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Changing Ideals in a Donor Organisation: 'Participation' in Sida

Andrea Cornwall
January 2009

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Changing Ideals in a Donor Organisation: ‘Participation’ in Sida

Andrea Cornwall

Summary

Development buzzwords shelter diverse and often divergent strands of meaning and practice, lending an air of credibility and currency to the policies of the agencies that espouse them. Tracing the trajectory of one of these buzzwords, ‘participation’, in Swedish development cooperation, this paper seeks to unpack some of those diverse meanings and lend form to some of those divergent practices. It weaves together institutional ethnography with oral history and textual analysis, fortified by insights from a unique action research initiative on participation. This innovative process brought together desk officers from across the institution in a participatory learning group that met for the best part of a year to explore the challenge of institutionalising participation in Sida.

The paper tells the tale of efforts to promote and negotiate participation in a changing external and institutional environment. It begins in a time when the term had not yet gained currency but in which the practice of Swedish development cooperation resonated with many of the ideals that were associated with popular participation. It goes on to chart the rise of ‘popular participation’ (*folkligt deltagande*) and other variants, *community participation*, *beneficiary participation*, *stakeholder participation* and *civil society participation*, as Swedish development cooperation came to be influenced by the discourses and practices of bilateral and multilateral development institutions. Pursuing the trajectory of participation into an era in which other buzzwords – harmonisation, ownership and accountability – have taken precedence, it reflects on the paradoxes of efforts to institutionalise ideals within development bureaucracies as they grapple with the opportunities, challenges and contradictions of the Paris Agenda and the reconfiguration of the business of aid.

Keywords: participation; history of development; organisational change; development cooperation; development policy.

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1 Introduction

It's in the backbone of every desk officer that you need to talk about participation and partnership somewhere.

(Sida desk officer, Stockholm)

There was much talk throughout the 1990s in international development circles about 'mainstreaming' and 'institutionalising' participation.¹ There was also a lot of talk, and many fears, about mechanistic applications that stifled the life out of already-existing participatory practices, and about the extent to which bureaucracies were able to accommodate bottom-up unpredictable process-oriented ways of doing development (cf. Korten 1980; Uphoff 1992; Chambers 1997). The challenge that institutionalising participation poses for aid bureaucracies runs deeper than those of many other development paradigms. For 'participation' is, at its very core, about relationships. As such it is never simply about what organisations do 'out there'. It is also about what goes on 'in the house', as Sida staff would say of their Stockholm headquarters, as well as 'in the field'.

This paper reflects on Sida's engagement with participation in development. It begins in the optimistic and expansive era of the 1970s, a decade in which Sweden was active in promoting a vision for development based on solidarity and self-reliance that struck chords with social democrats at home. It explores shifts in meanings, practices, policies and professions of intent across the 1980s and 1990s, and then homes in on the early 2000s to examine some of the challenges that were arising as Sweden began to adopt a more concerted poverty focus in its international cooperation policy. Drawing insights from a participatory research project carried out with desk officers within Sida's Stockholm headquarters, on interviews with key informants engaged in efforts to promote participation, departmental heads and desk officers in various parts of the organisation, and on participant observation during regular visits to Sida over the period 2000–2008, it reflects on some of the challenges that came to face those who sought to implement participation in this period.² It then moves to the more recent past, exploring the dilemmas that arose as new aid modalities and new approaches to development came to characterise a changing aid environment, and looking to the future.

1 See, for example, Blackburn and Holland (1998); Blackburn, Chambers and Gaventa (1999); Tandon and Cordeiro (1999), Long (2001).

2 This research was funded by Sida and carried out in conjunction with the Policy department in Sida's Stockholm headquarters. See Cornwall, Pratt and Scott-Villiers (2004), Cornwall and Pratt (2003), Arora-Jonsson and Cornwall (2006) and Cornwall, Jassey, Arora-Jonsson and Scott-Villiers (2007).

2 Participation in Sida: tracks and traces

Participation has survived precisely because it fits into any policy and can be reshaped to fit almost anything that's asked of it.

(Sida desk officer, Stockholm)

Since participation first began to find its way into the favour of donors and other international agencies in the 1970s, a number of distinctively different forms of thinking about and 'doing' participation have emerged; they have swelled, ebbed and flowed throughout the last 30 years, carrying different development missions and their associated flotsam and jetsam with them (Cornwall 2000). A constant in discourses on participation in international development, and within Sida's positions on participation, is an emphasis on enabling those whom development affects to play a more active role in determining its directions.

Over time, however, a number of contrasting, sometimes competing, positions on what exactly this might involve have emerged. Each has its own tracks and traces. In what follows, I explore the trajectories of different understandings of participation within Sida; like the 'family resemblances' that hold the concept of 'participation' together, they consist of overlapping, but in many ways also distinct threads of thought and practice. By disentangling some of these threads, this paper hopes to contribute insights that can be useful in thinking through some of the dilemmas faced in promoting participation in development.

2.1 Paradigms and pragmatics: from solidarity to efficiency

As older Sida staff members commented, Sida was doing participation without calling it 'participation' more or less from its inception as an official development agency in 1965. Much initial development work supported by the Swedish government was concerned with local-level development projects, and included support to cooperatives, and work building relations of solidarity and community. Ironically, one staff member was given to comment, these practices may have had more to do with what development discourses now term 'participation' than what the more fashion-conscious Sida of the 1990s actually came to do under that label. Contemporary discourses of 'ownership' and 'partnership' are, equally, reflected in Sida's adoption in late 1960s of the concept of 'aid on the conditions of the recipient', which sought to delegate control over deciding how aid was spent with minimal involvement by the donor.

The term 'participation' first came to enter and circulate within bilateral development agencies in the 1970s – even if it took another decade for it to enter their policies. Two quite different meanings were associated with it, each of which had a particular history and politics. The first was popular participation (*folkligt deltagande*), which captured a set of ideals about self-reliance, empowerment and social mobilisation that had a longer history in transformative social movements.

The ideals associated with *folkligt deltagande* are captured in UNRISD's (1979) definition of participation as

the organised efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions ... on the part of groups and movements hitherto excluded from such control.

