘... the solutions to the problems identified do not come under the purview of the project activities’.

Peters (2001) analyzes a rural development project in the uplands of Vietnam, and traces some of its shortcomings to the project having forgotten four lessons from past rural development experiences: ‘beware of “participatory” rural appraisal, start small and go slowly, introduce limited technologies, and help farmers adapt the technologies’. This forgetfulness he sees as a consequence of participation lip-service, big and fast donor-driven development, the availability of unlimited inappropriate technologies, and institutions that are not adapted to their putative functions.

II. Research and extension, innovation, knowledge

Part of our second theme borders with the first: there is a difference in degree but not in quality between cases where local people participate in diagnosis or planning and those where they play an active role in research. This is partly a consequence of a shift in perspectives concerning the complex question of indigenous knowledge and its status. After the implicit assumptions concerning the superiority of scientific knowledge that prevailed during the XIXth and most of the XXth centuries, the spread of postmodernism towards the end of the latter century ushered in extreme relativist positions according to which all knowledge (and belief) systems are basically equivalent so that there is no sense in even asking questions concerning the superiority of one over another. Together with other, less felicitous, consequences, this had the advantage of restoring respectability to indigenous – or folk, or vernacular, or, in agricultural contexts, farmer – knowledge, and to open up the possibility of serious research on this important subject, which tended to reveal situations far more complex, nuanced and dynamic than had been assumed before (see *e.g.* Jewitt, 2000; Price, 2001; Gurung, 2003). Another was a substantial increase in the recognition and acceptance of the role that farmers can play in agricultural research, development and extension, particularly from the late 1980s onwards.

Agricultural research was for a long time seen as the exclusive domain of scientists, with extension as the (one-way) delivery of the scientists’ findings to farmers, whose own role was seen to be in implementation, basically limited to adopting the technological innovations handed down to them. This kind of agricultural research and extension was criticized for, among other things, (i) the relative isolation of agricultural research stations, leading to research which is not always relevant to farmers’ needs and circumstances; (ii) excessive focus on yield, which is only one among several variables farmers consider when making choices (others include risk, food security and dietary preferences); (iii) a top-down approach to extension, disregarding farmers’ knowledge and experience; and (iv) ignorance of or disregard for the socio-economic constraints facing farmers. This, critics claimed, often led to poor research, based on wrong assumptions and failing to solve real problems.

In farmer participatory approaches the relation between research, extension and implementation, and the relations between the actors involved, are very different:

... the research and development realm (...) consists of co-creative processes to identify needs and opportunities, generate new information and innovations, consolidate them with existing farming practice, and then translate them into learning objectives and activities for enhanced farmer performance. ...[Extension and implementation] contains the phases during which efforts are made – either in a formal or a non-formal setting – to share innovations with larger groups of farmers, who then test, evaluate, and internalize (or reject) them in their farming practices, finally leading to impact (van de Fliert and Braun, 2002: 28).

Examples of participatory approaches to research and extension include for instance applications to setting priorities for the development of a research agenda for water management in a village in Khon Kaen

Province, Thailand (Caldwell *et al.*, 2002), to sustainable agriculture development in uplands of West Sumatra, Indonesia (Dendi and Shivakoti, 2003), to the development of forage technology with smallholders in Southeast Asia (Horne *et al.*, 2000), or the application of participatory technology development to improving crop-based pig production systems in Vietnam (Peters *et al.*, 2005; see also Boxes 4 and 5). There is also a great deal of participatory research applied not just to agriculture, but to natural resource management as well (Pound *et al.*, 2003). Ashby uses the term ‘research *for* development’ to characterize an approach which she describes as emphasizing ‘the iterative, adaptive nature of innovation in complex ecosystems, which is achieved through systematic enquiry combined with learning based in action’ (2003: 1).

Box 4: Improving crop-based pig production in Vietnam

Sweet potato-pig production is an important and widely practiced system that generates income, utilizes unmarketable crops, and provides manure for soil fertility maintenance. It is also usually characterized by low growth rates and low economic efficiency. The project in Vietnam used situation analysis, participatory technology development (PTD), and scaling up to improve sweet potato-pig production and to disseminate the technologies developed. Situation analysis included a series of pig production assessments, as well as pig supply-market chain identification, in several provinces. PTD involved a limited number of farmers participating in sweet potato varietal selection, sweet potato root and vine silage processing, seasonal feeding combination, and pig feeding with balanced crop-feed diet and silage. The main improvements included improved growth, higher feeding efficiency, increased year-round local feedstuff, and considerable labour reduction. A farmer-to-farmer training model was designed for scaling up the adoption and impact. Farmer trainers from seven communes in seven provinces received training in these technologies. In turn, they undertook the responsibility of training other farmers on sweet potato selection, processing, and feeding. An impact study showed that both participating and non-participating farmers took up the technologies, although the former had higher rates of adoption, generated more income and saved more labour from adoption of the technologies. The project has since broadened to a pig-cropfeed system perspective, based on farmers’ needs. It has included other crop feeds such as cassava and peanut stems in the research portfolio. New technologies based on on-going PTD will continuously be incorporated into the future training curriculum. (Adapted from Peters *et al.*, 2005)

Box 5: PROLINNOVA, a partnership to scale up Agricultural Research and Development (ARD)

Confidence in the effectiveness of one-way transfers of technology from scientists to users has waned over the years, as the recognition grew that the complexity of issues involved in improving the livelihoods of poor farmers requires attention not only to agriculture, but to a broader framework ranging from local governance to national policy, including action for change. This requires the knowledge of scientists from different disciplines as well as the knowledge and skills of other actors who can help to bring about change. Therefore, partnerships between scientists and other actors in ARD are being actively sought. PROLINNOVA is one such partnership, aiming at institutionalizing participatory approaches, so that they are understood, accepted and integrated into the regular programmes and activities of institutions of agricultural research, extension and education. The overall objective is to develop and institutionalise partnerships and methodologies that promote processes of local innovation in ecologically-oriented agriculture and NRM.

