

QUESTIONING PARTICIPATORY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE THIRD WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This paper links the common objectives of "participatory development" and "community development" into a concept named "participatory community development" (PCD). This approach may increase the cultural sensitivity of development projects, and is closely linked with the parallel methodology of participatory action research. In its popular usage, however, little is said of the attendant Western cultural baggage of PCD. The paper proposes an increased awareness of development change agents, and changes in the international development decision-making structure at the diagnosis level.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette monographie identifie les objectifs communs du "développement participatoire" et du "développement communautaire", afin de formuler une théorie de "développement communautaire participatoire" (DCP). Bien qu'elle se rapproche à une méthode parallèle à celle de recherches en mécanismes participatoires, cette direction a pour but d'améliorer la sensibilité culturelle des projets de développement. Cependant, il existe très peu de discussion au sujet des influences occidentales sur la formulation du DCP. Cette monographie propose donc d'agrandir les perceptions d'agents promoteurs du développement, et d'améliorer la structure de la régie internationale du développement au niveau diagnostique.

INTRODUCTION

Today some critics argue that the poor majorities in the developing countries would even be better off if all foreign aid could be brought to a halt. Even many long-dedicated development planners are frequently heard to lament 'At least the results of this project were benign' (Barbara L.K. Pillsbury 1984:43).

A call to halt foreign aid does not necessarily imply halting locally-initiated community improvement efforts. Here, 'foreign aid' refers to international development projects imposed from the west. Through the

terminology game, many facelifts have been made on international development models in renewed attempts to 'get it right'; international development is changing from the implicit hegemony of 'aid' to the fresh mind set of 'assistance' and 'partnership' (CIDA 1987).

"Participatory Community Development" (PCD), entails working with indigenous or local knowledge systems, beliefs, and desires among groups of people. PCD encourages group-specific agendas aimed at the solving of problems that oppress or suppress the human potential and sense of well being of the group. This is closely linked with the concept of sustainable development, where "the development process has to draw constantly upon sources of endogenous creativity which in turn promotes self-reliance" (CIDA 1991:executive summary).

The terms 'participatory development' and 'community development' have slightly different foci, but even so are often used interchangeably. Because of their complementary objectives I have joined the two terms as the subject of this paper, hereafter known as PCD; this more accurately reflects what researchers and development practitioners are currently pursuing. Ideas central to PCD have been manifest in development and applied anthropology literature for over twenty years, but only now do they dominate current thoughts on ethics and research in development (see van Willigen 1986:108).

Though PCD is a large step towards more culturally-specific and community-driven development models, it is still covertly driven by western ideologies, issues and the lingering limits of western economic and decision-making structures associated with development. As a result, people in Third World communities are not necessarily homogeneously prepared for, or wanting PCD in its current form.

Linda Stone's (1989) paper has led me to explore some of the unspoken complications, assumptions and implications of this newly practised paradigm. Stone encourages and provides a critical reflection on the western democratic cultural baggage that unavoidably permeates the 'rhetoric and the fads' of this shift in development philosophy that, as she says, "bear the cultural imprint of the West" (1989:206).

PCD now sits on a pedestal. Slightly dethroning the paradigm permits access to a deeper understanding of its intent, and should help to clarify its potential for application. Development workers must become increasingly aware of the paradigm which they represent -- this paradigm shapes both the project and the way local people view it (see also Groenfeldt 1986:95). Part of this understanding comes from the close relationship that PCD has with research theories and approaches that link knowledge with action and 'ownership'. The following questions underlie this paper: 1) What are the assumed preconditions for PCD? and 2) Why

is PCD popular as a stated ideal with governments and development agencies?

"PARTICIPATORY" instead of PARTICIPATION

In Canada, the solicitation of public input as part of the domestic policy formation process of governments has become much more common, 'proper' and expected. The most prominent current examples of this are the various commissions and public forums centring on Canada's unity debate. This is one form of public 'participation'. Participation in international development projects, though, has too often meant that, because social hierarchies and power relationships are preserved, people are ordered or required to 'donate' their time (labour) and/or land and possessions toward a 'community project' (Stone 1989:211).