(Pearse and Stiefel 1979)

These ideals chimed very well with the SIDA of the 1970s, which was represented by those who'd worked there then as a small, closely-knit organisation of people with radical ideals and egalitarian principles. 'It was new, it was challenging, it was everything you wanted', enthused one of those who joined in this period. The mood of expansive optimism that was a sign of these times was matched by a focus on spending time in the field, working directly with people. Staff posted to developing countries numbered in their hundreds, if not – as in the case of Tanzania, for example – thousands. Working for SIDA came to mean the exhilaration of postings that criss-crossed continents and sectors. Solidarity was the watchword, extending to direct support for leftist movements.³ Mick Moore reflects

They were overwhelmingly leftists, from Social Democrats through to Commies, who understood their role as using in the developing world much the same mobilisation techniques that had worked on 'the poor' in Sweden, within a general context in which Swedish aid was directed towards leftist, Communist and 'frontline' regimes and states. Arguably, the essentials of this approach, at least when done well, were: (a) focus on organising the poor for collective action of some kind (including through a lot of co-ops); (b) the notion of a vanguard role for Sida field staff and the other cadres they financed; and (c) at least some kind of expectation that these cadres would live the role of a revolutionary cadre, i.e. put in a great effort and incur personal hardship.

Moore goes on to note that the term 'participation' may well have described their ideals; but it 'had no special resonance' as a term. This chimes with reflections from those who had been in SIDA at those times, who talked about how their practice was simply what they understood as what doing development was about – and that only later did they recognise elements of it in what was to be termed 'participation'.

The second set of meanings that came to be associated with participation in this period were that those for whom development was intended – its *beneficiaries* – should not only benefit from development interventions, but play some part in shaping them. This was a very ambiguous notion: quite what playing this part amounted to varied – and continues to vary – considerably, from being obliged to provide voluntary labour and inputs in cash or kind, to being genuinely engaged in consultations over development interventions. One of the first official documents

³ Tor Sellström (1999), for example, shows how over 40 per cent of Swedish aid to southern Africa in the period 1950–95 was used to give direct support to liberation movements.

to name the need to involve the poor as beneficiaries of development was the 1973 US foreign assistance act (Cohen and Uphoff 1980). The influence of this perspective on participation was weak in the early days, precisely because it resonated so little with the overriding ideals of the organisation. But things were to change.

By the end of the 1970s, competing perspectives on participation within SIDA had begun to generate their own contradictions. On the one hand, *folkligt deltagande* emphasised mutual aid, collective action and, in an era where Sweden was lending significant support to liberation movements in southern Africa, mobilisation in pursuit of rights and social justice. On the other hand, the prerogative of 'aid on the conditions of the recipient' left progressive thinkers in an increasingly difficult position, as the following excerpt from a 1979 report entitled *Work is Not Enough* makes clear:

Instead of letting the recipients themselves manage and supervise their country's development effort, Sweden intervened to ensure that Swedish development assistance did not contribute to increasing economic and social inequalities in the country ... The result of dialogue between the Swedish and recipient countries is generally that the latter follow the advice and guidelines put forth by the former ... Of this, one may divine the assumption that the Swedes know how to see the interests of the poor rural population better than the bureaucrats of the countries in question. In some cases this may actually be so.

(Johansson 1979: 27)

Such paradoxes of participation were only to deepen over the course of the following decades.

Mick Moore recalls the extent to which the shifts that shaped the uptake of a more instrumental approach to participation in the 1980s were mirrored in a changing political environment in Sweden. 'In essence, Social Democratic electoral hegemony, unbroken for around 30 years, I recall, was clearly fraying. The collapse of sub-Saharan African economies in the 1970s was the trigger and the vulnerable point of "old" Sida. In my view, those Sida folks who began to promote "participation" were in effect trying to rescue something that they saw as valuable from the steady assault on Sida-as-solidarity'. Moore draws attention to a contrast between 'new-participation' and 'old-solidarity'. This came to be framed, over the course of the 1980s, by a more outward orientation – and the influence of the more instrumental and conservative view from influential international development players as they began to embrace 'participation'.

SIDA's 1981 Rural Development Strategy is often cited by those working outside the organisation of how progressive the agency was at a time when others were still focusing on older models of development assistance. A closer look at the strategy reveals how tame it actually was, and makes the resistance it was to receive from SIDA's board all the more interesting. It called simply for a pragmatic approach to involving people in projects, and went no further. Its architect, Lars-Erik Birgegård, saw the strategy as a tool to prise open some space for at least a minimal level of participation, and chose to frame it tactically as such in the recognition that, as he was to comment, 'Sida will never take on as an open

position to change power relations and structural injustice, they will apply it in a project context'. In later years, the strategy was to be a reference point for those attempting to engage *their* organisations with participation, including within the World Bank (Long 2001). The fact it had never been formally approved by the board was to mean little; given the way in which the organisation works, the formal adoption or non-adoption of policies and strategies is only one of many factors influencing what people actually do in practice.

By the early 1980s, 'You couldn't do anything without it [participation]. You had to mention it everywhere. You couldn't have a workshop without mentioning it. It was compulsory' commented Lars-Erik Birgegård, whose work with SIDA as an external consultant has spanned decades. But for those who tried to advocate for participation in this period, what it meant in practice was more akin to *beneficiary* than *popular* participation: it was generally less the kind of participation that was associated with radical shifts in power than engaging communities in sharing the costs, and the burdens, of development. Concerns with efficiency were to drive an ever more instrumental approach to participation, as the idealism associated with older ideals of *folkligt deltagende* and 'old-solidarity' faded into the background.

In its place was to come a re-invigorated version of *community participation* which coupled the popularisation of communitarian ideals with an approach that was highly palatable to the neoliberal reformers of the 1980s. International organisations began to enthusiastically take up ideas and practices that had their origins in British colonial community development (Batten 1948; Midgley *et al.* 1986): communities were enlisted, enjoined and encouraged to do their own development projects, set up self-help groups and local development committees and engage in providing for themselves. Amidst the many evaluations and reports of this period are those focusing on how efficient implementation can be pursued through contributions of rural people's time and resources, a form of participation that came to be highly consonant with other tenets of neoliberalism. There are, however, flashpoints where other interpretations come into view. One such example is Berit Olsson and colleagues' 1987 review of Sida's Guinea Bissau programme which argues, in the context of a discussion of participation:

There are many tasks that central authorities should handle for the people, who do pay taxes after all. The slogan 'health by the people' must not become a pretext for leaving the volunteer peasant alone to fight against tuberculosis and obstructed labour (which are surely more central health issues than the common causes of headache, for which he is equipped).

(1987: 26)

In work linking gender and participation, older SIDA sentiments about struggle and solidarity also shine through. Anderson's (1985) review of the impact of domestic water supplies in Tanzania on rural women argues, for example, that:

The goal [of participation] is practical – to improve the success rate of water supply projects and maximise benefits, which is positive for women ... but it is more positive to give attention to a clear objective to gender equality ... most

importantly to facilitate [women's] liberation and development as a group and as individuals.

(1985: 4,10)

Development rhetoric may have supplied a frame for SIDA's projects, but they were refracted through the ideals of individuals working within the organisation, who shaped them to be more consonant with their own political projects, and indeed with the idealism that was – and is – still to be found in the corridors of Sida.