The focus of PROLINNOVA is on local innovation. This is used as an entry point to building local partnerships between holders of different types of knowledge. These interactions, in turn, are used as entry points to stimulating institutional change. The process starts with encouraging people trained in Western science – researchers, extension agents, teachers etc – to identify and document innovations that local people develop on their own initiative and using their own resources, without pressure or direct support from formal ARD. In the process of local innovation, individuals or groups build on and expand the boundaries of their existing knowledge and discover new ways of managing resources: new tools, new techniques, new ways of doing things such as co-managing resources, communicating or organising themselves for marketing. The local partners – the farmers and scientists and/or development workers – then decide how to enhance processes of sharing these good ideas through informal and formal channels. The local innovations also become foci for community groups to examine opportunities, to plan joint experiments to explore the ideas further and to evaluate the results together. This process of Participatory Innovation Development (PID) integrates informal local and formal global (scientific) knowledge. Thus, PID builds on what farmers are already trying to do to solve problems or to grasp opportunities they have identified, in contrast to a scientist-driven research agenda. PROLINNOVA offer platforms at provincial and national level where stakeholders in ARD jointly plan how they will bring about this institutional change – and then actually do it (adapted from Waters-Bayer *et al.*, 2005).

III. Natural resource management

Within the broad field of rural development, natural resource management development is a main area of application of participatory approaches. In general terms, the purpose of these interventions is to improve the living conditions of local people, particularly the poor, by helping them manage the natural resources available to them or under their control with greater effectiveness, sustainability and equity.

For Pimbert (2004: 50-51), writing from a PRA/PLA perspective, the importance of participatory approaches to natural resource management lies in that:

Eliciting and making visible diverse **local** realities, priorities, categories and indicators through participatory learning is still very much needed today to challenge top down, ‘one size fits all’ science, policy and practice in natural resource management. However, claims that one tradition of knowledge and practice (local, vernacular systems *versus* external, science-based systems) is always better than the other may ultimately restrict possibilities. Instead, a key challenge for participatory learning and action lies in creating **safe** spaces where plural traditions of knowledge can be purposefully combined for the local adaptive management of natural resources and their equitable use.

Participatory approaches to natural resource management have been implemented in connection with a considerable variety of natural resources, including forests and woodlands (Rai, 1998), coastal resources, (Ira, 1997), water and watersheds (Kolavalli and Kerr, 2002; RDI, 2003; Reddy *et al.*, 2004), fisheries in flood-prone ecosystems (Campbell and Townsley, 1997, Bdes p.223), soil and water conservation (see Box 6) and conservation of nature reserves, to mention only some examples.

Participatory approaches are naturally complemented, in some of these cases, by the use of a *sustainable livelihoods framework*, which considers that a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. Because it takes into account not only agricultural but other assets and activities as well, the livelihoods approach is particularly suited to natural resource management, where very often the resources being dealt with are not of a strictly agricultural nature. Reddy *et al.* (2004), for example, analyse the impact of India’s programme of watershed development on the livelihoods of rural communities, by looking at its impact on the five types of capital assets and strategies required for the means of living. They also analyse the vulnerability and stability of those capital assets as well as the participation in the programme. They conclude that, even in difficult environmental

conditions where the watershed cannot bring direct irrigation benefits on a large scale, watershed development, if supported with other programmes, has potential for sustaining rural livelihoods.

Box 6: Participatory Watershed Management: Wasteland Development Project, Almer District, Rajasthan

For over two decades, the Pissagan block in Ajmer district, Rajasthan, faced problems of soil erosion due to flow of rainwater from the Aaravali Ranges. The rainwater in its course deposited stones and pebbles on the land, which had become unfit for cultivation. The soil lost moisture and the water table level fell. This had a negative effect on the lives of the people. As the land was not fit for cultivation the villagers earned their living as daily wageworkers in Ajmer or nearby towns, and most of them lived in poverty. They had to walk up to 4-5 kilometres to fetch water, fodder for cattle and fuel wood. The Wasteland Development Project started in Ajmer in 1995. Its main objectives were: (i) soil and moisture conservation measures; (ii) raising the water table level; (iii) providing fodder and fuel wood, and (iv) improving the socio-economic conditions of the villagers. This was to be achieved by means of construction of check dams and guard trenches to slow down and divert the water, water harvesting structures, tree planting, afforestation and horticulture. Meeting the objectives would not have been possible without people's participation. A sense of ownership was essential to ensure long run sustainability. Users committees, including villagers, farmers and project staff were formed. Membership varied from village to village. The office bearers of the users committees are elected and are changed on non-performance. Users committees were entrusted with the following responsibilities: (i) Implementation of the project (ii) Management of the project (iii) Protecting the construction activities and (iv) Distribution of fodder and fuel wood and wages to labourers.

Community participation was key to the success of the project. It ensured all through the implementation of the project that the people's enthusiasm and interest would not wane away after the initial euphoria. Most importantly, the project staff were from the beginning distant spectators, only providing the technical inputs but leaving design, execution and management to the users committees. This micro-level planning provided people with an opportunity to learn how to manage the scheme and gave them the confidence that they can now do things without government support. In the seven years it lasted, the project has changed the whole block of Pissagan. Today, Pissagan is a model for soil conservation measures. The lost flora and fauna are returning and even the villagers are reaping benefits. This project has raised hopes that wasteland can be made fertile and bring prosperity to the area. It has checked soil erosion and has helped retain soil moisture. Also, fodder and fuel wood are plentiful. In fact with each year production has grown and so has distribution (adapted from RDI, 2003).

Another interesting intersection between participatory and rural livelihoods approaches was a PPA carried out in Mongolia, which has 'shed new light on what might be an appropriate approach in public policy and investment to foster secure and sustainable livelihoods both within and outside the extensive livestock sector' (Mearns, 2004: 133; see also Box 7).

Box 7: Participatory poverty appraisal in Mongolia, using a sustainable livelihoods approach

An interesting combination of the participatory and the rural livelihoods approach was a Participatory Poverty Appraisal carried out in Mongolia, where growing demands placed on the pastoral livestock sector without the necessary investments, and the consequent increase in pressure over grazing land, has begun to threaten sustainability in significant ways, with symptoms that are also symptoms of rising poverty and inequality. The PPA has shown close links between poverty dynamics in rural and in urban areas, and between livelihood strategies in agriculture and those in other spheres. It has proved that secure and sustainable livelihoods will not be achieved if Mongolia's PRS does not emphasize the development of the livestock sector.