Sherraden extends the concept of participation to consider both "formal" and "informal" community involvement; referring to several social science studies, she maintains that "the informal realm operates semi-autonomously, and frequently in opposition to official and formal organizations" (1991:256). Informal participation as opposition to something is often a response to externally imposed methods and projects.

Edwards stresses that we must "learn to differentiate between genuinely participatory approaches to research and development, and approaches that use participation as a means to achieve predetermined aims" (1989:129; and also Stone 1989). Participatory development is promoted as "an empowering process ... that addresses the causes as well as the symptoms of powerlessness and poverty" (CIDA 1991:7). There will almost always be opposition and dissent around group initiatives and situations; however, participatory approaches, in the spirit of democracy, will ideally reach the most widely accepted decision. Those who disagree with the outcome will also ideally respect decisions resulting from the process.

One danger in discussing participatory development is that the distinction is not often made between 'participatory' and 'participation'; the understanding is simply that both are 'good'. Widstrand emphasizes this in writing that "participation, being the sweetest of all the words in that vocabulary of public policy, sugars many a pill and is put to a great variety of uses (closely followed by the word cooperation)" (1976:140).

Edwards, too, warns against the deceptive use of 'participation' as the vogue word in development:

Participation is seen as a mechanism for cost recovery in projects initiated from the outside; of reducing the costs of building and infrastructural programmes planned by governments; and of improving the accuracy of research carried out by and for external agencies. None of these usages is truly participatory. The crucial point is to see who sets the agenda and who controls the research process -- both the inputs and outputs (1989:129).

'Participatory' can itself be a deceptive term. At one extreme, Rahnema's discussion, entitled "Participatory Action Research: The 'Last Temptation of Saint' Development", (1990) is cynical about the deifying of the "participation ethic" that underlies participatory ideals:

... for most activists and persons with a humanistic world view, participation is viewed as a voluntary and free exercise, among responsible adults, to discover together the joys of conviviality, and to make the best use of their abilities -- both as individuals and members of a larger group -- for reaching a more humane and fulfilling life (1990:208).

Rahnema's paper, however, hinges on the concept that truly grassroots development of "exceptional importance" can only be inspired by figures such as Gandhi; the systematic training of individuals for empowerment falls into western models that avoid any spiritual force and identifiable meaning (1990:217). This scepticism may be relevant if participatory development were aimed at social revolution; however, figures like Gandhi are few and far between. Rahnema must be credited, nevertheless, for identifying some of the ideals or preconditions imposed on groups or 'communities' in participatory development schemata.

COMMUNITY AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

The basic manageable and identifiable unit for participatory research and development is 'the community'. Previously, communities, regions, and countries were the target of development projects. Participatory development, however, is built on the premise that communities must be catalysts for their own change and development, and that this hopefully will foster regional and national development schemes. But what is a community?

In their paper, Butz, Lonergan and Smit define community as "a spatially delimited set of interacting face-to-face groups whose everyday life in a locality is underpinned by shared values concerning social,

economic, political, and ecological well-being" (1991:144). This sounds good, but contains several assumptions that limit the application of participatory development and echo some of what Rahnema (1990:208) criticizes about participatory approaches. The definition implies the need for homogeneous 'shared values'. Many values will likely be shared by people working together, and a community may identify themselves through common goals; however, the initial identification of a community should not be limited by observable shared values.

Van Willigen's definition of community avoids this pitfall. For him, a community is "a unit of real or potential interaction in a spatial or residential framework" (1986:95). He has succeeded in offering an open and useful definition. By including "potential interaction" and "spatial framework", he allows for more than the demographic designation that limits perceptions to municipalities or villages with recorded populations. This definition of community can also extend to 'co-community' relationships, and is not trapped within the idea that a community is necessarily homogeneous in values full of 'co-operative' people where 'interaction' is a neutral term. This definition avoids reinforcing the biased assumption that harmony is necessary for participatory work (see Rahnema 1990:208). Often, it is divergent wants and values that make communities an innovative (and likely frustrating) forum for participatory development.

