Developing Poor Communities' Potentials to Critically Participate

Maureen C. Pagaduan

Are the poor better off after more than a decade of focus on participatory strategies for development?

In 1983, Dr. Gelia T. Castillo wrote: "As an overall assessment of the various participatory approaches reviewed, the short-term verdict is that: benefits from participatory development have yet to substantially accrue to the rural poor" (Castillo, 1983).

In a situation of widespread poverty and debilitating powerlessness, is participation a mere placebo, fake and confusing development response?

The Optimist View

Because the issue of development and the problem of poverty have been concretely felt by and not only viewed to affect everyone, rich and poor countries alike, the search for a more appropriate and effective response to the problem has held the global community economists, environmentalists, and activitis alike on alert. Discussions, papers, and conferences have asked:

1.   Participation: What do you mean?
2.   What kind of participation? By whom? Men? Women? Both?
3.   Who will benefit?
4.   What are the processes?
5.   What are the indicators that participation has been effective?

There are many practitioners of participatory strategies for development. In some countries, government is at the centre of initiative and action. In others, like the Philippines, the non-government sector's efforts have been more pronounced. People's organizations, social development institutions, churches and schools have been activated in their number to contribute to the widespread effort to bring a dictator down and thereafter protect and expand democratic space for more lasting and meaningful change. Worldwide, Chinese, Koreans, Thais, Eastern Europeans, as a people, took inspiration and the cry of "people's participation" rang louder. The lesson seems to be participation comes from people's initiative and that it produces a force that empower peoples to act to transform an oppressive situation.

The obvious impact of genuine participation cannot be denied or discounted. Thus, international agencies from the United Nations such as WHO, ILO, FAO, and UNESCO to the World Bank raise the rhetoric of participation as well as seriously push for its operationalization in development projects worthy of their support. Participatory strategies have been called or referred to as the bottom-up approach as opposed to top-down, the basic-needs approach, people-centered development, the community decision-making concept, etc. It has often been described as both a means and an end, a process and a goal. Moreover, definitions point to the distinction between participation and development though they are very closely related concepts. This conceptual proximity is explained in this definition of rural development as "a process which leads to arise in the capacity of the rural people to control their environment, accompanied by a wider distribution of benefits from such control" (Hollsteiner, 1979).

Increasingly, the conjunction of concepts of participation and development have produced the term "participatory development" referring to "total human development" as an overarching concept. These "focus on the improvement of the quality of life of all the people in the country through their active involvement in decisions which affect their lives"(Hollsteiner, 1981). In the context of development programs or projects, such participation affects the entire program or project cycle of planning and decision-making, implementation, sharing in benefits and evaluation. It critically examines

uneveness and inequalities in the practice of participation where communities participate fully in the implementation phase and insignificantly in planning and evaluation. Thus, these definitions apart from affirming the centrality of people in the notion "participation" speak of decision-making, control, distribution of benefits and quality of life.

The ContrastingView

The vagueness and ambiguity of the notion of participation produce pseudo-participatory practices. In these negative experiences, there are precious lessons to be reaped. One view that in itself alone has proven inadequate is that of participation taken to equal "cheap or free labor" of people. The division of labor into manual and mental labor is most pronounced. It is believed that people value the project more because they have literally labored and sweat for the project. The thinking and planning part remains prerogatives of technical agents and project staff.

Another strategy is to give a cost to participation by requiring a counterpart thereby enhancing project feasibility by lowering total costs. This view assumes that the people's commitment to the project is established if they can concretely bear the burden of their own development. People, it further believes, take more care of projects in which they have shouldered some of the risks. Though there is validity in examining the ways people ingeniously bear the burden (or survive) and take risks, this view tends to look at people as undifferentiated mass rather than forces that are completed to negotiate and confront for access and control over resources.

The third view that illustrates more clearly the interplay of all views is the belief that external agents can seal people's commitments by the ritual of the signing of contract. Once labor arrangements have been fixed, the counterpart clearly spelled out, then the community celebrates through a signing of contract publicly witnessed by the entire community. Local leaders affix their signatures, food is served, drinks are passed around and tomorrow appears brighter.

All these practices can be critically assessed by situating participation along a continuum of increasing power to the community. Is there significant and full participation of people in decision-making? Was the historical context of the process of impoverishment and powerlessness clearly analyzed? For impoverishment and privilege clearly divide communities and present opportunities and threats to participation.