The PPA shed new light on what might be an appropriate approach in public policy and investment to foster secure and sustainable livelihoods both within and outside the extensive livestock sector. It has shown that four complementary livelihood strategies need to be encouraged: *intensification*, including breed selection, supplementary feeding, veterinary services; *extensification*, including bringing back into use large areas of good pasture by rehabilitating wells and involving herder groups; *diversification* into new value adding activities, most likely of livestock product processing; and *migration* towards potential new livelihood sources (adapted from Mearns, 2004).

IV. Governance and decentralization

Governance plays an important role in determining the conditions under which participation can take place and, through its mechanisms, processes and institutions, it critically affects the possibility of participation as well as its likely success. Good governance makes it possible for citizens, individually or in groups, to articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights and negotiate their differences. Within the broad area of governance, decentralization, which brings decision-making closer to the local level, is potentially important to participation, since it may, if it is done well, lead to more responsive government and new opportunities for citizens to participate. The qualification is important, since there is also the danger that decentralization may provide little space for the poor to participate in local decision-making, may be misused by powerful sections of the community and end up fostering clientelism and strengthening local elites. One of the ways to 'do it well' is by strengthening participation at the same time as the decentralization is carried out.

A number of studies examine the linkages between governance (and decentralization) and participation. Agrawal and Gupta (2005) carry out a statistical analysis of who participates in environmental decentralization programmes in protected areas in Nepal's Terai. They find that the

likelihood of participation in community-level user groups is greater for those who are economically and socially better-off and who have greater access to government offices and officials related to decentralization policies. Their analysis support the argument that for decentralization policies to be successful in dealing with equity issues, it is important to build institutional mechanisms that encourage poorer and more marginal households to access government officials, improve access to educational opportunities, and create incentives to promote more interactions between less powerful rural residents.

Mathew (2004) reviews recent Indian experience of empowering the *panchayats*, rural (and urban) local government bodies, following constitutional amendments in 1992 that sought to institutionalize the idea of decentralized planning by autonomous panchayats, with participation of the local communities. He finds that, largely because of a lack of administrative and financial resources, panchayats have at best become the implementing arms of state governments rather than institutions of self-government. In addition to this, and despite important steps to include marginalized communities in the power structure of local government institutions, 'it cannot be said that panchayats have been able to take effective measures for removing the economic and social deprivation of the marginalized people' (p. 3). Mathew concludes that there are grounds for cautious optimism and that local government institutions need various kinds of support from higher tiers of government to succeed, such as legislation, constructive directions, monitoring, training and resource transfers.

Examining the same experience, Gaiha and Kulkarni (2002) come to broadly similar conclusions. They emphasize the informational and administrative advantages of community involvement in the design and implementation of anti-poverty and related programmes, mention the danger of 'elite capture' of the panchayats and conclude that only in a few cases has the system benefited the poor. They see collective action by the poor as key to the success of poverty alleviation, although the prospects for this are limited, given that they are divided by caste and religion. They conclude that the panchayat system's potential for poverty alleviation is hard to dispute.

Finally, a reference must be made to the Kecamatan Development Program, started in Indonesia in pilot form in 1997, and implemented from 1998 onwards (Guggenheim *et al.*, 2004; see also Box 8) one of the world's largest participatory development programmes implemented in Indonesia. This World Bank-funded programme is described by the Bank as 'an effort to address long-term structural poverty through targeted, decentralized block grants [and] at another level [...] an effort to increase community prioritization and management of government-funded local development projects' (World Bank, 2004).

Box 8: The Kecamatan Development Project, Decentralized Community Development for Poverty Reduction

The Kecamatan Development Program (KDP) is a Government of Indonesia program aimed at alleviating poverty in rural communities, strengthening local government and improving local governance. KDP provides block grants of 350 million to one billion rupiah (USD 40,000 to USD 114,000) directly to subdistricts (kecamatan) and villages for small-scale infrastructure, social and economic activities.

KDP began in 1998 at a time of tremendous political upheaval and financial crisis, which reversed years of progress in poverty reduction and plunged millions of rural people below the poverty line.

KDP has a very flexible structure, which gives power to communities by entrusting them with planning and decision-making responsibilities and placing funds directly in their hands. By pushing decision-making down to the lowest levels, KDP aims to allow villagers to participate in decision-making. The program in essence seeks to empower the rural poor and encourage more democratic and participatory forms of local governance by delivering its resources via inclusive, transparent and accountable decision-making mechanisms designed on the basis of extensive prior social research in Indonesia. All KDP activities aim at allowing villagers to make their own choices about the kinds of projects that they need and want. 'Community participation' is regarded as an important element in KDP, as is evident from the process of planning, decision making, and implementation. However, implementation is not perfect. Frequent problems include low participation by the poor in the planning process and elite capture of the participatory processes.

The replication of KDP has been exceedingly fast, and its scaling up has also gone substantially beyond the programme itself. Particularly interesting is the extension of the KDP principle of direct transfers to support participatory planning to primary education, health and natural resource management (adapted mainly from Guggenheim, 2004).

V. Other themes and final remarks

Practicalities preclude the possibility of elaborating further on these themes, or discussing some other interesting themes, such as for instance self-help groups and collective action by the poor (Blaxall, 2004; Deshmukh-Ranadive, 2004), or the supposed – and often rather unsatisfactory – participation of the poor in poverty reduction strategy papers (Guimarães, 2005; Booth, 2005) or, along a completely different dimension, the challenges of participatory rural development in the particular social and political environment of China. What needs to be stressed is that, despite differences in approach, all the examples discussed represent a clear and strong illustration of the statement that participation has become part of the mainstream of development. At the same time, and *because* of the differences in approach, they also clearly illustrate the ambiguities in the use of that term.

Much of the more interesting criticism of participation, and particularly the so-called tyranny critique, started precisely with criticisms of participation (especially PRA) as the ‘new orthodoxy’, which the critics felt had lost track of its original objectives as a consequence of co-optation into the mainstream. A brief overview of some aspects of this critique may help us clarify ideas about participation and – since nothing is more practical than good theory – throw additional light upon some of the difficulties that it faces in practice.