2.2 Institutionalising participation: challenges and struggles

For all the resonance with instrumental arguments for participation with the predominant development thinking of the time, the participation enthusiasts of the 1980s were a marginal minority. In SIDA, this was not the most auspicious of moments for calls for popular participation: it was a time in which the macro-economic agenda had become the Holy Grail. Although SIDA was more insulated from the kind of direct political intervention that plays such a part in the history of participation mainstreaming in an agency like USAID (Corneille and Shiffman 2004), the priorities of the SIDA's bureaucratic leadership had a considerable role in shaping the agenda. As one of those involved with participation in this period commented,

There was an infatuation with the Bank ... when Carl Tham was running towards the Bank and the macro agenda, everyone ran after him, no-one would say hey, hey we've been doing participation ... there was a feeling that we're getting into something new but forgetting to pack our bags, there was a lot of good in our projects, lots of field interaction, people working in a participatory manner ... But projects were considered very 1970s, and people thought participation could only be used in small projects, that it was outdated.

By the end of the 1980s, the fashion in participatory methods that was to sweep with such force and speed across the world of development institutions had reached Sida. The influence of the thinking of people like Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway had begun to create ripples in Swedish institutions over the course of the 1980s; in Sida, some of those working in and with the natural resources department, were influenced by their ideas and began to find ways of bringing them into Sida's work. A post was created in the natural resources department which included support to participatory methodologies. Strategic funding was used by staff to support methodology development in external institutions. One obvious strategy was to fund the production of guidelines and practical materials that Sida staff could use in their work; this was pursued through funding, from 1987–1993, to the Popular Participation Unit at Stockholm University and from 1988 onwards to the International Institute for Environment and Development's Sustainable Agriculture Programme.

The guidelines produced by the PPU failed to make any impact. Few people we spoke to had heard of them; some suggested they might be gathering dust in a

cupboard somewhere or slotted between other unused documents concealed behind the neat, bright, cloth covers of Sida desk officers' files. As those involved in producing them reflected, no amount of externally produced materials were going to make a difference if the institutional channels for getting them seeded and taken up were not there. One of Sida's participation advocates argued that they simply preached to the converted: 'they were there for people who had joined the church but were not used by others. There was no missionary here [in Sida Stockholm], they needed someone to be pushing it, shouting about it, training'. But even those who tried to get things moving found it difficult to sustain their efforts in the face of intermittent overseas travel and postings that took them from one division to another. Career trajectories in Sida tend to produce considerable staff turnover within any particular part of the organisation; and movement from division to embassy to department and back, leaves little institutional memory or depth of understanding in its wake.

'Missionaries' of participation did indeed emerge within Sida, but their reach was limited; and postings left them dislocated from the networks they were building, or unable to devote energy to promoting participation until they were up to speed with their new jobs. But even where they put this energy in, they complained of getting little back. A series of 'participation champions' from this period reflected on how much effort they put into convening events such as seminars and discussions, and creating a network of people engaging with putting participation into their work. Time and again, this drew only the already converted. Frustration with the limits these efforts met within the organisation led to the investment of funds and effort in external organisations in the hope that they would help pressurise Sida from the outside, and bring about change.

Swedish aid played a pivotal role in the early 1990s in influencing the shift from the margins to the mainstream amongst other development agencies and banks. Support to the World Bank's Learning Group on Participation in the early 1990s and grants to the Sustainable Agriculture Programme at IIED, the 'Forest Trees and People' programme at the FAO and Robert Chambers at IDS contributed to fuelling experimentation with and the expansion of use of participatory methodologies. But within Sida itself, little shifted. As one of those who tried to engage people with participation, and suffered a lot of frustration in the process, commented:

People didn't know how to handle the issue. Some people were very keen, individuals here and there in the field who pushed it. But people lacked the competence, the instruments ... There was a fear, an avoidance, of taking these approaches into the house.

With little interest in the participation agenda from the very top, advocates struggled and failed to capture people's interests. For all the talk about participation and techniques like PRA that could be used in the field, instruments for analysis of the kind that Sida desk officers could use in their actual daily work – like checklists of questions to ask or issues to cover – were not part of what was on offer. And there was an assumption that what was needed to support participation was to recruit more anthropologists, that 'they'd be the key and would release it [participation] into the house'. But, as one of Sida's early 'participation champions' reflected, 'we missed the opportunity by hooking it to the idea that we

needed people of this kind to deliver this baby', they weren't able to institutionalise it as we wanted'.⁴

2.3 Participation in the 'new Sida'

With the new administration in 1995, space opened again but the mood of the times had also shifted. This was the era of *'the miserable Big-Sida'*, when solidarity disappeared from the organisation's mission. It was the time when *SIDA* became the new *Sida*, with the merger of what were previously distinct organisations, dealing separately with economic and infrastructural issues, support to the transition economies of the former Soviet bloc, and research. With the merger came a dilution of the kind of leftist sentiments that were once the hallmark of the organisation. The subsequent reorganisation did little to bring together different currents of work with participation within the organisation: departments continued to pursue parallel lines, with little intersection.

Those working in different departments continued to network informally, but the individualistic nature of Sida's organisation left them little opportunity to influence practice beyond their own particular domains. Some fantastic projects and programmes were seeded and funded (see Woodford-Berger and Nilsson 2000), but they remained the exception rather than the rule. From what those I spoke with said, there remained little understanding of what exactly 'participation' might mean in practice: 'it was like a phrase we were putting into documents, there wasn't any thinking about how it could be done'.

By the mid-1990s, further variations in thinking about participation became part of an ever more complex tapestry of policy and practice within Sida. Two new versions came onto the scene. The first was the concept of *stakeholder participation*, which lent a degree of political analysis to a concept that up to then lacked the means to differentiate between potential participants. The World Bank's Learning Group on Participation, which from 1991–4 received a significant amount of Sida funding, came to promote the term – although not without considerable political ambiguity; ODA's (1995) *Note on Enhancing Stakeholder Participation*, in contrast, uses the term 'stakeholder' to highlight the politics of participation in one of the most honest documents a donor agency has yet produced on the subject. As we go on to discuss, Sida also came to make use of this concept in its policy documents, although not without slippage between this and other, older, variants of participation.

