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CONCEPT AND PRACTICE OF PARTICIPATION: SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULAR PARTICIPATION IN THE RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN AFRICA

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I. Introduction

Despite widespread endorsement of participation as an important objective and means of development, there is little agreement in practice on its definition and meaning. A cursory reading of the mushrooming literature on the subject testifies to the many different interpretations of the term in current usage. This paper therefore seeks to make a contribution to the analysis of the concept and practice of participation. More specifically, it attempts to suggest answers to the questions: participation for what, by whom and how?

The next section begins with a discussion of the different contexts and spaces or levels of participation. Here it is argued that in contrast to the growing usage of the term in relation solely to development, the term "participation" should be viewed in a more inclusive sense to comprise political, economic and social activities. It is argued further that, while different interpretations of participation may be relevant in different contexts, a key element in the practice of participation is the relative power wielded by different individuals and groups. In section III, therefore, the paper contains a brief analysis of the sources of power ant its distribution by social groups in typical developing country context. The problematic of participation is seen to lie essentially in the weak power base of the impoverished and marginal groups. The next two sections carry the discussion forward to the issue of participation promotion. Section IV focuses on some key elements of an environment conducive to participation promotion through grass-roots organizations of the excluded groups.

II. Concepts and contexts

Much of the literature on this subject is concerned with promoting participation in development activities. And even within this domain there is a narrow preoccupation at project and sectoral levels. The concept of participation, however, has a much wider application embracing social, economic and political affairs. Furthermore, there is a relationship of interdependence in participation in these domains. For instance, participation in the political domain may reinforce the ability to participate in the economic field.

Likewise, the notion of participation is applicable across geographical space. A good deal of the literature deals with participation at the project site, at the local level, in rural or in urban areas. A comprehensive analysis of participation should examine the situation at all levels - at home, in work places, in villages and urban neighbourhoods, and at the regional, national and international levels. As with participation in different domains, there is a relationship of interdependence in participation at different levels. For instance, participation at the work place can enhance the ability to participate at home or at the local level. In turn, participation at the local level can facilitate participation at the regional and national levels, which in turn can influence the ability to participate at the global level.

Finally, participation has both individual or personal and collective or social aspects. For instance, an individual may engage in political discussions or take part in a project on building access roads in a personal capacity but also participate collectively in political work and development projects as a member of a political party or a local community. Similarly, he or she might participate directly in an activity such as meetings of the village assembly or

in digging a community well, or indirectly through election of deputies for national legislature or membership of a trade union negotiating with the employers on his or her behalf.

The multi-dimensional character of participation can best be brought out by considering its application to the life and work of individuals in different situations. As a member of a family, an individual participates in the activities of a small and intimate group. These concern such matters as decision-making on expenditure of household income; allocation of labour of the members on subsistence, cash and household work - including childrearing; the size of the family; and a myriad of social activities. The nature and extent of participation of different members of the family would be reflected in their role in decision-making in the above activities.

As a citizen, the individual participates in the affairs of a nation through his or her political activity reflected in such things as elections to local or national organs of government, membership of political parties and of interest groups and civic organizations. The effectiveness of his participation is reflected in the extent to which his preferences and priorities are reflected in local and national programmes and policies are reflected in local and national programmes and policies of social and economic development.

As a member of a world community, an individual is affected in all sorts of ways by decisions taken by other countries, corporate entities and international agencies. However, his participation at this level is restricted largely to the role that might be played by his country in influencing decisions and developments in international affairs.

As a member of a work-force, the quality of his participation would depend on the extent to which he is able to control or influence his working environment. The latter would in turn depend on the nature of the work. As a peasant farmer, an individual is interested in such things as the prices of his products and inputs, the marketing arrangements, access to transport and electricity, taxes and subsidies, technical assistance to enhance productivity, etc. An industrial worker is primarily interested in wages, employment security, social benefits, working conditions and prospects for promotion and upward mobility. A person deriving his livelihood from working in the informal sector is affected primarily by the regulations governing his business, access to credit and facilities for training and technical assistance.

As a social being, an individual participates in recreational, cultural and civic activities. These may range from playing football to looking after the handicapped, and from taking part in village singing and dancing groups to performing traditional rites and ceremonies.