4 Current debates on participation

4.1 The ‘tyranny’ and other criticisms

As was mentioned before, participation and especially PRA have been subjected to frequent critical analysis from inside their own ‘communities of practice’. For PRA, the results of this analysis have appeared from time to time in *Participatory Learning and Action* or its predecessors. ‘Self-critical epistemological awareness’ is for Robert Chambers (1997: 32) an essential aspect of participatory ideology and practice. This self-criticism – and even criticism from relative outsiders, such as Mosse (1994), or most of the papers in Bastian and Bastian (1996) – does, however, stop short of bringing into question participation itself, or the PRA approach. For this reason Cooke and Kothari (2001a: 6-7), who organized and then edited the proceedings of a conference on *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, place it at ‘the border between the orthodoxy and more critical positions’. Although recognizing that this boundary is blurred, their aim with the conference was to move beyond criticism that might legitimize the participatory project, to more fundamental critiques.

The same authors (pp. 7-8) refer to ‘three particular sets of tyrannies’, with associated questions, identified to guide the critical analysis of participation, and particularly PRA, in the conference:

First was what we called ‘the tyranny of decision-making and control’, where we asked in the conference flyer ‘Do participatory facilitators override existing legitimate decision-making processes?’ Second was the ‘tyranny of the group’ – where the question posed was ‘Do group dynamics lead to participatory decisions that reinforce the interests of the already powerful?’ Third, we raised the issue of the ‘tyranny of method’, asking ‘Have participatory methods driven out others which have advantages that participation cannot provide?’ [...] The chapters in this book suggest that the answer to each of these questions is, or can be in some circumstances, ‘Yes’.

Some of the main criticisms of participatory approaches presented in the book (and elsewhere) are reviewed below.

The knowledge claims of participatory approaches

The first set of criticisms targets the knowledge claims of participatory approaches and, more specifically, PRA. Chambers (1994: 1258 *ff*) makes considerable claims of validity and reliability for the knowledge about the world through PRA. Campbell (2001) expresses reservations about these claims, on methodological grounds. He argues that ‘though RRA and PRA were intended to

provide roughly accurate information, the tendency has been to use them as a stand-alone set of techniques to undertake research' and that failure by participatory researchers to engage with issues of validity and reliability as defined in the qualitative research tradition will result eclectic and unfocused work, of limited practical, theoretical and policy value. Campbell makes the case for the integration of PRA with 'qualitative and quantitative methods that produce greater insight and more in-depth understanding than is possible from casual observation or from forms of inquiry that depend upon highly structured ways of interacting with respondents'.

Mosse (1994, 2001) raises doubts about the nature and validity of the information, such as statements of community needs and priorities, generated by PRA and other participatory methods. He sees it as problematic because it is produced in a social context strongly influenced by power, authority and gender inequality. In particular, he sees the *public* nature of PRA as causing the production of local knowledge to be subjected to the effects of 'officializing strategies' and 'muting'¹⁰. On the basis of his own experience, Mosse also stresses that information or knowledge generated in PRAs is the outcome of a complex game shaped by the concerns of 'outsiders' and their interaction with 'insider' community members, where each group repeatedly tries to anticipate the other's wishes and intentions. This leads him to question the assumption that 'learning and "local knowledge" defines or redefines the relationship between local communities and development institutions [...] Rather than project plans being shaped by "indigenous knowledge", it is farmers who acquire and learn to manipulate new forms of "planning knowledge". In this way local knowledge becomes compatible with bureaucratic planning' (Mosse, 2001: 32).

Furthermore, Mosse makes the crucial point that there are important insights about a local social reality that are necessarily external and analytical, rather than participatory, and are not, and probably cannot be, generated in group discussions by villagers: 'Like other analytical models, and like the knowledge gained from the critical reflection on project activities, they represent... an external viewpoint' (1995: 6).

Along a slightly different line, Stirrat (1996) criticizes the practice of positing two separate and opposed forms of knowledge (as in local or indigenous knowledge vs. scientific knowledge) as misconstruing the nature of forms of knowledge, which in this age of globalization do not exist in isolation but in terms of a global field of mutual interrelationships.

Finally, from another perspective, Kothari (2001: 182) also throws doubt on the claims of participatory methodologies of acquiring more appropriate and relevant local knowledge and of including and empowering those previously marginalized. She stresses the importance of examining how power relations run through a particular social body and are expressed in a variety of ways. She concludes that

By constructing dichotomies of power and oppositional social groupings, participatory approaches simplify highly complicated social relations. Thus participatory techniques can conceal inequalities and in certain circumstances reify them. What counts as "local knowledge" is often the effect of specific kinds of techniques of power, of regulation and of normalization (p. 182).

The illusions of 'community'

A second line of criticism of participatory approaches focuses on what Cleaver (2001: 44) describes as 'myths of community': 'The "community" in participatory approaches to development is often seen as a "natural" social entity characterized by solidaristic relations. It is assumed that these can be represented and channelled in simple organizational forms.' This perspective is criticized on a

¹⁰ Pottier and Orone (1995) make a similar point when they say that 'The major obstacle is that workshops, no matter how participatory they may be, are still public activities during which certain aspects of everyday social life must remain hidden from the outside world. [...] Public discussion does not move beyond the ground rules, the safe discourse, the official model. It is therefore no more than a first step in learning about actual practices.'

number of counts. First, the image of the community – or the village – as a natural entity, with clearly defined limits and membership, appears simplistic in the light of available evidence of the shifting, overlapping and subjective nature of ‘communities’, and of the permeability of their boundaries. As Stirrat (1996: 71) points out, villages are physical groupings of houses where people interact, but the social processes of which these people are a part have a much wider physical range, so that to idealise villages as significant social entities is to participate in the reification – indeed the invention – of an imaginary form of rural life. Cleaver (*loc.cit.*) concurs: ‘a concentration on boundaries highlights the needs in development for clear administrative arrangements, more to do with the delivery of goods than a reflection of any social arrangement’. Secondly, participatory approaches stress – and rely upon – community consensus and solidarity; they tend to pay insufficient attention to social differentiation and conflict, negotiation, inclusion and exclusion, with all that this implies (Cleaver, 2001; Francis, 2001). Harmony and cooperation are the exception rather than the rule in rural societies, where division and conflict are much more common.

Stirrat (1996: 69 *ff*) argues that descriptions of rural society that emphasize ‘village’, ‘community’, ‘local people’, consensus and harmony can be characterized as a ‘new Orientalism’ that, just as the old, is crucially connected with power and domination: ‘Put crudely, the Neo-Orientalist view of rural society is part of the continuing relationship of power and control, in which the rural population in all its forms is depicted as in need of protection and ‘mobilization’, through the actions of outsiders. Yet this relationship of dominance is presented as its opposite’.