The second was *civil society participation*, popularised in the shift from projects to policy, the emergence of instruments like the the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), the growing use of Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs), and the consequences of the New Policy Agenda of the early 1990s and the support this lent the phenomenal growth of 'civil society organisations' (Edwards

4 Indeed, anthropologists have been amongst the fiercest critics of participatory methodologies, and many remain sceptical about participation in development (see Richards 1995; Mosse 2001; Cornwall and Fleming 1995).

and Hulme 1997). *Civil society participation* is one of the most nebulous and euphemistic of all forms of participation, as the category 'civil society' is such a diverse one, almost anyone can belong to it – and agitate for their preferred solutions. Its significance for organisations like Sida lies in a very clear shift away from doing projects or programmes, often together – in solidarity even – with governments, as most Swedish aid tended to be spent prior to this period. Supporting civil society participation may indeed involve using strategic influence on government to open space for civil society organisations to come to the negotiating table, and Sida has worked hard at this in many countries. But as various reviews of Sida support to Swedish NGOs made clear, these organisations are hardly paragons of participation (Lewis *et al.* 1994; Riddell *et al.* 1995). Riddell *et al.* comment

The extent to which Swedish NGO-supported activities are participatory was disappointing. The rhetoric on participation commonly exceeded reality [...] one of the most common forms of participation was manual labour, the least common form was involvement in decision-making and activities to enhance the feeling of project ownership.

(1995: 13 and 121)

The spirit of the times is summed up in a 1998 article, 'The Sustainability Enigma', in Sida's Evaluations Newsletter: 'In order to be efficient and effective, Swedish aid must be shifted from a supply-driven, disbursement orientated venture, towards a demand-driven, performance orientated one' (Sida 1998: 3). Whilst Sida never went as far as USAID in describing those for whom development cooperation was intended as customers (see LaVoy 1998; Corneille and Shiffman 2004), the 1990s were a decade in which marketised solutions were in the ascendant. Swedish solutions were still being promoted, but the recipes had changed with the shifting politics of social democracy in Sweden and the influence of neoliberalism. The political community built around shared ideals, shaken by Sida's love affair with the World Bank, fragmented yet further. Despite its marginal relevance to most of those in the organisation, participation serves as an interesting touchstone for these differences in politics, and to some extent in values. The tensions between different logics of participation that are evident in different areas of Sida's work serves to exemplify some of the paradoxes of development cooperation during this period.

The entry of these new ideas about participation did not displace existing versions. They simply made the tapestry a little more complex. Sida continued to support community participation, especially in their sectoral work. The grey literature from this period abounds with examples of the use of community participation in education, water and health as a form of co-funding and labour. At the same time, this literature also highlighted the uncomfortable fact that Sida's ideals might not be shared by those to whom they wanted to empower or devolve ownership, something that appears to have slipped out of view in recent donor endorsement of the principle of 'country-owned' poverty reduction plans.⁵ In a

5 See Molund (2000) on the concept of ownership in Swedish aid, and McGee *et al.* (2002) for a critique of the extent to which 'country ownership' is actually played out in the PRSPs.

contribution to a World Bank review of experiences with popular participation, Anders Rudqvist contends:

The unanimous opinion among interviewed Swedish officials is that the weak link in the process is not the donor agency or its implementing consultants, but the government agencies of the recipient country, and occasionally NGOs or local organisations that are co-operating in the project implementation.

(1993: 54)

The later 1990s was a time when the notion of what it was to be a donor was in flux. There were (further) cuts in the number of field officers in the embassies. Sida began to shift, like other donors, towards decreasing engagement with projects, to programme support and then, more recently, to budget and sector-wide support, policy dialogue, and donor coordination – at least, that is, Sida began to speak more about operating in this way, even if in practice, as some staff pointed out, projects were still largely the order of the day. From the perspective of some Sida staff, these shifts put ‘participation’ into question. As one Sida staff member – an anthropologist who has always been somewhat sceptical of the participation agenda – put it:

Participation in Sida? What is that? What is the role for an external donor agency? There have been policy discussions in Sida over a long time, the main direction of them is that Sida shouldn't have a hands-on approach, should take a step back, should engage more local consultants, we should see ourselves as financiers. There's the idea of ownership, where it is not our projects, our job is to encourage local projects. The ownership idea doesn't go in harmony with the idea of participation – you can encourage local partners to use this approach but ... our relationship to the people we're supposed to assist is indirect.

As David Lewis and his colleagues suggested in their review of Sida's assistance to Bangladeshi NGOs, ‘Sometimes a sense of ownership is reflected in NGOs confidently asserting their own agendas against donors or funding NGOs’ (1994: 43). This raises the broader question put by one Sida senior manager, ‘To what extent should donors make their own judgements on what is participation and to what extent do you allow local stakeholders to have their own perspectives even if they're not the same as ours?'; and that posed by a desk officer, ‘if we're talking of participation and the responsibility lies with the recipients, what's in it for us, what's our role? Is it being able to judge how people are participating rather than to be a participant?’. New dimensions of discourses on ‘partnership’ and ‘ownership’ point to the growing complexity of configurations of relationships with the state, global governance institutions and non-state actors. It means, as one senior manager bluntly put it, ‘We can't go in with a Swedish blueprint of how the world is working’.

2.4 Policies and participation: contemporary trends and new directions

How do Sida's policy documents reflect these changing notions of development

assistance and different forms of participation? Amidst the profusion of statements, policies and positions on participation taken by other bilateral agencies in the mid-1990s, Sida was oddly silent. The wave of strategy papers and policies that followed the creation of what one person described as 'big Sida' in 1995, however, made copious mention of the word. Analysis of these documents reveals a plethora of meanings.

In the 1996 Poverty Strategy, the thinking behind *beneficiary* and *community participation* is evident, with lines such as 'programmes to combat poverty require the acceptance and support of the people through consultations, participation and trust' (Sida, Poverty Strategy 1996: 16) and 'effective aid programmes must be based on the resources of poor people and on their capacity to improve and maintain the local infrastructure' (Poverty Strategy 1996: 18). Indeed, the strategy reveals more of the thinking behind what exactly 'participation' consists of, stating that 'attention must be paid to ensuring that it is not just women who make sacrifices and work without pay (the men insist on being paid)' (1996: 20). *Stakeholder participation* makes an appearance, with: 'initiatives, planning and controls should, as far as possible, be managed by the immediate stakeholders themselves' – although quite who these might be remains rather more oblique.⁶ And *civil society* and *citizen participation* take their place in a discussion about democracy and human rights that has, to all appearances, its own independent trajectory and had, for years, associated activities that were almost completely independent of those Sida was supporting in other, generally sectoral, projects and programmes. Sida is of course not unique in this respect; it is only very recently that governance and social development have begun to converge around questions of participatory democracy, social accountability and rights-based approaches (Cornwall 2000; Gaventa 2003).

