

# Poverty, Participation and Social Exclusion in North and South

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## **1 Introduction**

The rapid growth and acceptance of the concept of participation has been a key feature in development in the 1990s, and is central to the evolving discussion on social exclusion. While during the 1970s and 1980s, 'participation' was more the discourse of grassroots organisations or NGOs, this decade has seen the concept being embraced at the institutional and governmental level. The World Bank Working Group on Participation is seen as an authoritative source on participation in development. The Bank has launched 18 flagship participation projects internationally. An Interagency Group on Participation has been established to promote participation amongst aid agencies. The UNDP is incorporating participation as a critical path for poverty alleviation. Encouraged by aid organisations, national governments are being urged to decentralise, and to democratise through strengthening community participation and planning at the local and regional levels.

The institutionalisation of participation offers the possibility of taking grassroots participation to a larger scale, of being a powerful vehicle for social inclusion, and for mobilising new energy and resources for overcoming poverty. The adoption of policies on participation at high government levels provides an opportunity to link efforts of participation 'from below' with efforts to legitimate and strengthen participation 'from above'.

Yet the dangers of misuse are also present. The institutionalisation of participation at a policy level can lead to co-optation of grassroots efforts, bureaucratisation and standardisation of the approach through top-down methods, and poor quality experiences that will taint participatory efforts in the future (Blackburn, forthcoming).

While policies in support of participation enjoy a new currency, the approach has been around for a long time. In particular, we can learn a great deal about the use of participation to address poverty and social exclusion by looking at how the concept has been used in the North, where policies to promote participation for community development and poverty alleviation have been tried for several decades.

In this article, I will briefly discuss the links between the concepts of participation and social exclusion. Then, turning to the context of the United States, I will present a short history of three government programmes that have attempted to use participation to address poverty and social exclusion. Finally, I will conclude with themes which emerge from this history and which may be relevant for the South, as participation is increasingly used as an institutionalised strategy for addressing poverty.

## 2 Participation and Social Exclusion

Within the literature on participation, a distinction is often made between participation as an end itself, or as a means to an end. A similar distinction may be helpful as we link the concept of participation to that of social exclusion.

First, we can understand the lack of participation in itself as a form of social exclusion. In his contribution to this volume, Arjan de Haan (1997) discusses several definitions of social exclusion, including social exclusion as 'the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live.' In this sense, participation or inclusion is a goal to be achieved in and of itself, as a response to the problem of exclusion. This definition of participation is similar to that used, for instance, by UNRISD in its work, which defined participation as 'the organised efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations, on the part of groups and movements from those hitherto *excluded from such control*' (Stiefel and Wolfe 1994: 5, italics added).

Second, however, we often find in the literature that participation is also a means of overcoming other problems of exclusion. Participation is seen as a vehicle to enable the excluded to act more effectively to address the problems which they face. Thus, the unemployed may be organised to participate in strategies for overcoming unemployment or for job creation, youth organisations may be encouraged to participate on issues affecting youth, immigrants or minorities may develop participatory strategies for addressing racism or cultural exclusion, etc.

In the first sense, participation may be seen as an antidote to the problem of exclusion and is more an end in itself. In the second sense, participation is seen as a means of engaging the socially excluded in broader solutions to the issues and problems in their lives. In either sense, participation and social exclusion are important concepts to discuss together, in both the North and the South.

## 3 Poverty and Social Exclusion in the North

While we often think of poverty in the 'South' and wealth in the 'North', these distinctions are increasingly misleading. While the North clearly is a place of relative wealth, it also contains within it large-scale poverty and increasing inequality. In the United States, development is highly uneven. We find areas within inner cities and vast rural areas where levels of poverty, unemployment, relatively poor education, illiteracy, lack of access to health care, etc. provide similarities to certain parts of the 'South'. With growing inequality in industrialised countries, the movement of jobs and industry to newly industrialised regions of the South, increasing issues of access to basic services such as health care for the poor in many countries, and the globalisation of goods, services and information, the traditional distinctions between North and South need to be re-examined. We must recognise that there are 'Souths within the 'North,' just as there may be 'Norths within the 'South' (Gaventa. 1991; see also other articles in this volume).