Thus, in the course of his day-to-day life, an individual participates in a wide variety of political, economic and social activities. His motives for participation are equally varied. He may participate in an activity to earn livelihood, increase his income, obtain greater control over his working environment, enhance his power, skills and knowledge, for personal enrichment and self-fulfillment, and in search of personal dignity and pride as a member of a group, society or a nation. The effectiveness with which he is able to

realize these objectives would depend in great part on the power he is able to wield both as an individual and as a member of a social group. It is thus to an analysis of power and its distribution by social groups that we now turn.

III. Power: a central element in participation

(a)   Sources of power

The notion of power is a complex one and its full treatment is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, in view of its vital importance in any analysis of participation, it is necessary to say a few words about its content and form. Power is an amalgam of many elements. An individual, group or institution may derive power from many sources which are often interrelated. The most obvious source of power is the military strength. An individual or a group in possession of weapons of destruction is obviously more powerful than its unarmed counterparts. In many a country, those who control the armed forces have repeatedly demonstrated their power to intervene effectively in economic and political affairs.

The second source of power derives from the political sphere. The right to enact and implement laws, allocate resources for investment and consumption, determine taxes, tariffs, subsidies and interest rates, to mention just a few of the responsibilities that belong to political authorities, confers immense powers on the individuals and groups that control the political institutions of a country, whether these be legislative, executive or judicial. The third source of power is wealth. A landlord possessing large tracts of land and employing hundreds of workers clearly wields more power than a landless employee. Likewise, a factory owner with modern machinery and a large labour force is more powerful than an unemployed with few skills. Executives of large corporations are more powerful than primary school teachers and so on. Clearly, the possession of financial and physical capital confers power by facilitating control and influence over individuals and groups.

The fourth important source of power is knowledge and skills. Individuals lacking military, political and economic strength may nevertheless wield considerable power and influence in a society because of their possession of exceptional scientific, managerial, entrepreneurial and artistic knowledge and skills. The importance of this factor has increased with the growing role of science and technology in economic progress and of media in social and political affairs. The fifth source of power derives from the special status enjoyed by certain individuals and groups, especially in traditional societies. The groups may comprise priests and magicians, royalty and aristocracy, elders and wise men. At the household level, the position enjoyed by the male head of the family would be another example of a source of power based on traditional customs and beliefs and independent of other sources of power discussed above.

Finally, it would be a serious omission in any discussion of the major sources of power to overlook the importance of organization. A worker in an industry with a well-organized union exercises more power than a casual employee in a large farm but with no union. Likewise, members of a chamber of commerce are more powerful than a street vendor. Organization enhances the power of its members through the aggregation of their individual strengths and through the

creation of an organism which can intervene in a coherent and organized fashion to preserve and enhance their interests.

No doubt in specific societies there are other sources of power. but the ones listed above appear to be the most important ones in countries across a wide spectrum of socio-economic systems. It is, however. important to stress that while, for purposes of discussion. we have listed the different sources of power separately, in actual practice, they are generally interlocking and mutually reinforcing. A general may be the head of the State and at the same time dispose of a vast fortune more often than not acquired during his tenure as head of the State. It may be stated as a general proposition that acquisition of power tends to heighten the appetite for further accumulation of power and that one source of power often serves as a launching pad for acquisition of other forms of power.

(b) Participation. power and social groups

From the earlier analysis of the dimensions and determinants of participation. we can now move to a discussion of the problem of participation in developing countries. The essence of the problem resides in the enormous disparities in the distribution of power between different individuals and social groups. Since individuals are members of one group or another, it is more useful and illuminating to conduct our analysis in terms of social groups. Different social groups are relevant in different contexts. When considering the situation in modern industrial enterprises, the two classic groups – the workers and the capitalists – are clearly central. In the agrarian context, the relevant social groups may be constituted by labourers. landlords and small or medium peasants. For some purposes, the relevant social groups may be the armed forces, the bureaucracy. the political élite, the professionals, the industrialists. the merchants and financiers. In yet different contexts. the groups based on ethnic, religious. linguistic or territorial factors may be the more appropriate units of analysis. For certain purposes. the most useful social groupings may be those based on gender and age.