Cochrane's definition of "community development", written over twenty years ago, was obviously premature for most development agencies and governments:

Community Development meant development of human potential through self-education. Concerned with helping people to define or appreciate their wants and letting them evolve the means of their satisfaction ... Creation came from within the community rather than from without. To stimulate this process a member of the community was often given specialist training, or an alien development agent was added to the community at the request of the people themselves (1971:47).

He captures here many of the underpinnings of current thoughts in participatory community development (PCD). Similarly, van Willigen (1986:93) identifies the following dominant themes of community development: self-help group action via community participation and voluntary cooperation, self-determination, democracy, self-reliance, local self-government, and a de-emphasis of material goods. These are all intrinsic to PCD approaches. Van Willigen's book, however, goes too far

in compartmentalizing and dividing applied anthropology research approaches, and offers little focus to the larger concept of PCD. Ideas concerning the nature of development (or 'benefits', or 'improvements') are spread along such a large continuum, that the concept of Participatory Community Action becomes one of a method towards development, whereas PCD is the end in itself.

DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

Partridge and Warren assert that

Development anthropology is scientific research with significant applications within the development project cycle ... to enhance benefits and mitigate negative consequences for the communities involved ... " (1984:1).

This "custom designer" role is only beginning to gain consistent respect in international development; however, this role is still too expert/outsider oriented for PCD.

Edwards states that the links between research and development are complex and multilinear, and that moreover "this immense outpouring of information and advice is having demonstrably little effect on the problems it seeks to address" (1989:116). While I agree that this relationship is neither simple nor linear, nevertheless I suggest that the PCD paradigm is a natural corollary of the more specific model of "collaborative action" or "participatory research" (as described by Warry 1990). Research has neither caused nor designed this development paradigm. However, the evolution of social science research towards a more widespread acknowledgement of its traditional hegemony suggests a more responsible approach to questions of power, knowledge and the relationship between researcher and 'researched'.

Dialogue is central to this relationship. According to Tandon, Paulo Friere was the first to describe dialogue as "inquiry and intervention" (1981:293). Tandon advocates that this relationship sparks the endogenous process of knowing and changing. This concept is intrinsic to both collaborative action research methods and the PCD paradigm.

Discussion of the relationship of PCD to collaborative action research can lead to an argument for structural change in the development project cycle. Here, research that, "constitutes emancipatory praxis that returns decision-making, based on a combination of theoretical knowledge and practical reason, to the community" (Warry 1991:25), should be behind any PCD efforts. Warry's call for "applied anthropology as praxis" (*ibid*), could be adapted within social science and development circles so that a

praxis approach model begins the development cycle. The relevance of suggesting that a praxis approach may be the necessary diagnostic catalyst of PCD will be elaborated on shortly.

VALUES BEHIND PCD

Stone opens her discussion by asserting that "... 'community participation' in development is by now an established, even revered, strategy in development programs around the world" (1989:206). This is true, and is especially relevant as a precondition to a wider awareness and acceptance of PCD, given the previous discussion that distinguishes the concept 'participatory' as a more focused imperative. As Hoben suggests, "indigenous beliefs, practices, and forms of social organization" can no longer be "... viewed as 'constraints' to be changed" (1984:13). Indigenous perspectives are, to the contrary, a resource upon which to build.

If indigenous perspectives are truly recognized as a resource, then development workers and researchers must no longer merely pay lip service to the 'participatory' element of PCD; they can no longer act like community barbers. The barber asks customers how they want their hair cut, then cuts the hair in the way they have understood the customer's request to mean. The barber, however, continues to hold the scissors and the money at the end of the process. There are obvious inequalities in the barber-customer relationship.