The parallels, convergences and connections between North and South (Maxwell 1997) are especially strong in the area of inequality, and its consequences for social cohesion and participation (see, for instance, the Wilkinson article in this volume). While globally, the levels of inequality are known to be increasing in the South and North, it is not often realised that the level of income inequality in the USA is higher than in many other countries, including many in the South (Couto 1994; World Bank 1991). Moreover, for whatever reason, socio-economic status (defined more broadly than income) is also more likely to affect social and political participation in the USA than in many other countries. Over 25 years ago, Verba and Nie (1972) found, for instance, that socio-economic status was a better predictor of participation in the USA than in many

countries in the north, such as the UK, Netherlands, and Germany, but also than in countries in the South such as Mexico and Nigeria. More recently, Robert Putnam (1995) has written of the decline of social capital and civic engagement in the US, at the same time that the USA is promoting a vibrant civil society as a condition for newly emerging democracies in other parts of the world.

So we face a paradox of participation in the North. In countries that globally have the most, there is high inequality between the haves and have-nots. And, for the have-nots who might need to participate the most to change their socio-economic situations, there are low levels of participation. (Verba and Nie: 150). It is perhaps for this reason that social policy in the United States over the last 30 years has included a series of programmes that have used participation – with differing meanings and strategies – to address poverty and social exclusion. These include:

- Participation as Community Action – 1960s
- Participation through Regional Planning and Integration – 1970s and 1980s
- Participation as Partnership and Collaboration – 1990s

### **3.1 Participation as community action: the war on poverty**

*Today for the first time in our history, we have the power to strike away barriers to full participation in our society.*

*Maximum feasible participation of the poor.*

President Johnson, 4 March 1964, while presenting War on Poverty Legislation to Congress

In the 1960 presidential campaign, John Kennedy brought the plight of the rural poor to the attention of the nation. A book by Michael Harrington on the hidden poor, **The Other America**, had captured his attention, as well as that of others across the country. Visiting the coal fields of Appalachia, Kennedy was shocked at the conditions of rural poverty which he witnessed. Urban areas, as well, were facing growing unrest. Following the election, President Kennedy (and later, President Johnson) became the architects of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, widely known as the War on Poverty legislation.

A cornerstone of the Act was the community action clause, which mandated that there should be 'maximum feasible participation of the poor' in anti-poverty efforts. It directed local communities to designate public or private non-profit agencies as grant receiving agencies, and to use those funds to develop employment opportunities and improve local living conditions. Community Action Programmes (CAPs) were formed, involving poor people and their organisations, often with the help of young, educated organisers who had enlisted in the War on Poverty efforts. Across the country in a few short months, there was an outpouring of community mobilisation and action.

Such a blossoming of poor people's organisations and voices, especially when supported by funds from the federal government, also provoked an outcry from the local elites in city halls and county councils. Conflicting interpretations over how much participation was either 'maximum' or 'feasible' quickly emerged, producing ongoing struggles over board composition and representation. Daniel Moynihan, one of the framers of the legislation, later referred to the CAP clause as 'Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding,' arguing that the intent was simply to encourage citizen participation, not to turn over control of the programme to them, nor to by-pass local political structures (Moynihan 1969; Gaventa, Morrissey and Edwards 1995).

By 1966, two years after passage of the historic legislation, the federal government had beat a hasty retreat. An amendment sponsored by Edith Green of Oregon put funding for community action under the authority of state or local governments, and determined participation by the poor to mean one-third representation of poor people themselves, one-third from government, and one-third from other business and civic sectors.

While brief, the skirmish with maximum feasible participation of the poor in official government anti-poverty programmes was a formative moment for future anti-poverty efforts. The policy intervention helped to galvanise the formation of new local groups and leaders, who would continue to organise self-help and other non-governmental efforts for the next two decades.

By the 1970s, the government had turned its attention in urban areas to a 'Model Cities' programme, concentrating on revitalisation through locally elected government, with little strong citizen involvement. In the rural areas, especially in Appalachia, one of the largest areas of rural poverty in the country, the strategy moved from community action by the poor, to regional development, achieved through integration into the national economy, and led by a more professional planning approach.