Popular participation re-emerged as a prominent current in discourses on participation in Sweden in the late 1990s, as some of these disconnects came to be bridged. The Swedish Government's White Paper, *The Rights of The Poor – Our Common Responsibility* (1996/7) is a radical document that was, in many ways, before its time. It highlights participation as right, the importance of establishing a more equal relationship between countries who are partners in poverty reduction through development cooperation and it emphasises the role that participatory methods can play in enabling poor people to learn, come together and act. Significantly, it argues for strategies that enhance poor people's political capabilities and give them 'a real opportunity to take an active part in the decision-making process' (1996/7: 37). With a broadening of notions of political participation beyond the politics of the ballot box, the new forms of democratic practice that are taking off in many countries which draw on more direct and deliberative democratic traditions, and the increasing emphasis on human rights in development, there has been a resurgence of interest in *popular participation* –

6 This is a moot point. Writing in the World Bank's Sourcebook on Participation, Rietbergen- McCracken and Narayan list potential stakeholders as being: borrowers (elected officials, line agency staff, local government officials, and so on); directly affected groups (including the poor and disadvantaged); indirectly affected groups (such as NGOs and private sector organisations); and the World Bank management, staff and shareholders' (World Bank 1996: 4–5).

once again, we are hearing talk of participation as a basic democratic right, and once again the focus is shifting back to the core issues of power and control that were such a preoccupation in earlier times.

Parallel with the distinct discourses and logics of participation that weave through Sida's programmes, divisions and departments, refracted through country strategies and partners' and consultants' positions and perspectives, are other relational concepts that serve to qualify what participation actually means in practice more closely still. One dimension of this is the implications in terms of power relations that terms like 'participation', 'ownership' and 'partnership', which are not at all straightforward, as a senior staff member in the evaluation department pointed out:

Participation is really an asymmetric kind of relation where someone is invited to participate in something belonging to someone else ... within a framework set and designed by us. Ownership is a more radical term ... [it makes us question] what is the extent of our participation in their development?

And, he went on to reflect, the way in which partnership is framed lends an air of technical rationality and instrumentalism to something that, in practice, is based on an older, more fraternal model that's closer to a kinship relationship, in which partnership is for good and for bad, not simply part of an impersonal investment portfolio. The densely tangled discourse on participation makes few of these distinctions.

The 1997/8 *White Paper Democracy and Human Rights in Swedish Development Co-operation* sets out an agenda that has been echoed by recent documents from other agencies – notably DFID's Target Strategy Paper *Human Rights for Poor People* (2000) – arguing that 'Everyone must have the right to shape his or her life and the society in which he or she lives'. It is worth citing in full the mandate this document gives:

Popular participation needs to be established as a concept and developed as a method to be used in development assistance. Although the participation of women and men has become an accepted term in development policy contexts, there is still no systematic experience of what it might mean in practice. It is important to penetrate beyond the flowery phrases and be clear about what we mean. This implies that we have to analyse our own ideas about what participation involves, but it is equally important to understand the views and the cultural attitudes of those we are working with as partners.

(1997/8: 98)

By 2002, Sida had begun to adopt a more broad-ranging notion of 'development' and with it had integrated participation into core policies, binding it ever more closely with the overarching goal of 'poverty reduction'. Note the logic laid out in the following excerpt from the 2002 policy paper *Perspectives on Poverty*, which begins by inserting poverty reduction as intrinsic to development, then goes on to equate having freedom of choice with empowerment, and in the strongest possible terms asserting that this is conditional – *can only be accomplished* – on participation and representation of poor people in processes of change.

Development can be seen as a sustainable process of enhancing the freedom, well-being and dignity of all people within an equitable and secure society. Poverty reduction is an integral part of this development process. As such, a key objective in development work is to enhance the freedom of choice of poor women and men by supporting their empowerment. This objective can only be accomplished through the active participation and representation of poor people in processes of political, social and economic change and by ensuring that they reap the benefits of their efforts.

(2002: 12)

Echoes from the past and from hegemonic policy narratives aside, what is most striking about these kinds of statements is how accommodating they are of an expansive range of ideological positions. Because so many of these words, like ‘participation’, mean so many different things to different actors, it is possible to read into this statement just about any desired meaning – as people in Sida did not hesitate in pointing out to us, policies like this are useful instruments for defending the initiatives they want to support, precisely because they allow such generous room for interpretation. And the words they use evoke, and indeed play on, a range of potential referents across the spectrum of development thinking: in the framing of ‘empowerment’ as ‘freedom of choice’, for example, do we find a supremely neoliberal formulation or the successful insertion of feminist notions of empowerment into mainstream development policy, opening the way for a much greater focus on building people’s sense of personal and collective power? Much will depend how policies are put to use, and by whom.

2.5 Whose responsibilities: participation in an age of ‘ownership’

‘Writing about policies in Sida is like running after a speeding train’, commented a member of Sida’s Policy Department. Sweden’s new *Policy for Global Development* was launched in the same year as *Perspectives on Poverty*, rapidly situating it on a much wider potential terrain. It spelled out the implications for development cooperation of a far-reaching new government bill, *Shared Responsibility. Sweden’s Policy for Global Development* (2002/03: 122), which set out a new vision for joined-up policies that spanned all Sweden’s global engagements, including trade, agriculture and so on. The *Policy for Global Development* argued that development cooperation should be based on a rights perspective and on the perspectives of the poor. In effect, it sought to serve as a demand on the countries who receive Swedish aid to make sure that ‘poor peoples’ interests, experience and resources’ are represented in national policymaking processes.

What does this actually mean in the current landscape of bilateral aid? One of Sida’s ‘participation champions’ from the 1990s reflected on the uncertainties of the present

Right now, we don’t know if it [participation] is going to stay, whether we can do something good with it, find our own angle, or whether it will just die when the World Bank changes its ideas.

Changing notions of what a donor does were seen by some as further diminishing the chances they'll have to do more than, as one desk officer put it, buy their five minutes with a southern government minister for 'policy dialogue' or sit at the table with multilaterals with whom they feel little kindred spirit to argue for broad-based and uniform policy measures. What this might mean for participation, apart from appealing to governments to make sure they take note of the interests of people who would be unlikely to recognise themselves as an interest group, and whose very exclusion from decision-making processes is used by others to define them as 'the poor' is a moot point.⁷

By 2003, the shape of things had begun to shift – or rather to drift – yet further towards the tendencies that were beginning to emerge in the early 2000s: donor coordination, talk of 'country ownership', sector-wide approaches, comprehensive development planning and so on. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) had, by then, offered a rather rocky road in many countries to seeking 'ownership' and 'participation' in national poverty policy processes. Those within Sida with whom I discussed PRSPs during this period expressed their frank disapproval of the extent to which 'civil society participation' had become, in some contexts, an excuse for marginalising elected representatives and bypassing parliament; and considerable scepticism about whether they offered any prospects for genuine popular engagement in framing poverty policies 'that are written in Washington'. Over the years that followed, these concerns were to deepen.

