



Paradox of Empowerment: Reflections on a Case Study from Northern Ghana

KARL BOTCHWAY *

Parlin, New York, USA

Summary. — In recent years the “development” industry has begun to incorporate into its vocabulary notions about the “empowerment of the poor,” “participatory democracy,” “gender in development” etc. as part of a strategy for poverty alleviation in the developing world. This paper critically examines the notion of participation as the basis of empowerment in the context of a joint Canadian–Ghanaian financed rural development project in the Northern Region of Ghana. The paper argues that because of the inherent goodness of the notion of participation, it has become a substitute for the structural reforms needed for social change. The paper raises questions not just about the terms and mode of participation but further points out that reference to the term “village” or “community” as the basis of participation is simplistic and problematic. The paper also questions the feasibility of the institutional and administrative structures within which such concepts may be realized. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years the “development” industry globally has begun to incorporate into its vocabulary notions about “empowerment of the poor,” “participatory development,” “gender in development” etc. as part of a strategy for poverty alleviation in the developing world. The use of these terms at least suggests a certain degree of dissatisfaction with earlier models of development. Furthermore, this demonstrates a recognition on the part of the development industry that the process of social development is facilitated if the intended beneficiaries participate fully in the making and implementation of decisions that affect their lives or what they perceive as development. In the foreword to a World Bank publication, *Listen to the People*, the Vice President, Operations Policy states:

The World Bank is interested in incorporating the peoples’s perspective into project work so as to narrow the gap between professionals and the intended beneficiaries. Methods of attending to cultural and behavioural factors—listening to the people—... are as important to effective development work as are the more widely tools of financial or economic analysis.¹

In effect, the discussions centers around a theme of initiating development through the

action of local people by means of development projects which enhance the “claim-making” capacities of local people. Undoubtedly, the emergence of a participatory element in development discourse is not a bad thing, since it offers the possibility of opening up spaces in which the citizenry could be part and parcel of the cultural and socioeconomic structures of society. The belief seems to be that once people are “empowered,” development becomes both attainable and sustainable. Some of the ideas for empowerment focus on initiating development from below and increasing people’s participation in the development process. As Cohen and Uphoff indicate, concern with participation has become so popular that one can hardly be against the concept and promoting participation becomes good by definition.²

In this paper, I reflect critically on participation, as the basis for empowerment in the context of a joint Canadian–Ghanaian financed rural development project in the Northern Region of Ghana, referred to as the Northern

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Region Rural Integrated Program (NORRIP). The paper argues that because of the inherent goodness of the notion of participation, it has become a substitute for the structural reforms needed for social change. Thus the focus on participation is narrow and ignores many of the contextual issues, which remain out of the control or influence of the beneficiaries of the development project. The paper raises questions not just about the terms and mode of participation but further points out that reference to the term village or community as the basis of participation is simplistic, problematic and gives the impression of homogeneity. Furthermore, the paper questions the feasibility of the institutional and administrative structures within which such concepts may be realized and makes the case that a focus on local participation and empowerment can provide the state with a legitimate opportunity for shirking its responsibilities by dumping them on local areas even though those areas lack the resources needed.³

Historically, the terms participation and participatory development as Majid Rahnema reminds us, appeared in development discourse around the 1950s, and were used by social workers and field activist who were frustrated by the failure of earlier models of development which advocated a "top-down" strategy for development.⁴ The mainstream development establishment some years later started to acknowledge the failures of the top-down strategy and thus agreed with the then marginalized knowledge that the failure of most development projects to achieve their goals and targets was in part due to the fact that the main beneficiaries of such projects had often been left out of the whole developmental process. Thus the consensus now among various categories of development field workers is that whenever the beneficiaries are locally involved and actively participate in their own development endeavors, much more will be accomplished. Perhaps the writings of the Paulo Freire⁵, the Brazilian educator provides one of the strongest affirmations of the value of participation, particularly among hitherto poor and dominated social classes. As Freire points out, whenever any social class becomes oppressed and is reduced to a culture of silence, that group is denied participation in the creation of its own humanity and as such, becomes only an object of knowledge. When this group is mobilized to participate in decision making for social development, the group begins to create its own

history and engages in its own process of development. This is not to suggest, however, there is unanimity about what participation should entail. As a review of the literature elsewhere suggests, participation means different things to different people.⁶

Gow and Vansant's four affirmations below summarize the importance of participation in development:

—People organize best around problems they consider most important.

—Local people tend to make better economic decisions and judgments in the context of their own environment and circumstances.

—Voluntary provision of labor, time, money and materials to a project is a necessary condition for breaking patterns of dependency and passivity.

—The local control over the amount, quality and benefits of development activities helps make the process self-sustaining.⁷

What these four affirmations suggest is that participation means more than just an occasional meeting in which local people are briefed about plans by project implementers. Rather, any meaningful participation implies at a minimum the process in which local communities discover the possibilities of exercising choice and becoming capable of managing what they understand as development. It is important that theoretically I locate myself as to how I use the term development. I do not use the term development as that which is self-evident and needed by all poor societies no matter their peculiar needs, circumstances and history.⁸ On the contrary, I problematize the notion of development and propose to understand development as a practice. That is to say, development should be understood as an arena of negotiations and struggle, which is historically constructed and may take unpredictable turns but usually involves interaction between different social actors.⁹ Such an approach, for instance, enables me to examine the role of the intended targets of developmental intervention and to find out whether they were capable of exerting any influence of their own.

In what follows, I provide an overview of the goals and objectives of NORRIP and also discuss the salient aspects of the Integrated Village Water Project (IVWP). I examine the conditions under which the villages were organized for participation in the NORRIP water project paying particular attention to the socioeconomic environment of the villages and the institutional and administrative structures

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