### 3.2 Participation as regional integration

*For all practical purposes, most of the 14 million poor in our poverty areas are on the outside of the market economy . . . they are on the outside looking in, and they need our help.*

**The People Left Behind,** President's Commission on Rural Poverty, 1967

In the 1960s, socio-economic maps of the United States revealed enormous pockets of poverty in rural areas, regions viewed as being 'socially excluded' in the sense that they were outside the nation's social and economic mainstream. Of these, three regions stood out most clearly: the Appalachian region, the largest, most densely populated area of rural white poverty; the deep South, which includes Mississippi, Alabama and the Arkansas delta and is the largest area of rural black poverty; and the Native American reservations in the western United States (Gaventa and Lewis 1989).

In the Appalachian region, a special development agency, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), was launched. Over the next 25 years, the ARC, with aggregated expenditures exceeding \$15 billion, became the nation's largest rural economic development agency. The commission invested most of its funds on infrastructure – highways and industrial parks – that it hoped would lure in outside industry, following a model parallel to the 'modernisation' approach in other parts of the world. Through the development of regional infrastructure, the commission believed, Appalachia would 'take off' and become 'integrated' into the national economy, overcoming the regional exclusion and poverty of previous decades.

From the late 1960s to the late 1970s, the ARC strategy seemed to work. Industries, often from the industrialised northern USA, migrated South in search of resources, cheaper labour, and a more favourable business climate. The gains, however, were short lived. The 1980s were marked by decline for many residents, including a widening gap between their income and that of other more affluent parts of America. The crisis was no longer of impoverished rural pockets of poverty 'on the outside looking in,' it appeared much more to be of the mainstream economy itself.

What had happened? One factor lies in an economic restructuring that was national and international in scope. During the 1970s and 1980s, agricultural and industrial America was being transformed into a service and finance economy. Millions of jobs were lost as plants shut down or moved, many to overseas locations. Such economic restructuring had particular impact on the rural poor, who saw themselves underbid by newly industrialising parts of the world, but were not able to compete for new jobs or industries with the more affluent and educated regions in their own country.

By end of the 1980s, it was clear that the regional integration solution to poverty was not working, especially in the context of a changing global economy. At the same time, during the 1970s and 1980s, community-based efforts at development, many of which were spawned in the 1960s, had continued to grow and to demonstrate results, at least on a small scale (Gaventa, Smith and Willingham 1993). As in other parts of the world, attention began to turn to forming new partnerships between government and civil society, rather than to traditional market mechanisms, as a path for change.

### 3.3 Participation as partnership and collaboration

*The road to economic opportunity and community development starts with broad participation by all segments of the community. This may include, among others, the political and governmental leadership, community groups, health and social service groups, environmental groups, religious organisations, the private and non-profit sectors, centres of learning and other*

*community institutions. The residents themselves, however, are the most important element of revitalisation.*

President's Community Empowerment Board,  
1994

One of the hallmarks of the Clinton administration has been the Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities (EZ/EC) programme, the most comprehensive federal programme of the 1990s to focus on relieving severe distress in rural and urban areas. Launched in 1993, the programme provides \$2.5 billion in tax incentives and \$1 billion in block grants to revitalise 95 distressed urban and rural communities.

The principles of the EZ/EC programme are similar to many which are now being articulated in international approaches to community development. First, the programme builds on each community's own vision for change, through a strategic planning process that allows local residents to set their own path to success. It gives significant new emphasis to the role of citizen participation in the planning and development process by promoting involvement and partnerships among all sectors of a community. Second, it adopts a comprehensive approach to development by linking the principles of economic opportunity and sustainable community development into a broad vision of change and revitalisation.

While much can be learned from the implementation of this programme, two points pertaining to participation stand out. First, as in the War on Poverty, given a chance to participate in development, people did so in enormous numbers. The process began with strategic planning, in which thousands of citizens at a grassroots level took an active role in determining the vision, goals and strategies for revitalisation of their communities. Widely diverse groups were involved in the planning process, including women, minorities and low-income people. In addition to racial, gender and class diversity, the planning process represented community-based organisations, government, private business, labour unions, educators, health care officials, media and other community stakeholders.

