## SAVING PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT FROM THE DANGERS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

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A B S T R A C T

The development discourse has evolved to acknowledge that top-down approaches need to be replaced by participatory interventions in order to make development sustainable. However, one of the major obstacles to this change is institutionalization. This article argues that participatory approach can come to its own rescue when facing the dangers of institutionalization. It outlines dangers that participatory development faces from this mainstreamed institutionalization, simultaneously providing the relevant solutions and suggestions from within the participatory discourse, proving that it can save itself. Solutions are put forth, borne out of a discussion that indicates how institutionalization can be avoided altogether, finally succeeded by dangers to the primitive participatory discourse identified by Robert Chambers. Participatory development as an approach can save itself from being institutionalized, provided that the practitioners avoid the pitfalls mentioned by implementing the approach in its original, pure form, rather than the ones born out of rapid evolution.

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## WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT?

Participatory development is one of the approaches to development practice that signifies the stakeholders and can be defined as a process through which they can control and influence development initiatives, especially decisions and resources that affect themselves. It emphasizes upon the input of local people - regarded as agents of change - in the different stages of policy making and project implementation. Through this process, knowledge transfer is not just from the practitioners to the locals but also vice versa. Yet, participation as a process constitutes of acts that denote varying degrees of power. (Selim, 2013) Since Robert Chambers, a leading proponent of participatory development popularized the participatory rural appraisal (PRA) toolkit, participatory discourse rapidly became a part of the official aims of governments and international development institutions at an unprecedented rate, not only mainstreaming it, but also an indication that it was being politically 'tamed'. Within its officially recognized form, critics fundamentally question the 'empowerment' that participatory development intends to achieve.

## RISKS AND DANGERS TO PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT

**Bureaucratic culture**

When participatory development goes down the bureaucratic funnels of institutions, it faces the danger from the administrative structure and staff skills: there is difficulty in changing the bureaucratic culture to allow devolution of power to the communities which the participatory approach demands. The solution to this risk is simple: in order to

adopt the approach, there needs to be a change in the way these organizations and government agencies operate. Participation takes time, additional skills and additional resources, which can only happen if there is a change in the practitioner's administrative culture.

Linked to this is the concern that time consuming participatory techniques will be cost ineffective in the current age requirement of short-term cost effectiveness of institutions. The agencies need to realize that building trust to enable partnerships is a time-consuming process and requires a unique skill set which, if they do not possess, they need to acquire. In order to apply the participatory approaches, they need to change themselves in order to bring change. (Thomas, 2013).

**Focus on project results**

When these institutions adopt participatory development, they subconsciously pay more attention to the interests of the donor agencies simply by focusing on quantitative, economic impacts while ignoring livelihood resources like human, natural and social capital. Their interest in project results invokes interest in outputs rather than outcomes, which is the actual intended transformation of participatory approaches (Nawaz, 2013). The solution to this problem can come from adoption of an innovative research method within participatory action research (PAR) called 'peer review'. As Godden and Muli explain in *'Peer review: an emerging research method in international development',* it is a process of mutual trust, transparency and participatory values that emphasize on mutual learning devoid of conditionality. The emphasis is on dialogue, reviewing and learning from each other's practice. Since both the sides have equal control in the process, focus on only economic, or any

specific element can duly be avoided; performance criteria will not be linked to funding requirements of measuring mere outputs.

**Pre-determined priorities**

Volunteer development institutions often drive the priorities of the process; volunteer initiated and run workshops best suited for participation often ignore the technical skills of the local staff, relegating them to logistical roles. These volunteers can make positive contributions but misdirected good intentions can risk impeding the basic purpose behind participatory approaches: authority to poor. Their different cultural background and assumption that they know best hinders the essence of the approach they aim to apply. For example: *'We know Timor has nutrition problems so we are planning to come and do a nutrition workshop.'* (Graves, 2012) There is dire need for applying the participatory approaches as they have been suggested: not from the middle of the development process, rather from the start to finish.

**Neglection of structural causes**

The fifth danger is the fact that these institutions encourage the excluded (women and people with disability) to participate in development without paying heed to the structural factors which aids their continued disempowerment, sometimes even maintaining and supporting gender inequality as the knowledge they unearth is mediated by inter play of community's power relations. (Williams, 2004) Once again, the solution lies within participatory approach itself: participatory gender monitoring framework can be adopted, consisting of a participatory rural appraisal that is a value neutral process highlighting diverse views on gender roles of a community. Further, by employing participatory consultation tools, using people with disability as data

collectors, can lead to a meaningful partnership with them when conducting research, simultaneously advocating for them as well. This has been demonstrated by James, Whitzman and Powaseu in their research on impact of road development in Papua New Guinea. (Thomas, 2013)