PCD is often promoted through the ideal of equality. This is emphasized in two ways: first, the term "change agent" is often substituted to describe the professional or expert working in development. This aims to give the sense of a "co-actor whose main role was to act as a catalyst in an endogenous process of self-regeneration" (Rahnema 1990:216). Second, "the concept of community participation entails the value of human equality (Stone 1989:207), with the assumption that people have the opportunity to express themselves in a democratic process (Edwards 1989:123). Stone's case study from Nepal identifies that this second kind of equality is not universal throughout communities. In Nepal, the caste system psychology is imbued with hierarchical principles that govern a system of human interdependence that is pervasive, according to Stone (1989:207).

Equality also implies that change agents surrender their power in the decision-making process. The suggestion that change agents are not obligated to share their own knowledge as input to the decision-making process would be unjust, patronizing, and a further expression of their power of choice. In PCD, promoting the agent role simply as a 'catalyst to change' is overemphasized. In addition, where money or support is

sought outside of the community, the community really only has partial input to decisions.

Internal decision making naturally points to the ideal of self-determined change central to PCD. In defining "international development", O'Manique and Pollock describe the essence of such change:

In the context of human individuals and societies, 'develop' should be used primarily in an intransitive sense, indicating a change from within based on latent capacities -- a flowering or unfolding. Change affected by external agents should be seen as secondary, supplementary, and complementary to the unfolding from within (1989:2).

This metaphor of flowering may clarify the secondary position of change agent as catalyst. But this metaphor also reflects western views on the processes of education, child development and personal growth. PCD may therefore also involve convincing people of the otherwise assumed values of this approach, especially where a quick fix or donor-recipient model of development may be expected or even requested, instead of the more gradual "unfolding".

Valuing self-determination in PCD further reflects two elements from current western political thought: Native struggles for self-determination, and the American success story. Similar to increased awareness of women's and environmental issues, Native moves toward self-determination have long been on government agendas and in the forefront of the media. As such, the current sensitivity to these priorities naturally allows them to seep into the international development agenda.

The relationship of the American success story to PCD is a forceful dynamic, and possibly the key reason that PCD philosophies are attractive in international development circles. Citizens of donor nations have an affinity to PCD because it reflects the sacred cow of rugged individualism that characterizes America (Hsu 1983:4). The notion that the little guy can make it is intrinsic to a belief in pulling your socks up, realizing your potential, and the belief that you can do anything if you try. PCD reflects this by treating a community as an individual in the sense of self-reliance and self-determination for its future; but one wonders how this fits in with, say, Buddhist beliefs in karma, rebirth, and the cycle of life, or the Hindu notion of rebirth into a caste position.

In PCD philosophy, "self-reliance" calls for increased autonomy, and this is also related to desires for self-determination and self-government. Tickner (1986) describes the multiple goals of self-reliance in the context of contemporary Third World development debates and proposes a multi-level self-reliance strategy. She stresses the following priorities:

... devising poverty-reducing development strategies, decreasing dependence with respect to the world economy, and pressuring more advanced states into a redistribution of global resources (1986:461).

This involves mainly macro-level structural changes that are not in the immediate realm of PCD as a means, but certainly reflect the micro-level ideal pursued through PCD as an end in itself.

There are certain psychological barriers that PCD will be likely to meet in Third World communities. Implementers of the PCD goals of 'emancipating' and 'empowering' people, unless they are already on the verge of a revolution, cannot assume that community members are predisposed to participatory dialogue. As Galeski (1976:160) asserts, it is often the conflict between privileged and underprivileged groups in a community that will determine the various group's attitude toward development programmes. PCD programmes must confront a community's experience or struggles with colonialism, researchers, development, and the 'privileged'.