Second, however, while participation was high in the beginning visioning process, it has been difficult to maintain in the implementation process. After encouraging local communities to go through a very hurried planning process, with promises for quick action, long delays then occurred as the government agencies attempted to devise new ways to process applications or allocate and disburse funds. Then, once money began to flow, communities often found the traditional power holders stepping in to take charge, and serious conflicts emerging over goals, governance and implementation, as in the War on Poverty. In other places, however, these conflicts have been less pervasive and new initiatives have taken root very quickly, involving new coalitions of civil society organisations, local government and the private sector.

## **4 Key Themes for Development**

What does this brief history of participation policy in poverty programmes in the United States suggest about the current debates on participation and policy in international development? A number of key themes emerge which are relevant and perhaps instructive.

### **Participation policy matters**

While in some quarters there may be scepticism about attempts of government or large-scale agencies to legislate or mandate participation, the experience in the United States is that participation policy matters. Strong legislation in the War on Poverty and in the latest Empowerment Zone programme helped to legitimate and to galvanise large-scale action at the grassroots level. Opportunities for participation, when built into national policy, made a difference in who participated locally. The capacity, energy, and momentum created at the grassroots often continued, even after the formal policies changed or failed.

### **Who participates matters**

Broadening the base of participation is not only important in its own right, but it affects the development agenda. When there was broader-based participation in the 1960s and 1990s, we saw very different definitions of what was important for development than in the more top-down and market oriented versions of the 1970s and 1980s.

Visions of development which emerged in the community-based planning process in the Empowerment Zone Programme reflected much broader concerns with issues of participation, capacity building, cultural awareness, empowerment, etc., not only the more traditional agenda of economic and infrastructure development. The varying emphases on the development of economic, human or social capital by differing groups often led to conflict about which goals were most important.

### **The definition of participation matters**

Attempts to institutionalise participation have also led to conceptual debates about what we actually mean by participation. In 1969, a chief advisor for the War on Poverty published a ladder of participation which ranged from non-participatory forms of manipulation, to degrees of token participation, to degrees of shared power, including partnership, delegation, and control (Arnstein 1969). In the mid 1990s, similar typologies or scales are also being used and developed. Pretty (1996), for instance, examines levels of participation ranging, again, from manipulation to self-mobilisation.

As the War on Poverty debates on what was meant by 'maximum feasible participation' illustrated, it is important to have as much clarity as possible on the levels and types of participation intended. However, we must also recognise that in its implementation, participation is a dynamic process. Participation at one point on the scale may lead to movement along the scale. For instance, consultation processes, if done well, may lead to demands and expectations on the part of those consulted for a greater level of participation. Similarly, consultation that is misused can lead to manipulation and reinforce levels of passivity or cynicism in future attempts at participation.

### **Participation and power**

As participation moves 'up' the scale to include concepts like citizen control over resources or self-mobilisation of groups which have previously been inactive, then we can expect it to encounter resistance from the traditional power holders. There is one school of thought which says that power is not a zero sum game, that increased participation by some groups does not diminish the power and participation of others. However, if participation

involves decision-making and control over scarce resources, then the history of these programmes in the USA suggests the opposite to be true – increased participation by the have-nots will be perceived as threatening to those who have traditionally been the dominant decision-makers.

The history also suggests that simply mandating or legislating participation from the top is not enough to sustain it. Ongoing intervention is needed from the top to help ensure its implementation, and to help intermediary elites to understand or accept the new participation. High-level 'champions' of participation at the top of government institutions are important to reinforce the participatory vision at the local level, to help resolve conflicts, and, if necessary, to intervene to enforce the new policies.