In the third place, there is ‘the myth that communities are capable of anything, that all that is required is sufficient mobilization (through institutions) and the latent capacities of communities will be unleashed in the interest of development. The evidence does little to support such claims’ (Cleaver, 2001:46). Even when collective action takes place, the critical units for decision making and action are often above or below the community level (Francis, 2001:79).

The logic or bureaucratic organizations

Another line of criticism relates to what, paraphrasing Richards (1995), we could describe as the bureaucratisation of participation, when the logic of participation as empowerment may clash with organizational interests or even, as the concerned organizations see it, their very survival. Mosse (2001) gives a concrete example of the conflict between ideals of participation, striving to independent capacities, local autonomy and eventual project withdrawal, and ‘the core rationale of the same project from the organization’s point of view, based on its network of patronage and the delivery of an expanding range of programmes, increasingly through village volunteers who operated as the lower orders of the project delivery mechanism. [...] Why would the organization want to rid itself of its best customers, and villagers take leave of a serviceable patron?’ ‘Empowerment’ may then become a means to managerial effectiveness, and this may in turn require a form of subjection of those that are supposed to be empowered.

Similarly, as Stirrat (1996) points out, NGOs working in rural development may talk of empowerment but in practice they are often accountable not to their members or those they work with, but to their donors, and it is the donors’ criteria that they have to satisfy in order to continue being funded. This may lead to the adoption of very similar views to the donor’s and create shared interests that work against too close a questioning of the structure.

Other criticism: a summary

Both in the ‘tyranny’ book and elsewhere, participatory approaches to rural development are criticized along other lines, largely complementary to those mentioned above. Much of that criticism may best be summed up by saying that participatory approaches fail to take into account what Cleaver (2001: 39) calls the *recursive relationship between structure and agency*.

Consequently, they ignore the considerable progress made by the social sciences in trying to understand the complex and diverse interactions between individuals and social structure; posit simplistic models of individual action, alternating between ‘rational choice’ and ‘social being’; fail to analyse social structure and the linkages between individuals and the structures and institutions of the social world they inhabit; are naive about the complexities of power, power relations, how power is embedded into social and cultural practices and how empowerment may occur; and their practice tends towards treating participation as a technical method of project work, lays excessive emphasis on the local level and on the organization of collective action, and depoliticizes what should be an explicitly political process. As Stirrat (1996) argues rather bad-temperedly, most participatory discourse is bad in theory, limited in methods, and epistemologically weak.

This is strong criticism, which needs to be taken seriously by theorists and practitioners alike.

Taking it seriously means, among other things, that the easy way out, which is to dismiss all such criticism as referring to instances of bad practice, must be avoided no matter how strong the temptation. For that way lies participation – or PRA – as a closed system, and the impossibility of learning and changing.

4.2 ‘From tyranny to transformation’

Hickey and Mohan (2004) edited a book with this title, aimed at evaluating the state of participatory approaches in the aftermath of the ‘tyranny’ critique. They mention evidence suggesting that participation has actually deepened and extended its role in development, with new approaches emerging in theory, policy and practice and, most importantly, people in developing countries continually devising new and innovative strategies for expressing their agency in development arenas. The book tries to explore the extent to which the new approaches respond to the critique and can re-establish participation as a ‘legitimate and genuinely transformative approach to development’ (Hickey and Mohan, 2004a: 3). An underlying theme is that ‘politics matter’ in international development, and that the way towards a more transformative approach to development is through understanding how participation relates to existing power structures and political systems.

Hickey and Mohan (2004b; 2005) advocate a radical political project based on the promotion of citizenship as a way of overcoming the ‘tyranny’ of local, project based approaches to participation and establishing a link between participation at the project level and governance and political action at the state level. This they see as creating a possibility to bring about a broader project of social justice and structural transformation, as (poor) citizens take autonomous action and create their own opportunities for participation. It is in the context of such a multi-level political project that they see agency of the poor, expressed in active citizenship aimed at local governance reform, as possible and meaningful: ‘Relocating ‘participation’ within citizenship situates it in a broader range of sociopolitical practices, or expressions of agency, through which people extend their status and rights as members of particular political communities, thereby increasing their control over socioeconomic resources’ (2005: 253).

In the same book, Cornwall and Gaventa explore participatory spaces and participatory governance, itself closely connected with the concept of citizenship. Cornwall (2004; also 2002), looking for new entry points to understand the dynamics of power and difference, explores the concept of spaces for participation, where ‘citizens gain meaningful opportunities to exercise voice and hold to account those who invite them to participate’ (Cornwall, 2002: 56). She sees these spaces less as concrete locales than sites that both constitute and express power relations, and that condition the subjects’ presence, action and discourse, their competence and performance. She argues that ‘by illuminating the dynamics of power, voice and agency, thinking spatially can help towards building strategies for more genuinely transformative social action’ (2004: 75). Gaventa (2004: 35) defines a variety of different spaces from a participation point of view, ranging from *closed spaces* in

which 'decisions are made by a set of actors behind closed doors, without any pretence of broadening the boundaries for inclusion', to *claimed/created spaces*, 'which are claimed by less powerful actors from or against the power-holders, or created more autonomously by them'. Between these two, *invited spaces* are those 'into which people (as users, as citizens, as beneficiaries) are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities, be they government, supra-national agencies or non-governmental organizations'. Cornwall sees invited spaces as an important way in which development intervention may support transformative participation.

Gaventa (2004) links participation and citizenship, and explores the transformative possibilities of citizen engagement with local governance, and the conditions under which such engagement can lead to both a strengthening of democracy and pro-poor development outcomes. He argues that an analysis of the power relations in and around new spaces for democratic engagement is necessary for assessing their potential for transformation: 'Only through such a power analysis can we fulfil the broader agenda of understanding and promoting both participatory democracy and participatory development, for theorists and practitioners alike' (2004: 39).