Desegregating Community Groups

It is imperative that as participation gets increasingly dissected, the historical and social processes under which participation is to take place must be clearly marked. People and communities are divided between rich and poor, men and women, black and white, young and old, fully abled and disabled, etc. These divisions get moven into the structures and systems of society and get heightened prominence or are tolerated or overlooked depending on historical and cultural processes. These processes either maintain social stability or aggravate crisis situations. Strategies of nego-tiation and confrontation are within consideration of participatory develop-ment approaches. For a development agent to maximize impact of participation in people's lives, he/she must take cognizance, clearly study and take position as to the existence of these divisions and differentiations.

Participation necessarily must unite affected and poor people. It must contribute to a consolidation of the forces that are marginalized creating a mass, a concentration of will and action to effect changes. Individual participation must lead to collective participation. Collective gain is the sum total of individual gain. While individual gain or interest must always be considered critical in a collective action.

When people participate by choosing or electing representative to speak up in a forum, to sit in a council, or to vote for a position, the processes of selecting the representative or representatives are indications of the dominance of divisions in communities. Who finally and fully benefits is spelled out in how judiciously people's representatives were chosen.

Preparing People to Participate

Participatory strategies, contrary to popular belief, is not cheap alternative. Participatory processes cannot also be fast-tracked. People who have grown to be passive, dependent and fearful are incapacitated to participate. Their present modes of participation are ineffective to spur their own development. Their visions of development are impaired, dictated more by daily survival than the needs of future generations. "If a project comes up against fears, doubts, suspicions, lack of self-assurance, or traditional beliefs and values that run counter to the proposed change, a participatory approach can be vital". In communities where such attitudes commonly prevail, behavioral change is unlikely to take place unless a sufficiently sensitive and facilitative approach is used to uncover, examine and address social constraints such as:

> difference in the presence of authority
> fear of speaking-up in groups
> low self-esteem
> distrust of the motives of those in power
> reluctance to take risks
> fear of economic consequences or social loss of face
> fear of criticism for overstepping customary role
> factional differences
> a sense of powerlessness or fatalism
> lack of experience in working with groups
> lack of skills in planning and problem-solving

(Srinivasan, 1990)

In this condition, processes of participation are both learning and unlearning processes. In a project, the principle of participation must be applied throughout the entire pprocess. The point of view the project takes as it spells out people's needs and priorities must be the basis for the project which is validated through "a process of dialogue and consultation with the people". The basis for the project which stems from a clear statement of

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people's problems is a product of joint investigation or participatory research with the people. Confidence and competence building of people at the initial stages of project development make for sustained and critical participation throughout the entire project's life.

Many development agents often make the mistake in believing that people's folk wisdom is inferior to wisdom acquired through scientific application. In developing training programs for capability-building of people, they fail to unearth the people's knowledge, expertise and experience of their own environment and harness these as basic resource in training. In the Philippines, an average farmer was found to have at least twenty-five years of farming experience behind him to qualify as an expert in agriculture (Ferrer, 1988). This fact gets lot to development agents who are: expert-oriented and deeply distrust poor people. Other occasions find the same agents feeling themselves wise and in safer position when they limit participation of people to the implementation phase of a project. If on the other hand, they open participation at the planning level, they insure their own blueprints by limiting participation to an advisory capacity, that is seeking approval for a *de facto plan*. These approadches are short-cuts to participation that only leaves people still in dependent situations and make projects unsustainable.

"The participatory approach - often as learner-centered - has evolved over the past decade as a means of helping learners take greater control of their lives and their environment by developing their skills in problem-solving and resource management. Unlike traditional teaching methods which have emphasized the transfer of knowledge, messages or content preselected by outside specialist, participatory training focuses more on the development of human capacities to assess, choose, plan, create, organize, and take initiatives. These skills can then spill over to many other aspects of the person's life and community" (Srinivasan, 1990).

Participation becomes integrated into every fiber of community involvement if structures for participation are established at the opportune time. Working through core groups, developing community leaders, setting

up committees and establishing community organizations or people's organizations that revolve around a project's life or throughout the project cycle become the skeletal framework or foundation for alternative democratic processes in poor communities.

Organizing Communities to Critically and Effectively Participate

Many still rest in the belief that communities are already organized. They point to what is a historical and established fact that organizations abound in communities. Some even state that so many organizations have led to disorganization (Manalili, 1984). But much the same way as we desegregate communities, so too community organizations. For not all organizations are vehicles of participation, of change and empowerment. Moreover, not all new forms of organizations are more effective than the traditional or indigenous organizations. Thus, the decision to start organizing for participation is an informed and studied one unlike what many traditional practitioners of community development believe. Organizing and participation on are not simple social practices or processes in which an organizer is either a natural mixer or learns to belong, to be identified as one of the gang, or blend into the social life of the community on the way to building a patron-client relationship with community members. It is not also simply establishing an organization that is a structure that merely serves to be a vehicle for project implementation. For it has been found that local organizations may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for development (Gow and Moss, 1981).