Come 2005, there was growing concern 'within the house' over the implications of the new Paris Agenda: not only for participation, but with increasing demands for coordination, greater disbursement pressure with rising levels of aid, and a growing sense of dislocation from 'the field' or indeed 'reality'. This, of course, was nothing new. But it was certainly considerably more intense. A round of interviews and conversations in Stockholm in early 2005 highlighted some of the concerns that desk officers were now voicing. One desk officer suggested that I shouldn't pay too much attention to all the talk I was hearing about budget support and the new aid modalities: bureaucrats' hearts are in projects, they said, most of what they do and will continue to do are projects, most of Sida's countries are in any case places where there can be no budget support, so things will carry on as usual. But several highlighted dissonances in what has happened to participation and indeed donor engagement with participation that, they argued, need to be taken seriously by the organisation:

Folkligt deltagande [popular participation] was about mobilisation; now it is all aid effectiveness.

Sida used to work for 'the people' and we were always meeting people. Now we're putting the poor person in the centre, but we don't meet real people.

How can you motivate people to go and spend time outside that very artificial world?

⁷ Arguing that 'the poor' are too large and heterogeneous a category to be able to assess their participation, Cohen and Uphoff contend: 'to talk about 'the participation of the rural poor' is to compound one complex and ambiguous term with another, even more complicated and amorphous' (1980: 222).

As another desk officer pointed out, ‘poor people are not from another planet’, but tend to be treated in that way these days. One person talked of a recent visit to Tanzania: they didn’t meet any Tanzanians at all, just other donors. ‘In the old days’, they mused, ‘we met with the ministries and discussed projects and programmes and it took a lot of time. If we just have budget support and are dealing with central ministries and donors, we will have no knowledge of local countries’. As a colleague of theirs pointed out, ‘there is a real problem of people going absolutely nowhere except to donor meetings’. One desk officer who had spent four years in Vietnam said that one of their best experiences in this entire period was going on a field visit: it was a rare, and vital, chance to get any glimpse into the realities of poor people’s lives. In the last few years, it seems that the situation has got considerably worse. As one division head put it, ‘we plan our fieldtrips, and then we cancel them’. And as another desk officer put it, ‘where is the place where we’re formulating the problems, the Sheraton or the village?’.

Giving budget support ought, in principle, to allow donors to travel anywhere in the country and follow up how it works at a local level, these desk officers argued. But to seek to do this raises questions of legitimacy. ‘We have to realise it is not a Swedish project any more’. At the same time, concerns about the legitimacy of those who represent ‘the government’ or indeed ‘civil society’ in any given country bring into question the ambulant rhetoric about what is at stake. Discomfort was expressed by several desk officers over the extent to which the so-called ‘participation’ in PRSPs undermines the democratic process. One offered a solution: ‘we should offer to come to parliament [in the country] to present our [country] strategy and to debate – that *would* be radical’. Yet, as a Swedish political scientist colleague pointed out, ‘Sida lacks capabilities for dealing with the political dimensions of budget support’. It is, after all, easier to subscribe to the current donor rhetoric and play the game than to step outside of it and engage more directly with the messy realities of aid.

As Sida reviews of PRSP processes in three Latin American countries, coordinated by the Institute of Social Studies in the Netherlands, makes clear, it is essential to recognise the inherently political nature of these processes.⁸ The review brings into question the extent to which development agencies can ever achieve effective influence by bludgeoning governments with PRSPs which are neither owned by the government, nor based on broad-based consultation nor, ultimately, sufficiently politically salient to ‘stick’. Where these issues emerge in sharp relief is in relation to the discourse on ‘ownership’ in Sida. Growing attention was placed on ‘ownership’ as Sida came to accompany other donors down the road of budget support. Yet the contradictions highlighted by Stefan Molund in his 2000 paper on the topic continue to reverberate (Molund 2000). As one Sida staff member argued:

Ownership is the big dividing line – in the past, participation was due to taking on responsibility for the project. Now our role is clearer: trying to promote ownership.

8 These studies can be found on Sida’s website (www.sida.se), and provide fascinating insights on the unfolding processes in Bolivia, Honduras and Nicaragua between 2003–2007. For an overview of the project, see www.iss.nl/Cross-cutting-themes/PRSP/Project-overview (accessed 20 June 2008).

At the same time, Sida's engagement in 'dialogue' is inherently ambiguous. It is a site in which conditionalities are brought to bear: 'We call it dialogue, but it's [conditionalities] always there'. And, as another desk officer pointed out, 'By dialogue we usually mean we talk until people agree with what we say'. The implications of this are complex. After all, Sweden has a commitment to gender equality, and to combating discrimination and violence against LGBTI people: something to which most of the countries receiving Swedish aid are highly unlikely to subscribe. Indeed, Sweden's recent policies on gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights explicitly advocate *breaking* the kinds of norms that those ultimately responsible for 'country ownership' might wish to assert.

This raises questions not only in terms of ownership, but also in terms of the broader harmonisation agenda where Sweden is brought into 'dialogue' not only with recipient governments, but other donors. As one desk officer bemoaned:

What does it [harmonisation] mean? It means skipping everything that we've been standing for.

The implications were spelt out by another:

What do you do if all the donors line up behind the PRS and it is ill conceived? Are we all going into the big trap? How do you act?

There was, however, caution about the tendency to celebrate a past in which Swedish aid was managed very differently. As one desk officer argued, this is often accompanied by a sense that the best path of action would be to create 'mini Swedens' in other countries. He said: 'We need to take care about idealising the past. The Swedish system is not the right way. There were things existing in local participation, that we just don't recognise.' Others were more pragmatic, focusing less on critique and more on what it takes to make the current system work more effectively. Echoing Rosalind Eyben's (2006) analysis of what lies at the core of improving aid, they argued for working within the current structures to focus more on the quality of interactions between Sida staff and the government officials involved in 'policy dialogue'. As one put it, 'We can't get results without good relationships'.

2.6 Whose agenda? Paris and the paradoxes of participation

By early 2006, concerns about the implications of the Paris Agenda for Sida appeared to have intensified – in some quarters, at least. Discussion with some Sida desk officers and managers about what 'participation' might mean in all this came to centre on *Sweden's* participation in relation to other donors, rather than the participation of any of the recipients of Swedish aid, be they people living in poverty or recipient governments. A conversation with a number of desk officers from different departments within Sida highlighted the new contradictions in terms of power relations that were arising as the Paris Agenda has come to be implemented:

When donors gang up, it's very sad to see at times, you come to a table and you discuss, for example, health. And you have a vice-minister and 20

donors, who have had a discussion between them for maybe a month on how to discuss with the vice-minister. The donors are overwhelmingly powerful.