**Disregarding indigenous communication systems**

Language is a critical factor in participatory development; there may be many different local languages being spoken in the target communities. Once institutionalized, the participatory development initiative often overlooks the indigenous communication systems, which are crucial for interaction as they are a manifestation of everyday interactions. Information is important but so is the communication channel through which it is provided. Again, these institutions need to make use of the tools like participatory video and photo voice based on PAR theory, both of which highlight the value of generating grass root knowledge to help shift decision making power. Participatory video, with its visual nature to capture the local voices holds the potential to advocate, persuade and educate tells stories through video. (Plush, 2013) Photo voice, a form of qualitative research that combines documentary with storytelling gives voice to the excluded, as defined by Shamrock in '*the power of pictures: Using Photo Voice to investigate the lived experience of people with disability in Timor-Leste'*. Although knowledge can be constructed and partial in terms of whose views are given preference, but these tools have the potential to bring change. Simply put, language translation attempts can be biased, but pictures and videos cannot lie.

**Ambiguous Role of NGOs**

Within its institutional reach, participatory development is criticized for contributing to the spread of non-state bureaucratic power

due to the prevalence of NGO activities outlining the growth of PRA. These NGOs spring up to bathe in the foreign aid, not as third part actors, but as a representation of the community. This, in turn, is a danger to participatory approach as power is also legitimized by these NGOs through participation discourse, as the cause of failure is shifted from macro concerns onto the 'people' as bad participants, leaving the institutionalization blameless. (Williams, 2004) However, this financial misappropriation by local development brokers can be prevented if the international project practitioner and donor agency ensure that a self conscious and organized local community - eager to participate – is mobilized prior to the introduction of the development initiative, without making the hasty assumption that communities are already strong and stable. (Platteau, 2006)

**Increased risk of bias**
Lastly, anthropologists identify yet another risk to participatory development from institutionalization, saying that discourse-oriented PRA method and its emphasis on dialogues to extract information are practiced in social situations embedded in power relations, therefore increasing the chances of results bias. Not only this, but the visual aids also require expert interpretation in the end. (Schunhoth, 2004) In response to this, it needs to be recognized that participatory development may have evolved into an international discourse, but that does not mean that it 'always' creates intentional projects. It has no predetermined results: the room for either positive or negative unintentional consequences is always located within it. Participatory visual cues need to be seen as maps of cultural reality which can be profitable to anthropological studies and vice versa.

## SAVING PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT FROM INSTITUTIONALIZATION
Institutionalization as a phenomenon can be avoided by keeping the following things in mind: most donor attempts to institutionalize participatory approach initiates with a too short time horizon for a realistic accomplishment of the goal set, which induces a failure to grasp the long term structural issues and practicing the approach in its pure form. Therefore, first, there needs to be a long term approach in order to sufficiently practice participatory development. Second, it needs to be sustainable in terms of follow up and relationship building in all phases of the project and third, there needs to be practice of integrated vertical participation with multiple level representatives so that concerns of lower levels are heard. (Fritzen, 2000)

Chambers, in a paper entitled *Participatory Rural Appraisal: Challenges, potentials and paradigm* highlighted the dangers to primitive participatory discourse and in doing so, effectively summarized not only why the approach faces dangers from institutionalization but also what needs to be avoided, as a solution. First, he says, through over rapid adoption and promotion, there has been misuse of the approach, leading to the false belief that it entails quick, easy fixes to problems. The second danger, rushing, has led to rapid but low quality practices, which elude what is required: find the poorest, learn from them and empower them. The third danger is of standardization through manuals, which inhibit instead of acting as aid. Fourth and last danger identified by Chambers is that of routinization, leading practitioners into regular habits, consequently overlooking other options.

Simply put, in order to avoid the dangers posed by institutionalization, it is important to not consider the approach as a quick fix; it is a time-consuming process which cannot be practiced effectively by rapid adoption. Critical awareness, personal commitment and improvisation are required to keep the quality as well as creativity of the approach intact. Chambers has therefore, implied what has been reinstated throughout the essay: it is not the participatory approach which is ineffective; rather, the nature of its implementation makes it a success or a failure in development practice.

## CONCLUSION

Conclusively, participatory discourse contains in itself the potential to save itself from the dangers of institutionalization, provided it is implemented in the correct manner. This has been reinstated through discussions offered in the essay: details of various dangers arising from the adoption of the approach by institutions (duly supplemented by relevant solutions that put emphasis on various participatory tools as well as actions to be avoided), solutions pertaining to the avoidance of institutionalization and finally, dangers identified by Robert Chambers leading to the deduction that if the implementation of participatory discourse is amended, its institutionalized flaws can be turned into positive outcomes that reflect its real nature. There needs to be realization of the fact that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to participatory development. Instead of using its name just for their benefit and tailoring it around their own structures, institutions need to change in order to bring change; they also need to avoid letting their cost effectiveness and standardization derail the participatory development from its main purpose. When participatory development is practiced in its purest form, the only use of power will be to empower.

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