Although recognizing that the citizenship approach of Hickey and Mohan, also elaborated by Gaventa, has potential particularly through the possibility of multi-level approaches to participation, Cleaver (2004: 272) returns to the recursive relation between agency and structure when she cautions that agency cannot be exercised in a vacuum. The forms that citizenship can take are shaped by the minutiae of social life and relationships, which may prove slower and more difficult to transform than public spaces and institutions of the state. The short-term costs to the poor of fully assuming their citizenship and their rights and confronting the unequal and oppressive relations on which they depend may be too high when compared with the costs of simply allowing those relations to continue. Cleaver identifies three key factors that 'both enable and *constrain* the exercise of agency and therefore shape citizenship: moral understandings of action and the unconscious motivation of many acts, the complexity of both individual and collective identities and the (often unequal) interdependence involved in the exercise of rights and livelihood interests', and concludes that recognizing those constraints, and 'the limits of the makeability of social life', is crucial to achieving something in development.

4.3 The relevance of the debate

Both the criticisms of participation and the potential for transformation that recent approaches have identified are extremely relevant and utterly practical. It is an ever-present temptation for practitioners to gloss over the problematic nature of much of the knowledge generated with participatory methods, to be lulled by the illusions associated with the concept of community and the assumptions that accompany it, to assume that the constraints of social structure can be easily overcome by proper participation, or to ignore the clash between organizational constraints and objectives and the desires and interests of the local poor. These criticisms thus represent a much-needed 'reality check' that can help us question our assumptions and 'take nothing for granted'. The same may be said of the transformative potential of participation. It is, again, tempting to emphasize, in the complex social processes in which we are involved,

'...the potential of the bits we like: the transformation rather than the tyranny, the solidarity rather than the conflict, articulation rather than mutedness, the enablement of agency rather than the constraint of structure. In thinking through participation, we do ourselves no favours in wishing away the potentially negative aspects of representation. Our challenge is to use an understanding of the dynamic nature of such duality to identify opportunities for change. However, we have to reconcile ourselves to these only ever being partial, intermittent, involving winners and losers, not entirely controllable or predictable (Cleaver, 2004: 276).

5 The challenges of participatory rural development: some reflections and points for discussion

A good enough participation

Despite our best efforts, perfect, transformative, empowering participation is probably unattainable most of the time, except perhaps where it was not necessary to begin with. The question then is whether we can have a ‘good enough participation’, what that would look like and what it would require. Perhaps the main criterion would be that the interventions associated with it should do no harm, and preferably some good, in terms of the main objective of poverty alleviation, while at the same time contributing towards creating at least some of the conditions that enable participation, agency and the full exercise of citizenship by the poor to take place. If such interventions remove some of the constraints of everyday life, by increasing the productivity of agricultural labour or bringing clean water closer to where people live, alleviating the burden of disease caused by malnutrition and lack of hygiene, decreasing vulnerability to natural disasters or to the vagaries of climate and rainfall, or making people less dependent on relations of patronage for daily subsistence, they are a step in the right direction (Cleaver, 2004). If this is done for instance through the permanent and expanding presence of an organization that offers ‘better technology and more affordable inputs rather than autonomy and independence’ (Mosse, 2001: 34), it may not fit in with the fashion for empowerment and farmer-managed development, but may still represent significant progress.

Multidimensional rural poverty and the sustainable livelihoods approach

The complexity and multi-dimensionality of poverty in general, and rural poverty in particular, are generally accepted nowadays. A recent ESCAP document calls for

... a deeper knowledge and understanding of the emerging dynamics and local processes that cause and maintain rural poverty. The rural poor face multiple deprivations from lack of assets, isolation, alienation, dependence, powerlessness, vulnerability and lack of freedom of choice. Disparities also exist within rural areas: in particular, disparities between ruling rural elites and small farmers or landless households; and disparities among farmers over access and rights to fertile lands. In this context, a distinction between the different but closely related dimensions of poverty is important : (a) a lack of income and productive assets; (b) a lack of access to essential economic and social services; and (c) a lack of power, participation and respect. These different dimensions of poverty reinforce each other, keeping the poor trapped in poverty (ESCAP, 2007: 8).

Lack of awareness of this multi-dimensionality, or a reluctance to confront it, may explain much the failure of past rural development strategies in reducing rural poverty. The implication is clear: new, sharper, multi-targeted rural development strategies are called for, taking this complexity and multi-dimensionality fully into account and going beyond the old approaches that were based solely on the growth of agricultural productivity and focused almost exclusively on the small farmer.

An approach to rural poverty and rural development that appears capable to encompass this complexity and multi-dimensionality is the so-called sustainable livelihoods approach (Scoones, 1998; Ellis, 2000). As Ellis and Biggs (2001: 445) emphasize, this approach ‘... embodies no prior requirement for the poor rural individual or family to be a “small farmer”’. The livelihoods approach takes an open-ended view of the combination of assets and activities that turn out to constitute a viable livelihood strategy for the rural family’. The same authors add that empirical research indicates that farming amounts on average to only about 40-60% of the livelihood ‘package’ put together by rural households in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa¹¹, and conclude:

¹¹ van Roosmalen and Guimarães (1982) made a similar point 25 years ago, when they stated that in Southwest Bangladesh farmer’s strategies often involve investing agricultural surpluses in activities such as educating their children, setting up small businesses (if possible in neighboring urban areas), buying land in different locations, lending money and generally diversifying their economic activities. As Bendavid (1991) also noted, even large farmers only

If a new paradigm of rural development is to emerge, it will be one in which agriculture takes its place along with a host of other actual and potential rural and non-rural activities that are important to the construction of viable rural livelihoods, without undue preference being given to farming as the unique solution to rural poverty. It is in this sense that the cross-sectoral and multi-occupational diversity of rural livelihoods may need to become the cornerstone of rural development policy if efforts to reduce rural poverty are to be effective in the future.

Such paradigm will probably combine participatory approaches with rural livelihoods, given their compatibility and potential for mutual reinforcement.

Contextual factors and the role of the state

The success or failure of participatory rural development interventions depends as much on the conditions surrounding the particular intervention as on the quality of the work done at the local level. Among the conditions most frequently mentioned are economic growth, a favourable political and administrative environment characterized by administrative decentralization and more generally good governance at the macro level, and the presence of cultural traits or ideologies that favour participation, self-reliance and collective action by the poor (see Box 9).