Talking more with these and other desk officers about what ‘participation’ might mean for Sida in 2006, a series of familiar themes arose that had been recurrently part of earlier conversations. One of these themes was that of knowledge; and of who was providing the ‘evidence base’ on which Sida’s policies were being crafted. The kind of outsourcing of knowledge and influence that Sida staff commented on as being one of the consequences of increasing aid has lent considerable framing power to external consultants. Where once such consultants might have been from the Universities of Stockholm, Uppsala, Göteborg or Lund, these days they are as likely to be from London or beyond, drawn from the increasingly mobile labour force that has come to service the higher end of the development industry.

As one desk officer commented, ‘They are very good at selling their knowledge, and we buy it because we don’t have time’. Another remarked, ‘Development generates so many buzzwords, there are those who have taken it as their job to give meaning to these words, summarising what they might mean for donors; this is used by busy people to understand what is going on’. And as others still commented, the net result is that it ends up with the development consultants doing this work of interpretation and determining what is actually going on in the framing and negotiation of policy. Consultants also help to mediate the acquisition of the new procedures and instruments that are part of the new aid package. One Sida staff member told me about consultants in results-based management who seemed to be doing the rounds of the donor agencies, transferring a uniform set of tools. On the positive side, the ‘busy bee’ elements of this should not be overlooked: sharing instruments, indicators, procedures and approaches can aid harmonisation in the field, and good practice might well be an outcome of accumulating experience of institutionalising RBM in very different organisational contexts. On the less positive side, one might be tempted to conclude – as one Sida staff member did – that the double whammy of harmonisation of content and of procedure leaves scant scope for any institutional innovation, or indeed distinctiveness. That which was once a *Swedish* approach to development becomes part of a globalised monoculture.

Further concerns arose about the extent to which the new aid modalities were making aid into a kind of business that needed to be conducted with business-like efficiency. This was contrasted with the tradition of Swedish aid of long-term relationships with particular countries – such as Ethiopia or Tanzania – that lasted for years, through thick and thin. As Rosalind Eyben (pers. comm.) points out, ‘If you say it is a relationship, you invest time in it; if it’s a transaction, you want to deal with it as soon as possible.’ Is this the fate of ‘participation’ in the new reality of aid within Sida? Some would suggest that it is. As one desk officer put it:

There are no resources in the Paris Agenda for all the transaction costs. The Paris Agenda is about ‘effective and efficient’, it is a one size fits all approach. There are only a few states who can achieve the MDGs and apply the principles of the Paris Agenda. The ones who are weak, it’s very hard for them to apply the Paris Agenda. The donors can gang up but if there are no recipient government people to implement the processes that are assumed to

be in place by the Paris Agenda, it's a framework for efficiency but doesn't give much content on how to achieve change on the ground.

As another pointed out:

Participation is also about time. When we worked with participation in the 1980s, we weren't much better. We always expected the target group who would be walking one day to the meeting and a day walking back while we were jetting in. It has got even worse. Participation takes time. We are not making that time.

3 Framing participation

Sida is, as I was constantly told, an organisation that has a policy for everything and anything. Even if policies are, as one person put it, 'just words that float', they are social artefacts, products of a particular moment in time and the organisational imperatives that are of that time. It is, however, in procedures that more telling clues can be found as to how 'participation' is framed: the devil, as the old adage goes, is in the detail. An example can be found in the 2005 revision of a manual on 'contribution management', *Sida at Work*. Guidelines for production of an assessment document for any project or programme over SEK3 million, state, under 'relevance':

In order to assure that the *perspectives of the poor* have been able to influence a programme, the characteristics of the preparation process designed by the development partner should be examined:

- Has the process involved democratically elected assemblies?
- Has the process provided opportunities for participation and influence for the women and men affected by the decision? Who are the people who have been able to take part and exert influence?
- Are those who have been able to influence the process legitimate representatives of the people affected by the proposed programme/project?

In order to clarify that a *rights perspective* has been applied, the following questions should be posed:

- How can the programme be used to improve poor people's ability to demand accountability from decision-makers?
- Can actors be identified who can influence power structures in a direction that is favourable to the poor and excluded? Please take gender equality aspects into account.
- What rights are affected by the proposed contribution?
- What are the obligations of the government in relationship to these rights?

(Sida 2005b: 28–9)

This all looks very promising. Indeed, according to the first set of questions, most if not all PRSPs would be judged lacking. But whether or not these procedures are actually followed, or indeed whether they can be followed in the context of harmonised relations between donors, is another question. In the words of one desk officer, Sida has 'A policy for everything, you can find support for whatever you want to do'. It also has a variety of sources to which people might look for procedures. There is a lack of consistency across the various procedural guidance documents that exist on what 'participation' might actually entail in practice. In another operational manual, for example, the 2005 *Country Level Analysis for Poverty Reduction*, we are told:

A focus on poverty reduction as the main goal and feature of a development process implies promoting the right of poor people to play a full and equal role as beneficiaries and participants in the development of the societies they are part of and to have an equal say in the shaping of this development. This entails a need to address developmental as well as structural causes of poverty, where the former has to do with shortcomings in the overall level of development ... while the latter pertains to inequalities and injustices that prevent the poor from becoming equal actors and partners in the development of the societies they are part of.

(Sida 2005a: 6)

Yet while this document draws attention to a number of critically important points – context-specificity and the shortcomings of any one-size-fits-all 'best practices', the need for good country knowledge, looking beyond symptoms to the structural causes of poverty and the power relations that sustain them – there is little reference to precisely the issues of power, politics and participation that *Sida at Work* highlights. Even if it has only been the concern of a few 'missionaries' from within, Sida has long supported the development and use of participatory methodologies in development. We see barely a whisper of any of this in the country strategy guidance paper. Instead, 'knowledge' is persistently conflated with 'information' and regarded as a stock that can simply be gathered and augmented, rather than a process through which meaning is contested: one that is political and social as well as technical.

In the context of harmonisation, questions of knowledge gain a new salience. As one desk officer reflected,

Previously each donor did their own analysis, the aim now is to harmonise analysis. Are we also going to harmonise knowledge? We're stepping into a minefield. It is a real danger.

And, as another desk officer pointed out, 'There is often a lead donor and we get very far away from the knowledge of what is happening. There is a big group and it's hard to influence. The donors have their own agenda, they need to spend money'. Another reflected, 'What does participation mean for them [the other donors] in that new context? Much of the dialogue is taking place between the donors.'

As Sida embraces the Paris Agenda there is growing concern about the extent and means through which Sida will be able to insist on values that are at the very

heart of Swedish aid. As a desk officer from DESA mused:

Is alignment aligning away from human rights, child rights, gender equality? Are we powerful enough, or is our power invisible so we just echo what they think?... We need to keep women's and children's issues in, not let them get sidelined.