### **The importance of prior social capital and organisational capacity**

In both the War on Poverty and the Empowerment Zone programmes, communities which were historically poor by measures of economic and human capital, revealed strong resources of social capital in the planning and visioning process. Given an opportunity to participate with others, they were able to do so, building upon networks, relationships and levels of trust that may have been structured over decades. This was not uniformly true, however. It is perhaps self-evident that groups that have a history of trust, and of working together, will do better at working together in the future. Where there is a history of conflict or 'vertical' social capital, participation in large-scale formal endeavours is more difficult to accomplish or to sustain.

While 'social capital,' (defined by Putnam as trust, reciprocity, and networks of support) is important for participation, so, too, is the organisational capacity of the grassroots or poor people. In the Empowerment Zone Programme, large numbers of people participated in the strategic visioning process. However, it has been more difficult to sustain participation in the implementation of the programme. In communities where grassroots organisations and leadership have been built in 10–20 years of prior development work, the poor have been more successful not only at 'getting to the table' but also in 'staying at the table.' With the help of this organisational capacity, these communities were more able to take advantage of the institu-

tional opportunities for participation when they came along, to negotiate with government officials over terms and implementation, to survive difficult conflicts, and to mobilise resources when necessary (Morrissey with Gaventa and Creed 1997).

This suggests another important lesson for policy intervention: mandates for participation from 'above' must be linked with pre-existing capacities for participation 'from below.' If there has not been a prior history of local action and organisational development, there will be fewer building blocks for larger-scale participation to occur.

### **The importance of governmental or institutional capacity**

If the development of organisational capacity at the grassroots community level is important for sustained participation with institutions, then equally important is the development of the capacity of institutions and governments to work in a participatory way with communities. A major obstacle in the implementation of the EZ/EC Programme has been the conflict among the various levels of government, and turf conflicts within agencies responsible for implementation of programmes. This has led to delays, confused and often conflicting procedures, and mixed signals and advice to the localities. Also important has been the lack of skills, knowledge and attitudes amongst agency staff about how to work in a more participatory fashion, especially where goals and projects are set by the community, rather than given to them by government. New more flexible institutional procedures, and new skills and attitudes on the part of the government staffs and officials are important for participatory policies to work effectively at the community level.

### **The importance of participatory monitoring and evaluation of participation**

As participation becomes more and more accepted, it will also be important to determine ways to monitor and measure whether 'quality' participation is occurring, and with what results. What are the indicators for success in participatory development?

This issue has at least two important inter-related dimensions. On the one hand, as participation is accepted in principle, we must evolve indicators

and ways to know if it is in fact occurring in practice. However, while researchers have developed earlier methods of monitoring and evaluating more traditional forms of development, such as infrastructure, job creation or education, the tools and indicators do not exist when it comes to measuring (potentially more fuzzy) concepts of participation, empowerment, and capacity.

The second dimension relates to the question of 'who measures?'. Whose indicators of success are used and who uses them? The rapid evolution of PRA has taught us a great deal about the importance of people's knowledge and has provided sets of tools for using that knowledge in appraisal and implementation of projects. The next step is to involve people centrally in evaluating their success and impact. 'Who counts reality?' may prove as significant as 'whose reality counts?' (Chambers 1996).

### **Participation may not be enough**

Clearly, policies to promote participatory approaches for dealing with poverty and social exclusion are also affected by broader forces and must be linked to other policies for change. Much more work is needed to understand the relationships of grassroots participation to other large issues linked to globalisation of the economy, racial, ethnic and religious movements, the overhaul of social welfare policies, governance and decentralisation policies, to name a few.

## **5 Conclusion**

This article has suggested that policies and experiences with participation as a strategy for countering poverty and social exclusion in the North may be relevant to the current debates on how to institutionalise participation in development in the South. It has argued that there are many parallels and themes to be explored, and it will take much further research to do so adequately.

However, from this preliminary inquiry one lesson is perhaps most clear. While many donors and aid organisations in the North (such as AID in the United States) are promoting strategies of participation abroad, they may do well to examine more critically the lessons which can be learned from similar strategies at home. While democracy and participation in the North have strong traditions,

the models and approaches used at home have also taught us a great deal about challenges still to be faced in implementing large-scale participatory

programmes. Perhaps the new experiences with participatory development in the South will provide new lessons for the North as well.

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