It must, however, be kept in mind that (i) as experience has repeatedly shown, there is no automatic cause and effect relationship between economic growth and poverty reduction; (ii) decentralization and good governance work primarily by removing constraints and barriers; and (iii) even when culture and ideology favour collective action by the poor, there are limits to what they can do, as their agency is constrained as much as it is enabled by structure (see section 4 above).

Box 9: Economic growth and poverty reduction in Vietnam

Vietnam has important lessons in participation, rural development and poverty alleviation. In the recent past, the share of people living in poverty fell from 58% in 1992 to 37% in 1998 and 29% in 2002; rural poverty fell from 45.5% in 1998 to 35.6% in 2002. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Bank supported rural development projects in Vietnam that take a participatory, bottom-up approach:

‘The most important first generation project, the Participatory Resources Management Project (PRMP), was designed in 1993. [...] The project sought to [ensure] equitable access to all development planning with the full participation of communities in the province of Tuyen Quang, one of the poorest in the country. The project introduced new approaches to poverty reduction, including decentralization and promotion of provincial autonomy, to promote food security, build management capacity at the community level, and introduce participatory, demand-driven approaches in institutions providing rural support services. Second generation initiatives [...] have built on the success of the PRMP and scaled up decentralization and community-driven development in Vietnam’s poorest areas. These projects have done a good job of targeting poor people, and decentralization and participation have empowered rural people to identify, plan, implement, and evaluate interventions, giving them a greater stake in development efforts’ (Markanday, 2004).

Factors explaining the country’s success in reducing rural poverty include the existence of an environment conducive to rural development, with a national policy focus on poverty reduction and a policy of economic reforms that has delivered remarkable growth for a considerable period of time. Without this favourable economic and policy environment, the story might have been very different.

Although the poor can be resourceful and imaginative, they are unlikely to be able to escape poverty by themselves. This means that neo-liberal solutions to the problem of poverty are unlikely to work: the problem will just not go away without deliberate and proactive government policies, backed by appropriate resource allocation. This does not imply a return to the government-led, top-down interventions of old, which did not work either: rather, the state must work with the poor, creating the conditions for their participation and supporting it with resource transfers, stimulating pro-poor growth and working to reduce inequality and promote social justice.

invest seriously in agricultural *intensification* after such diversification, when they feel secure about what we would now call their livelihoods.

Policies specifically aimed at participatory rural development include legislation for rural people's organizations, including full freedom of association; reorientation of the delivery system, in particular the extension services, towards the needs of the rural poor; full integration of women in development; decentralization of decision-making, planning and resource allocation; rural poor-oriented research, extension, input supply, credit and marketing, supported by the necessary financial resources and aimed at enhancing income-generating activities, both agricultural and non-agricultural; and just fiscal and pricing systems (van Heck, 2003). Participatory rural development projects must involve government institutions, such as line departments or local governments, banks, training and research institutions, women and youth councils; they must also continue to involve civil society organizations at all levels.

Government institutions need to become more open to the advantages of using local knowledge for improved productivity in farming, water conservation and natural resource management, and of associating local communities and small farmers to their research. Equally needed is research on sustainable and labour-intensive agricultural production systems, rural off-farm employment and enterprise development (Polman, 2001: 10).

Pilots, innovations and scaling up

Many of the most innovative rural development projects start small. This makes it possible to experiment with new approaches (e.g. to participation) or technologies, while keeping costs and risks within acceptable limits. Such projects are thus, for all practical purposes, pilot projects. This means that, if they are successful, they will at some point need to be scaled up. Scaling up has its own problems that need to be resolved before successful projects – or parts of projects – can yield significant benefits. These problems are not trivial, and if they are not resolved, the initial promise may lead to disappointing results.

On the basis of a number of case studies of scaling up of technical or institutional innovations, Biggs (2006: 16-17) points out in relation to poverty reduction and social inclusion that effective innovation in the policy and institutional arenas is generally location and time specific, and *has* to be, because the significance of institutional innovations can only be understood with reference to time, place, culture and political context. In the cases studied,

...major and significant institutional innovations were coming up all the time from within the local context. Informal, unplanned R&D was always taking place [...] In addition, and significantly, in 'scaling up' processes, it was the local institutional innovations that were the critical elements that gave rise to the way the technology or institutional model was scaled up and to the pattern of outcomes as regards who benefited from the process. Consequently, for those concerned with being effective in poverty reduction and social inclusion, the most important research starts at the so-called 'scaling up' stage. Scaling up is not a minor 'development' job to be done at the end of an R&D pipeline [...] Institutional innovation in the local context is not in any way similar to the 'adaptation' to local circumstances of outside technical innovations.

Biggs then goes on to argue for the importance of 'learning from the positive'; policy and development personnel should constantly be on the look out for the positive changes that are always taking place wherever poverty and social exclusion exist, and monitor, learn from, support and promote these changes.

Scaling up can be interpreted in two separate and complementary ways: (i) as replication on a large scale, from a small to a large project (a variant of which is from a small to many coordinated small scale projects in different places); and (ii) as 'mainstreaming into policy making'. Each of these meanings implies different challenges. Large-scale replication of a small participatory rural development project requires that many facilitators or extension agents pay the same amount of concentrated attention to their work and their clients as did the initial pilot team. They have the advantage of being able to learn from other people's mistakes; on the other hand, what was for the

initial participants a process of learning by doing, with a significant research component, is now something to be taught and learnt, then applied. There is less incentive to perform well, and it is easier to fall into routinized, mechanical approaches. To deal with these challenges, at the very least motivation, indoctrination and institution building (including the provision of suitable incentives) are needed before the replication starts, close monitoring and control at the beginning of implementation, and spot checks throughout.

As to scaling up in the sense of mainstreaming into policy making, its success is a function of the capacity of institutions and organizations to learn, and of the existence of enabling environments that provide the conditions, stimuli and incentives for institutions and individuals to act in desirable ways. Focusing on the scaling up of participatory watershed management in India, Kolavalli and Kerr (2002) maintain that, given the limited availability of NGOs, a realistic strategy must be to improve the capabilities and incentives of government agencies to work more like NGOs. They argue that institutionalizing participatory approaches in government bureaucracies may include (i) creating an enabling environment where the necessary conditions and appropriate incentives exist, plus (ii) strengthening upward accountability and (iii) introducing downward accountability.

