7 Social and Political Participation in Sustainable Development with a Focus on Governance

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Abstract

In the course of the past four decades, participation has been mainstreamed in development research and practice. However, despite very widespread use of the term, there is no consensus on its definition, and it has generated intense and controversial debate. Taking stock of some fifty publications developed within the framework of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South on the topic, this paper opens up new avenues of research while offering a critical appraisal of social and political participation in sustainable development research and practice. The mainstreaming of participation has corresponded to an increasingly technical approach to the question. What the body of literature discussed here suggests is that more attention should be given to power relationships and governance processes in analysing the participatory dynamics of development. Participation is primarily a political problem relating to power relations and (im)balances in a given society. It is, therefore, not a 'simple' norm whose implementation would be a prerequisite for "good governance" and sustainable development. It is an arena, a physical or symbolic space where key social issues such as, for example, access to resources, gender inequalities, access to land, or land rights are debated and negotiated.

Keywords: Participation; sustainable development; governance; power; politics.

7.1 Introduction

Over the course of the last four decades, the term "participation" has been widely used in development discourse and has also been mainstreamed in development practice and research. Although it is nowadays generally advocated as a philosophy of development (see, for example, Cernea 1985; Chambers 1992, 1994a, 1994b), the concept of participation itself has generated and continues to generate intense and controversial debate about its meaning, implementation modes, and effects. Consequently, it is not easy to define what has gradually become a meta-concept of (sustainable) development, particularly as the polysemic nature of participation manifests itself in multiple, changing meanings in the development arena (Cornwall 2000).

In the present article, participation is considered as a process through which stakeholders (generally poor people or organisations that act as intermediaries for the poor or for specific relatively disadvantaged, marginalised, or voiceless groups of people) strive to influence and share control over development policies, initiatives, and the allocation of resources that affect them.

Based on this definition, the present article aims to contribute to current international debates on the issue of participation in (sustainable) development by reviewing approximately fifty relevant studies carried out within the framework of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South research programme. A diversity of situations, as well as the controversial nature and ambiguity of the concept of participation in development – in terms of its effects and limitations – are confirmed here. But what the body of research discussed in this article suggests, directly and indirectly, is that more attention needs to be given to power relationships and governance processes in analysing the participatory dynamics of development. As governance, very broadly speaking, refers to the inclusion of new actors in political decision-making processes, it is directly related to both power and participation.

This review argues that the concept of participation has undergone a certain process of 'depoliticisation' (Cornwall 2000; McGee and Norton 2000; Bühler 2002; Brock and McGee 2004; Brown 2004; Gaventa 2004; Williams 2004) during the last two decades, both at a conceptual level and in the way it has been implemented in development strategies. Currently, however, the concept of participation appears to become repoliticised as a result of the impulse of certain civil-society actors and social movements. Power

relationships and governance issues are thus assuming importance in current debates about the new challenges and meanings of participation.

This article proceeds in three steps, first broadly sketching the evolution of the concept of participation in development literature and policies. It then moves on to synthesise briefly the main contributions of the NCCR North-South on the topic, with a particular focus on the effects of participation. The final section gives a critical outlook on the actual impact of decades of 'participatory development' before suggesting some avenues for further reflection.

7.2 The concept of participation in development (1960s–2000s)

The concept of participation in development policy has changed markedly in recent decades. During the 1990s, participatory processes were formalised and institutionalised on the international scene. This led to an inversion of logic. Bottom-up dynamics, which had been the hallmark of participatory principles in the 1970s, were widely replaced by top-down dynamics (initiated by states or international institutions) that nevertheless claimed to rest on bottom-up movements (Rabinovich, in press).

In the 1950s and 1960s, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and grass-roots activists began to promote greater popular involvement in the development process. Concepts of 'community participation' and 'popular participation' emerged in opposition to technocratic, homogeneous, and homogenising development practices inherited from the colonial period (Cornwall 2000; Karl 2002). Influenced by these initiatives, 'community participation' became a channel through which 'popular participation' began to be realised in mainstream development initiatives of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Cornwall 2000). In those years, indeed, donor governments and international agencies defined goals that put 'popular participation' on international agendas and made it the subject of national legislation. In several South American countries, for example, the option of 'popular participation', conceived by the United Nations as an instrument of politico-administrative change, was adopted in response to the 'modernisation' of states that had been declared necessary (Martínez Montaño 1996).