Sweden occupies a place in international affairs that has long been a distinctive one: as a defender of human rights, and of the rights of women and children. As this desk officer went on to note, Sweden might make more of their positionality in exercising greater voice in support of the two perspectives, and of the democratisation of the development process:

We have a presence internationally. People are used to hearing Sweden talk about human rights. Believe me, we are powerful if we sharpen our methods and believe we can challenge. We can see in countries that finally the budget process has meant that technically it [strategies and plans prepared by foreign donors] must be brought to the parliament ...

The two perspectives – poor people's perspective on development and the rights perspective – that lie at the heart of Sweden's global development policy should presumably occupy a significant guiding place in Sida's own engagement at country level. There is, then, an even more surprising gap here between what is said at the level of guidelines and what is being prescribed at the level of country strategy development. Where participation is mentioned in relation to country strategy development it is in terms of language which has an archaic feel to it, with talk of 'beneficiaries' – or even 'participants' and 'partners', terms that have such nebulous referents it is difficult to envisage what kinds of relationships exactly they might signify. Even if Sweden is reluctant to use the language of citizenship, the emphasis on rights in Swedish policy might have led to a sharper, less all-encompassing, way of framing the engagement of people living in poverty and those who represent them. As another desk officer argued

It is also about whose opinion counts. It is seldom 'national' in terms of covering the whole population. Some circuits are closed. Who is really benefiting from all this aid money coming in?

These kinds of internal contradictions across policies and procedures within the organisation are, of course, hardly surprising. As noted earlier, what 'participation' comes to mean to different departments, in different sectors, in different social and political contexts, and to different dimensions of development cooperation varies enormously. It is, perhaps, inevitable that these complexities circumscribe the more enabling possibilities of a participatory approach. Although the guidance in *Sida at Work* does demand a degree of specificity that has been striking by its absence in the past, it is easy enough to see how difficult it is in the homogenising environment of today's aid world to put this into practice. In the post-Paris Agenda world, donor disconnects have become so extreme that those who entered Sida wanting to make the world a fairer place may find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. Highly-paid consultants have taken over the role once played by in-house policy analysts; 'the field' has become five-star hotels in capital cities. In the midst of all this, the only opportunity development bureaucrats might

have for contact with ‘the poor’ is via immersions which give them at least a little taste of the world they are trying to change.

4 Shifting discourses, changing practices?

What, then, are the implications of these dissonances for how the organisation might better respond to the challenges of integrating the two perspectives into its everyday work, in an era where the Paris Declaration has become of such immediate concern at every level within the organisation? Sida continues to grapple with this question (POM 2006). And what are the prospects for ‘participation’ in the undoubtedly harsher present climate than the 1970s, when the concept of *folkligt deltagande* first made its way into Swedish aid?

As this paper has sought to show, what ‘participation’ means in a bilateral donor agency not only changes with shifting fashions in development rhetoric and policy, but also embraces a multiplicity of competing meanings depending on who uses the term, for what purpose and in what context. ‘Participation’ becomes a cipher that only gains meaning when it is imbued with the meanings of the other terms with which it comes to be associated. Its malleability gives it enormous rhetorical power, as it tends to admit no negative. But it remains elusive, difficult to pin down and fix in definitions, and very difficult to define as a thing-in-itself in guidelines or strategies. Perhaps more than anything, the sheer diversity of what participation becomes in the multiple ‘fields’ to which it is applied brings into sharp relief the difficulties of arriving at any single category or measure that can suffice to describe what should happen, or indeed what does.

A senior manager who I spoke with in 2006 was clear about what was required: the kind of ‘clarity through specificity’ that Cohen and Uphoff (1980) called for at the end of the decade in which participation first made its appearance on the development scene – ‘It’s a matter of what people actually do and say about participation when they are in actual situations that should be our focus’. Contributing money to build a clinic, taking part in a public meeting to discuss where a bridge is going to be built, being elected as a representative to go to the capital to talk to the government about what money should be spent on education – this is what ‘participation’ involves in practice. Each involves activities that are different in *kind*, rather than simply in degree; and each requires different capacities and different approaches. Each, too, might involve different participants, at different times and for different purposes. Unpacking participation is essential, but analysis should not stop there.

What participation in each and every of these activities actually means in different political, cultural and social contexts also depends on the context. Participation in an urban upgrading programme in Tanzania, in a water project in the Mekong Delta, in human rights work in Guatemala, in rural health clinics in Bangladesh or in a PRSP process in Mozambique has as much to do with the nature of state-society relations as it has to do with techniques for public involvement. Who participates, how they participate and what happens as a result is not something

that conforms to any linear set of procedures or prescriptions. Making sense of these complexities requires not generic definitions but context-specific social analysis. Such analysis is an essential pre-requisite for mapping out what participation might mean within contexts where the contingent connections between the state, the market and civil society create very different preconditions for and constraints to societal engagement and social mobilisation – and where the entry points for donors and other international development actors may be very different indeed.

There are, however, wider issues still to consider. ‘It wasn’t easy talking about participation before, and it hasn’t become any easier’, a senior Sida bureaucrat commented, reflecting on the changes that had taken place in the organisation in recent times. But while talking about participation may have gone out of fashion, these conversations are as important now as they have ever been. As the kind of social movements who were once beneficiaries of Swedish aid gain greater trans-national connectivity and we come to see ‘participation’ taking the shape of popular mobilisation against the reforms promoted by today’s harmonised donor cartels, the question that needs to be asked is less one of how donor agencies can more effectively institutionalise participation than how bilateral agencies such as Sida can more effectively support struggles to achieve the social justice that today’s aid policies have come to persistently undermine. For some, the answer may lie in taking ‘ownership’ to its natural conclusion and becoming brokers and fixers for the delivery of aid, rather than maintaining a stake in its outcomes. For others, however, it may be time to return to that which was distinctive about Sweden in the pre-Paris world – and to reclaiming an ethical position on development. For others still, it is about reconnecting committed public servants with the realities that their efforts seek to change, through ‘reality checks’ (Sida 2008).

The key to rearticulating a participation agenda that is more consistent with a broader mission of advancing social justice may lie in leveraging the connections that are implicit between the two pillars of Sweden’s poverty policy. On the one hand, this calls for recasting participation as in itself a right of citizens and an obligation of their governments and the donors who support them. It also calls for reinvesting in the relationship between participation and human rights in ways that enable otherwise marginalised groups within the lumpen-category ‘the poor’ to gain not only ‘voice’ but also *entitlements*. There are evident tensions in such an approach between an emphasis on human rights and on country ownership. Yet Sweden’s policies are quite unequivocal about a deep commitment to human rights and to justice that has underpinned Swedish aid since Sida was first created, and is a fundamental part of Sweden’s contribution to the world in which we all live. If nothing else, the legacy that attempts to institutionalise participation in Sida *has* left behind is a conviction that the issues of power are critical to the challenge of addressing poverty and inequity. As Sida deepens its work on power and justice, it may again become the beacon for progressive approaches to development.

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