Joshi and Moore (2002) argue that the outcomes of public programmes to tackle poverty in developing countries are more likely to be decided in the implementation than the decision-making phases of policy making, and conclude that it is vital to try to 'plug the gaps' at this stage. Searching for ways in which this might be done through a 'self-correcting' mechanism that creates an enabling environment for the poor, they focus on the extent to which anti-poverty programmes succeed in mobilizing their own beneficiaries. They argue that the likelihood of collective action by the poor to defend their rights in the context of anti-poverty interventions depends on the *predictability* of those interventions from the point of view of the poor, or of the social activists and political entrepreneurs needed to galvanize them into collective action. This in turn has three components: *credibility* of the officials implementing the anti-poverty programmes; *stability of the programmes* over time, in content, form, procedural requirements, etc.; and *formal entitlement*, which includes but is not limited to legal rights to benefits of the programme. Such predictability, argue these authors, encourages and supports collective action in favour of the anti-poverty programme¹².

The importance of territory

From the local to the territorial it is a small step, but one that adds a rich layer of meaning to the discussion. The territorial dimension can contribute significantly to participatory rural development, by providing it with a spatial and social context within which participation may become easier and more meaningful. In recent years, the concepts of *territory* and of *territorial competitiveness* have acquired considerable importance as a result of economic and social changes within countries, in the context of accelerating globalization. The word 'territory' designates a rural region, which will normally include one or more small or intermediate urban centres together with their rural hinterland¹³. Because of its scale and of the closeness of the interactions that take place within it, the territory is increasingly seen as a privileged space for participation in rural development.

¹² Joshi and Moore make three related and interesting points: first, that public agencies tend to ignore or downplay these aspects, for the very good – though not very defensible – reason that to do the opposite would be to court trouble for themselves; second, that NGOs are unlikely to elicit the same kind of collective action with their programmes, since they provide pure 'benefits', not entitlements; and finally that Social Funds have much the same effect, for the same reasons.

¹³ The precise meaning of the term is deliberately left vague, to account for the fact that a number of different elements, including a strong component of collective will, play a role in the definition and delimitation of a territory: in this sense, a territory is any rural area that somehow 'hangs together' and that collectively decides to see itself as such. It could be a municipality or a group of municipalities, or a district, or a valley, or a micro-region.

The concept of territorial competitiveness starts from the usual definition of the term competitive and adds to the concept a number of normative elements that broaden its meaning and enrich it as a policy objective. Interpreted in this broader way, “a territory becomes competitive if it is able to face up to market competition whilst at the same time ensuring environmental, social¹⁴ and cultural sustainability, based on the dual approach of networking and inter-territorial relationships” (Farrel and Thirion, 1999).

In order to strive for territorial competitiveness, the actors in the territory engage into negotiation leading to the formulation of a collective *territorial project*: a vision of the future of the territory in which territorial competitiveness is assured and therefore the territory fulfils its potential. This depends on local actors and institutions acquiring four types of skills: the skills to take joint action, to assess their environment, to create links between sectors by ensuring that maximum added value is retained, and to liaise with other areas and the rest of the world (*op.cit.*). These skills link to the so-called “four dimensions” of territorial competitiveness, present in each area in different combinations: social, environmental and economic competitiveness, plus positioning in the global context. These processes are seen as forming part of a long-term approach that is at the core of each area’s development strategy (Farrel and Thirion, 1999). The presence of divergent or even opposed interests implies that negotiation, usually managed negotiation, is explicitly present and plays a key role in the definition of the territorial project, itself a process of social learning (Lewis, 2000; RDD, 2005). The presence of an urban centre (or more), and its linkages with the rural areas, is a crucial part of each territory’s identity, a focus of negotiation and participation processes and of local institutional innovation, and a key factor of success in achieving territorial competitiveness.

In order to move from an analysis of the situation to the identification and design of a territorial project, to charting out a path for the territory’s future, it is necessary to carry out an analysis of what is known as *territorial capital*, defined as

...all of the elements available to the area, both tangible and intangible, which in some respects constitute assets and in others constraints.

The concept of “territorial capital” is not static but dynamic. It corresponds to the analytical description of how those seeking the room to take action see the area. It is therefore related to the territorial project concept and to the bid for territorial competitiveness. Each area endeavours to find its place by focusing on access to markets, its image, its potential to attract people and businesses, its ability to renew its governance, etc. (Farrel and Thirion, *op.cit.*).

At its heart, the idea of territorial competitiveness is a very simple one: the actors in a territory join forces to analyse their situation, agree on *what is their difference* and then decide how best to enhance its value. The similarity with concepts such as Thailand’s ‘one tambon, one product’, or Vietnam’s handicraft villages, is obvious although, as seen above, territorial competitiveness may be realised in more ways than just through the sale of a particular product or combination of products from the territory.

Processes of territory based rural development do not overcome the constraints of structure over agency; furthermore, they make sense only where basic conditions for negotiation are present; but when such conditions *are* present, they complement and give new strength and meaning to participation, by integrating it into a jointly agreed project at the local level.

Concluding remarks

We have reviewed the background, analyzed some of the practices and discussed criticisms of participation in rural development. We have also discussed ways in which participation’s advocates are taking on board those criticisms and trying to rescue its promise of transformation. It seems

¹⁴ For social sustainability here read, among other things, poverty alleviation and inclusion where there is poverty and exclusion.

reasonable, in the light of these discussions, to conclude that the use of participation in rural development will continue, and that this may not be bad. If we use them well, the criticisms need not be a source of discouragement; but by reminding us of the need to *take nothing for granted*, they should help practitioners resist smugness and strive for better ways of achieving its ideals. In this, the idea of a *good enough participation* seems to hold some promise, because good enough may both be worth doing and, because it is not ideal, be worth improving. This is important for practitioners, who need to feel that what they do makes sense, but need at least as much to avoid self-satisfaction.

Other challenges facing participatory rural development include a fuller incorporation of the sustainable rural livelihoods paradigm; finding a stronger and more proactive role for the state without falling back on old practices that did not work in the past and would not work in the future; combining pilot interventions where new ideas can be tested with facing up to the challenges of scaling up and the nontrivial research that that entails; and, given the right conditions, taking advantage of the potential of territory-based participatory and negotiated rural development. The future of rural development, in Asia as elsewhere, seems inseparable from participation, and that may not be bad, since despite all the criticism, participation, like life, seems better than the alternative.

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