Within mainstream discourse, participation was seen largely as a means to involve people in activities initiated by development agencies or the state (Cornwall 2000). Contrasting alternatives emerged, such as 'people's self-development', 'pedagogy of the oppressed', and 'participatory action research', which considered participation as a process of creating collective reflection and action to recognise, and subsequently change, societal power structures that impeded more equal access to and participation in the shaping of public policies. In other words, this type of participation was meant to build the capacity to negotiate on new terms with those in power, including the state (Cornwall 2000; Fals Borda 2006).

In the mid-1980s and 1990s, the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies led to a convergence of different (even diametrically different) interests that can be considered "a meeting of the opposites" (Lacroix 2000, p 5) involving international institutions, states, social movements, engineers, specialists, local actors, etc., all of them sharing common objectives within the new global paradigm of development (e.g. Premchander and Müller 2006). On the one hand, this change was mainly characterised by the increasing and exponential influence of the role of NGOs in the new political agendas of development, and by a withdrawal of the state as an actor in development. On the other hand, there was a formalisation and institutionalisation of concepts such as 'capacity building', 'empowerment', 'community', and 'participation' (Cornwall 2000; McGee and Norton 2000; Eberlei 2001; Brown 2004; Premchander and Müller 2006; Rabinovich, in press). The participatory dimension ultimately became central and consensual in development policies and projects.

During this period, the concept of participation was 'domesticated' by the implementation of 'invited participation' spaces (Cornwall 2000), and it also became broadly depoliticised with the development of an extensive and powerful process of 'good governance' in line with the dominant global neo-liberal paradigm (Bühler 2002). This evolution led some researchers and local actors to consider participation as the main tool in a new technocratic tyranny (Cook and Kothari 2001; Bühler 2002; Williams 2004). However, some alternative approaches, such as Participatory Rural Appraisal, have resisted the mainstream(ing) of participation controlled by international and transnational entities (Chambers 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 2007a).

Since 2000, growing interest in 'citizenship participation', defined as "direct ways in which citizens influence and exercise control in governance" (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999, quoted in Cornwall 2000, p 60), as well as in the generalisation of 'invited participation' spaces has been responsible for a return of the political dimension of participation in development. New forms of citizenship have emerged that consider participation as a right in the social, economic, ecological, and political realms. Moreover, the issue of (access to) decision-making and power relationships is again coming to the fore. It is in this context of renewed attention to the political dimension of participation that research was conceived and conducted within the NCCR North-South. By focusing on the complex relationships between (and within) formal and informal power structures and the related institutional dynamics, as well as the implications these have for the production and reproduction of individual and collective agency, this research has made a valuable contribution to debates about participation in development.

7.3   Main foci of research on participation in the NCCR North-South

Providing a detailed overview of the more than fifty studies conducted within the framework of the NCCR North-South on the issue of participation would go far beyond the scope of this article. In what follows, we therefore outline some of the major lines of argument presented in these studies.

Broadly speaking, the studies can be grouped into two categories: 1) works dealing with 'political participation' that emphasise analysis of processes in arenas in which collective decisions are taken; and 2) works on the 'effects' of 'social participation' that focus on the implementation of development projects. However, a common denominator of all the studies is their focus on the continuities and discontinuities between mostly marginalised (local) actors in development projects and related public spaces for decision-making. In the latter category, research on participation in decentralisation processes clearly dominates (see Geiser and Rist 2009). Although most studies recognise the interconnection between social and political participation, these are generally examined separately. Moreover, a distinction is to be made between processes and effects as a focus of research.

7.3.1   Focus on processes

Possible answers to the question of how certain forms of participation change power relations can be found in one group of studies dealing with conceptualisations of participatory processes in a broader societal context. Some of these studies analyse participation and its relationship to the transformation of basic understandings of citizenship, public space, deliberative democracy, emancipation, or resistance. Others emphasise a better understanding of the potentials and constraints of different forms of collective action as part of development (associations, social movements, etc.). The relation of the observed changes in power asymmetries to indicators of ecological sustainability is generally not addressed by these works. Instead, they focus on the constitution and evolution of social organisations and movements and show that it is worthwhile to differentiate between top-down (nevertheless usually well-intended) 'decreed participation' and 'uninvited participation' on the part of social groups making explicit claims to change political orders and societal structures. It seems that 'decreed' participation aims rather at maintaining dominant macro power relations – within a context of redistributing administrative functions – and, to a certain degree, related power relations. 'Uninvited' participation intends to change prevailing power relations directly.

Some PhD candidates carried out case studies showing how power relations are directly involved in the shaping of social relationships within different actor categories, and between these actor categories and their local natural environment. These studies often focus on marginalised groups such as women, indigenous people in rural and urban areas, migrants, landless and unemployed people, pastoralists, slum dwellers, etc. They are significant insofar as they provide basic knowledge about the factors and dynamics that result in certain actor categories remaining or – in some cases – becoming marginalised.