When does an organization directly represent and benefit the poor? There are many indications of genuineness of a people's organization but primary is the capacity of the organization to establish access and control over reources for its members. Second is that members are continuously informed and conscientized so that their critical awareness level remain continuously high. Third is that the organization has a definite program of action that hones the capacity of the people to keep pace with the demands of their struggles. Overall, when the organization addresses the issue of power imbalance and tip this in favor of their poor members as in the areas

of resource mobilization, education, and decision-making can organizing lead to development and transformation.

Some Specific Strategies for Participation in Environment Impact Assessment

The concern so aptly put in a pastoral letter of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines is that "all the living systems on land and in the seas around us are being ruthlessly exploited". The global environment is facing disaster. Resources are being destroyed while demand continue to dramatically rise. Under this condition, the response puts the focus on people's education, mobilization, and program for change as key components of an effective intervention.

In programs called integrated area development, social forestry programs, and community or local resource management schemes, there is invariably much value placed in harnessing people's participation in making sound and solid (scientific) impact assessments. The process of participatory evaluation provides a case from the perspective of participatory evaluation that prescriptions and model-building are not intended.

Again, it is stressed that people must be prepared to participate, in this case, in assessment and evaluation. These preparatory processes cover the entry and beginning phases of community organizing. The organizer together with the core group identifies people who will participate in evaluation. Alongside with this is analyzing what potential participants' needs and probems will be in order to be able to fully participate. For instance, how will adult, married women participate? What support services such as daycare will be necessary? After selection of participants, the organizer enters into a problem-solving process with selected participants that produces a tentative evaluation plan as a concrete output. This is usually undertaken by holding a number of planning meetings or focused group discussions with participants in the community.

When a consensus has been reached as to the purpose of evaluation and the methodology of evaluation, the plan is implemented. Choices as to the method of data-gathering, validation and processing range from structured interviews, surveys, focused-group discussions, participant observations, role playing and other group exercises as well as reviewing available literature and records. When data has been gathered and processed, initial interpretations and analsis are made perhaps with the assistance of an outside evaluator or simply initiated by the organizer or local leader. This draft analysis is again presented or fed back to the community for validation, comments and finalization. Usually, the sessions include action planning that is already an actual and appropriate response to the analysis of impact presented.

The outputs of training include: identified indicators of evaluation/ assessment, the evaluation method, the instruments and the plan of operations i.e., time frame, logistics and persons-in-charge.

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The final form in which the report or document is packaged must include appropriate dissemination schemes to members of the community. Thus, it must consider the educational and economic background of the community. Popular education materials are most effective in disseminating information, education and communicating with poor communities.

Whether assessment is conducted at the beginning of the project or towards the end of the project cycle, it must always be integrated into a community organizing plan. The approach to assessment must also be consistent with principles of participation espoused by the project.

Some Points to Remember Concerning Women's Participation in Assessment/Evaluation

Women have been found to be triply burdened by participation in development (Tadelfa, 1992). Thus, development projects are considerably gender sensitive when they factor in women's particular conditions and the possible negative impact on this when their participation is harnessed for development. This sensitivity particularly applies to the areas of identification of target group or selection of participants, the choice of development strategy, e.g. access to training and technology, provision of support service, and program implementation and evaluation.

For instance, the reference to household heads as chosen representatives of families to participate in development limits choices to male participation. So, the particular condition of abused or battered women make them unlikely participants in development projects though they may be the most needy. Support group formation rather than core group may be a more appropriate strategy for organizng women. Participatory training that is sensitive to women's own learning processes may effect maximum impact in building women's capacities to participate especially in evaluation/ assessment work.

Lastly, women and men have inherent differences in the ways they experience both poverty and prosperity (Tadelfa, 1992). In conducting environmental impact assessments, the determinants of women's physical, socio-economic and political well-being must reveal these differences and should be used as guides in drawing-up measures to alleviate a poor woman's condition. For example, measures that expose conditions in the family, of children, the division of reproductive tasks among adults in the

household, the quality of relationship between men and women should all be considered to be under the purview of the general environment. Therefore, participation of women should be greatly enhanced and benefits accruing to these participation can be concretely felt when changes in the home as well as in the farm are genuinely effected.