Embarking on PCD would therefore seem to require a precondition whereby the community members must view their own potential positively (van Willigen 1986:97). In a similar vein, Pitt refers to a "local ethnocentrism" and pride that are yet unrecognized as necessary stimuli to development and the concept of well-being (1976:15). It has been said of Africa, for instance, that the result of colonial domination and cultural destabilization has been either the copying of foreign models in the belief that they are superior, or the immobilization that results from striving to preserve the traditional at all costs (Warner 1991; Stone 1989:211). PCD must operate somewhere between these poles, and the question must be asked whether and how PCD change agents should approach the dilemmas associated with each extreme.

Without delving into Marxist theory, van Willigen points out further complications concerning cultural mimetism and the participatory process:

The concept [of community felt needs] is appealing, but nevertheless, has its problems. For example, ... all participants in the development process, namely, agents, community members and community political leadership, have their own felt needs. The community as a composite has 'felt needs' that are somewhat different from those of its individual participants. And further, a community's 'best interests' may not be 'felt needs' (1986:96).

Awareness of these potential problems is essential for change agents when they accept their roles as catalysts, mediators, and sources of information. Rahnema, too, argues that a participatory approach is conceptually hindered by the feeling that "participation is [seen as] meaningful only when it serves a cause that is justifiable on moral, humanitarian, or social and economic grounds" (1990:203).

CONCLUSIONS: IMPLEMENTING THE PCD PARADIGM

PCD reflects not only western worldview and issues, but is also widely acceptable in the government and development agency frameworks. This must arouse suspicion. In the continuing macro/micro debate in development, Stone points out that, in the health field at least, people charge that "an emphasis on local 'self-help' strategies bypasses the broader national and international political and economic relationships which are the real root of poverty and ill health in developing areas" (1989:207). While development must attend to both macro and micro-level imperatives in the way that short and long-term initiatives can complement one another, I see the danger of, through the 'rightness' of PCD, the root causes of underdevelopment or oppression being avoided or masked. PCD is tantalizing to the western politico-economic structure because self-help projects do not challenge the status quo of the world economy (see Rahnema 1990:201-203).

PCD is still trapped within outdated structures that govern the development project cycle. In Canada, this includes a system by which private agencies and non-government organizations bid for development project funding through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). At the funding level, bidding emphasizes project packages that may have included thorough social impact assessments, but that are not based on a participatory diagnosis. With reference to similar models in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) that do not necessarily respect thorough social analysis, Gow asserts that

... fundamental decisions concerning project design are made at a very early stage, and ... By beginning with a model solution, many alternatives are precluded from the outset (1991:3).

The CIDA discussion paper on "Society, Culture and Sustainable Development" (CIDA 1991) brushes the surface of some of these problems:

Genuinely promoting participatory development inherently implies smaller projects, hands-off management, delegating accountability and prolonging the appraisal and implementation period (ibid: 9).

Observing how CIDA deals with these suggestions will be interesting, as will the questions of who is allowed to influence the process.

The underlying dilemma, however, is that participatory diagnosis requires an initial commitment of time, personnel, and money as an investment that has unknown returns. The development agenda from the community may not perhaps place a demand on the development agency that initially supplied a change agent. The implementation of research according to Warry's (1991) notion of "applied anthropology as praxis" has the potential to build a network for PCD that avoids the limitations of this project-oriented bidding process and empowers communities with information regarding other change agents, funding, co-community resources, and the experiences of relevant PCD initiatives.

SUMMARY REMARKS

Ideally, PCD empowers groups of people through an endogenous process of education and experimentation in self-determined and self-sustaining development decisions. The unified term of "participatory community development" is not yet commonly used; however, the objectives and methods behind PCD are already popularly behind the current paradigm for international development in this decade. Because PCD has been popularized, its meaning has become clouded, and its underlying values are not widely questioned. The ideas presented here promote a more complete awareness of why and how PCD is being used. The recognition of this cultural baggage may encourage more sensible and sensitive applications of the paradigm in future. The challenge, then, is to be found in synthesizing the necessary relationship between research, participatory community priority diagnosis, and international development assistance structures. The exasperation expressed in the opening quotation should be avoidable.

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