7.3.2   Focus on effects and impacts

A second group of studies analysed the implications and impacts of participation on different forms of governance of natural resources, protected areas, water, and waste. This group includes PhD-level studies dealing with the development or evaluation of participatory instruments for planning, monitoring, or assessing aspects related to sustainable development. The indicators used to assess the effects of participation mainly refer to the

ecological dimensions of sustainability, for example impacts on deforestation, soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, or availability and quality of water. Research taking into account that sustainable development is not only defined by a certain form of participation but also by a broad set of socio-economic indicators, such as values and institutions regulating access to and distribution of basic natural resources, has not been conducted. Two books present a total of 21 case studies showing that current forms of 'participatory' (Galvin and Haller 2008) and 'decentralised' (Geiser and Rist 2009) management of natural resources are generally associated with great problems when it comes to effectively changing existing power asymmetries. As a consequence, they often fail to achieve expected medium- and long-term ecological impacts.

7.4 Some effects of participation

Differentiating between processes, impacts, and effects makes it possible to identify two aspects of sustainable development that are interrelated but not integrated in research practice: the social-ecological and the political effects of participation. In the following sections, we summarise some typical cases in each category of effects, and point out some additional aspects mentioned in other studies.

7.4.1 Social and ecological effects

Participation has been shown to help improve people's living conditions and their access to natural and other development-relevant resources. In Bolivia, the (ad)option of 'popular participation' in the implementation of a (government-induced) decentralisation process since 1994 has generated considerable changes in terms of local development, by comparison with neighbouring countries. In the initial years, educational, social, and medical infrastructures were created in each municipality, making local support of the economic sector more efficient (Arrieta and De La Fuente 1998; Lacroix 2000; De La Fuente 2001; Bolay 2002; Lacroix 2005). In a few villages in Pakistan, the participatory forest management system introduced by the public Forestry Sector Project has increased natural assets (use of forest-associated pastures) as well as the social assets (networks, organisation, information exchange) of forest dwellers, although institutional changes in the forestry sector did not help to foster cash-oriented livelihood strategies (Shahbaz 2004; Ali et al 2007).

The increase in social, cognitive, and emotional competencies through participatory training and joint learning by local actors, researchers, and development workers is another fundamental outcome of participation (Rist et al 2007; Rabinovich, in press). For women, education is particularly decisive for their integration in decision-making and negotiating processes on values, norms, and entitlements (Müller 2006).

The group of works dealing with social effects includes a series of studies that aim to link social and ecological processes by evaluating participatory management schemes and emphasising ecological indicators of sustainability, for example with regard to impacts on deforestation (Ali et al 2006), soil erosion (Mitiku Haile et al 2006), loss of biodiversity (Gurung 2006), or availability and quality of water (Lüthi et al 2008). The main virtue of this kind of research consists in linking social and ecological processes. However, because these studies generally examine only a small number of social variables related to specific but important aspects of participation, they tend to fall short of capturing the full complexity of other social phenomena related to participation, for example power structures and relations, actor-specific understandings of development, human beings, or nature (Bottazzi 2008; Geiser and Rist 2009).

7.4.2   Political effects

As stated above, participation by local actors is directly related to the issues of agency and power (Long 2001; Bichsel 2009). This relation is clear and obvious in participatory processes, which often reveal the social and political situation or configuration, bringing to light power relations (domination/subordination, normalisation/marginalisation), underlying or latent conflicts, tensions, and interpersonal or intersectoral relations. Implementation of participation can lead to the emergence of claims that provide information about disparities and/or inequalities of access to decision-making.

In Mexico, as in other parts of Latin America, research on participation draws attention to social organisations and movements and their role in the construction of new societal structures (Morales 2004). Their activities often stem from the defence of local sociocultural, organisational, and economic structures in order to maintain or (re)gain control over constitutive elements of their life-worlds (Gerritsen and Morales Hernández 2009).

An example is the Red de Alternativas Sustentables Agropecuarias (RASA), a network for sustainable agricultural alternatives in western Mexico. This network currently comprises about 100 farmer families, six non-governmental organisations, and two local universities. Starting from the defence of local resources, organisations, food, and identities, it evolved into a new platform for debating and proposing alternative rural development policies. RASA thereby became a frame of reference for organic agriculture and fair trade, and turned into an important policy actor. For example, RASA is actively participating in a state governmental board on strengthening organic agriculture (Gerritsen and Morales Hernández 2009). Other cases confirm this pattern of policy influence exerted by locally rooted organisations and movements which, by means of federalisation, create powerful regional and national networks allowing them to compete with political parties and private companies in the arena of high-level policy-making (Freytes Frey et al 2006; Orozco Ramírez et al 2006; André de la Porte 2007).

7.5 The limited impacts of participation

When claims to change power structures are compared with the real-world effects of participatory development, it becomes apparent that the impact is very limited. Although participation in general promotes 'better' local development in the sense of responding more adequately to the needs and expectations of the local population, and contributes to (local-level) democratisation, participatory approaches fall short of achieving real change in the power relationships implied in (re)shaping social, political, and ecological structures. In other words, participation only constitutes a means to improve access to resources or decision-making and/or to more participatory management of resources. Although this is in accord with the principles of sustainable development, participatory approaches generally tend to improve sustainability within existing structures.

There are a number of reasons for this contradiction: a) exogenous, mainly top-down-oriented initiatives for participatory processes often involve imposition or privileging of the development visions of more powerful actors, rather than creating room for reconciling local and external perspectives (Gerritsen and Morales Hernández 2001); b) local inhabitants' knowledge is rarely integrated into projects, implying that the respective participatory process all too often ignores these people's capacities, resources, and visions, drawing a line between their own and outsiders' solutions (Rist and

Dahdouh-Guebas 2006; Rabinovich, in press); c) simplifying social complexity for the sake of participatory development as conceived from the top leads to overestimation of the effects and feasibility of institutional or technical packages (Galvin 2004; Rabinovich and Navez-Bouchanine 2005). National governments often conceive participation schemes without political and structural backing, as simple tools for overcoming a specific crisis, instead of considering participation as a real means and opportunity for finding, in a joint effort, solutions to the underlying social problems such as poverty, inequality of access, and marginalisation. This leads to a discrepancy between local expectations, public policies, and international mainstreaming, or to a lack of means that directly reflects a lack of political will on the part of national governments, which must respect modalities imposed by international institutions. As a result, in many cases participatory processes are artificial and remain superficial as they emerge from development projects rather than (sectors of) civil society.

Consequently, the question of which role the state should play becomes central. One of the absolute conditions for international organisations to support top-down-initiated participatory processes was – and often still is – that the participatory process in question must support withdrawal of the state from the economy and society. In many cases, however, this (neo-) liberal ideology represents in itself an obstacle to implementation of public and participatory policies. Without the power of the state to institutionalise and upscale, generalise, and thereby protect successful participatory initiatives for sustainable development, the sustainability of such initiatives will remain uncertain and weak.

These limits to participation can generate frustration on multiple levels for local stakeholders, and ultimately represent a danger to the participatory process itself. Indeed, the expectations and hopes of populations can rapidly turn into disappointment and rejection (Lacroix 2000; Müller and Kollmair 2004; Lacroix 2005; Gurung 2006; Shahbaz and Ali 2006; André de la Porte 2007). Beneficiaries or stakeholders can be exasperated by the time it takes for the effects of participatory processes to materialise, and many of them abandon the undertaking (Rabinovich, in press). This collective feeling comes from a misunderstanding between the people in charge of the participatory processes and some of the actors involved in them. Participation is often presented as a 'revolutionary process' that allows full consideration and automatic integration of all claims. On a practical level, however, this is impossible to achieve. Actors' roles and responsibilities are rarely clearly

defined, and this provokes confusion, frustration, and disillusion. Finally, participation is completely overestimated if it is considered as a panacea – as if it could generate solutions for its own inherent limits. Participation is not implemented to effect structural change, particularly in cases where it is not accompanied by structural measures. Participation cannot be considered as a global solution to mitigate syndromes that are attributable to political structures or social inequalities. Yet local actors rarely discredit participation as a way or method of development. The satisfaction of being consulted or included in development seems fundamentally more important than the results or consequences of the participatory process (Rabinovich, in press).

7.6   Preliminary conclusion and prospects

Any reflection on participation in development must face the difficulty of synthesis. As Brock and McGee (2004) mention, multiple levels and spaces lead to fragmentation of participation. Cornwall adds that "the spectrum of practices associated with participation in development is so vast that capturing their complexity would be impossible" (Cornwall 2000, p 58). Nevertheless, the diversity of case studies in terms of geographical distribution, methodologies, and approaches relates to the various disciplines that co-exist within the NCCR North-South programme. Several complementary definitions of participation in development were produced. Participation is generally

> understood not as an end in itself, but as a means to facilitate processes of deliberation between different stakeholders who – based on the principles of fairness and empathy – collectively use and broaden public spaces, aiming at structural and personal transformations in view of more sustainable forms of development. (Webler and Tuler 2000, quoted in Wiesmann et al 2005, p 128)

In this respect, participation is generally seen as related to the broadening of existing or the opening of new deliberative spaces from a normative perspective. But in a more critical way, participation is also perceived as a

> complex concept that encompasses social actors' interests; their purposeful selection of partners for participation; their strategic interaction – and active non-interaction – with others; and their capacities to make claims sound attractive and just. Participation

> *can mean very different things to different social actors, though*
> *all use the same word within a specific context [...]. Participation*
> *appears in this analysis as an important means to struggle for*
> *one's vision of development within wider social arenas. Such par-*
> *ticipation alliances between (often unequal) partners are facilitat-*
> *ed by converging interests and supported by related discourses,*
> *and split by changing interests and the emergence of new dis-*
> *courses. Finally, participation is not an a-historic phenomenon.*
> (Geiser 2001b, p 28)

These two positions span the political arena in which participation has appeared in the context of NCCR North-South research. A major difficulty in systematising the role of participation in development is its 'double nature': Participation appears to be understood by those promoting it from outside (e.g. development projects or governments) in a communicative way, oriented towards deliberation, while the beneficiaries of participation (e.g. marginalised societal actors such as women, peasants, etc.) use it as a strategic tool to improve their position in a process of negotiation with generally more powerful external actors, emphasising specific needs to be met, calling for solutions to conflicts, or expressing sociopolitical claims in development arenas.

We found that participation can be understood as a normative and purposive actor-specific process that adopts stances between strategic and communicative types of interaction. It thus becomes clear that participation generates 'nodal points', which can be defined as "physical or virtual spaces where various problems, actors, and processes converge, and where decisions are taken, agreements concluded, and social norms created". These nodal points constitute "an interesting starting point for the observation of governance processes" (Hufty 2011 in this volume, p 413).

Finally, regarding the role of participation in solving any emerging conflicts, we find that rather than asking whether a solution or the actors involved are 'good' or 'bad', it is much more important to focus on temporary acceptance of the existence of the claims of 'the others' and to implement a negotiation process and accept a re-negotiation of the rules of the game (Geiser 2001a, 2001b). This effort of allowing deconstruction and re-construction of fundamental notions such as 'community', 'civil society', or 'state' is an important aspect in jointly re-negotiating the meaning of participation (Geiser 2003; Geiser and Rist 2009).

Several types of contribution taking this approach to participation in development deserve to be fully considered. Some interesting and important efforts at synthesis have been made in recent years, including the works by Chambers (1994a, 1994b, 2007a), Cornwall (2000), McGee and Norton (2000), and Cook and Kothari (2001). New contributions have regenerated a consensual normative reflection by considering actors' dynamic networks as well as power relationships in a certain Foucaldian spirit, such as the works by Kaufman and Dilla Alfonso (1997), Cornwall (2000), Cook and Kothari (2001), Gaventa (2004), Mohan and Hickey (2004), Williams (2004), Kesby (2005), and Beetham and colleagues (2008), or by proposing measuring instruments in the continuity of already existing ladders of participation, such as the contributions by Chambers (2007a, 2007b), as well as the work done by the Participation, Power and Social Change team at the Institute of Development Studies of the University of Sussex[5] and the Participatory Geographies Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society[6]. Based on this research and these reflections, a new governance of participation with new forms of engagement between citizens and the state was proposed (Cornwall 2000; Eberlei 2001; Mohan and Hickey 2004), involving a re-conceptualisation of the meanings of participation and citizenship (Bühler 2002; Gaventa 2004) and opening up new spaces for political action (Williams 2004).

This is why the type of approach advocated here, which sees participation as primarily a political problem relating to power relations and (im)balances within a given context, seems particularly promising, from both an analytical and a policy-oriented perspective. Participation, therefore, is not a 'simple' norm whose implementation would be a pre-condition for 'good governance'. It is an arena, a physical or symbolic space where key social issues such as access to resources, gender inequalities, and land rights, to name but a few, are negotiated, thereby producing new norms and patterns of social regulation. Analysing and understanding these negotiation processes is crucial to identifying the potential benefits or the negative and counterproductive effects of decentralisation policies, as many of the NCCR North-South studies mentioned here have shown. This is also an important challenge to be taken up by future research.

Endnotes

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[5] See http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/research-teams/participation-team.

[6] See http://www.pygyrg.org.

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