In most societies. the most powerful groups are constituted by industrialists, financiers, large landlords. capitalist framers, large merchants, senior officers of armed forces and the bureaucracy. independent professionals and the political élite. Other groups exercising considerable power may include skilled and technical workers organized in trade unions in modern industry and services. The least powerful groups comprise landless persons. seasonal and migrant workers and other unskilled employees in industries with no or weak trade unions. the unemployed and those who eke out a living in the informal sector. Among these groups, women workers are generally the most vulnerable and exposed.

Since the more powerful groups have the ability to participate adequately in national affairs. the problem of social participation boils down to ensuring effective participation by the weaker groups. This in turn requires both an environment favourable to participation and efforts and initiatives on the part of the excluded and deprived groups to seek greater political and economic strength. The next section discusses some of the critical elements of an environment conducive to participation. This is followed by a discussion of the mechanisms and processes for the empowerment of the marginal social groups.

IV. Enabling environment for participation promotion

Participatory processes take root and flourish under certain conditions. Among the most important of these are a democratic environment, satisfaction of basic material needs of the people and wide dispersal of political and economic power. We discuss each of these in turn.

(a)   Democratic environment

A democratic environment comprises several elements. Perhaps the most important is the existence of a rule of law. It is almost a contradiction in terms to talk of participation in any organized activity by different social groups in a situation characterized by lawlessness, rule by decree or exercise of arbitrary power by a dictator or a self-appointed clique. Such a situation may give rise to sustained popular resistance which may in turn contribute to the emergence of a participatory culture. But the lack of a well-established system of a rule of law fails to provide a framework for the organization of any kind of political and economic activity except in opposition to the regime.

The other elements of a democratic environment include basic human rights of expression and association. Without freedom of speech and writing, and of organization, demonstration and protest, it is not possible for the people either to express their views on social and economic matters or to organize to defend their interests and struggle against injustice and oppression. An open regime tolerant of dissent and criticism provides a fertile ground for the stimulation of creativity, enterprise and initiatives by the people to accelerate social and economic advance. It is no accident that the countries in which people's organizations and initiatives have shown the greatest vigour and energy are those characterized by the rule of law and freedom of expression and association.

In this connection, it is important to underline the vital potential of the mass media in stimulating participatory processes and initiatives at the popular level. The radio, press, television and video can serve as important tools of education, culture and mobilization efforts by different social groups. For this potential to be realized, it is essential that such groups have access to the media and preferably be in a position to own and control the facilities in the interests of the members of their own groups.

(b)   Meeting the basic material needs

A participatory approach both requires and sustains a development strategy geared to meeting the essential needs of the population. Participation becomes an illusory objective in countries where large sections of the population suffer from endemic hunger, malnutrition, disease and illiteracy. In such situations, the highest priority needs to be given to devising policies to promote a broad-based pattern of growth. Depending on the situation in a particular country, this may require, inter alia, agrarian reform, wider access to resources, employment-oriented programmes and policies, progressive tax systems, creation of opportunities and incentives for small and informal sector enterprises, equitable distribution of public expenditure and universal provision of basic social services.

Such structural reforms and progressive policies are, however, more likely to be adopted in countries with a democratic regime and strong organizations of the popular groups. The democratic consensus and participatory institutions in turn provide a framework conducive to accelerated economic and social advance through mobilization of resources and flowering of creativity and enterprise. Participation is thus simultaneously a guarantee, a vehicle and an outcome of a basic-needs oriented approach to development.

It is arguable that a democratic regime and participatory institutions may have the effect of holding back the rate of economic growth in a country. And indeed the experience of several countries has demonstrated the feasibility of rapid growth under authoritarian regimes. But these experiences also show the unsustainability of such regimes over prolonged periods either because of increasing polarization of incomes, wealth and power or because of growing resistance to authoritarianism and struggle for democracy and social participation. Even if a trade-off could be definitely established between rapid growth and widespread participation, the social choice may dictate a balancing of two objectives rather than subordination of one or the other.

(c)   Dispersal of political and economic power

Widespread dispersal of political and economic power is a vital ingredient of an environment hospitable to participatory activities. Such a condition gives meaning and reality to the exercise of the fundamental human rights of freedom of expression and association.

Unfortunately, in this respect the conditions of progress in the modern world tend to be inimical to participation promotion. Processes such as growing specialization, economies of scale, technological progress, expansion of markets and increasing complexity of production and management systems, all tend to favour accumulation of economic power and growth of bureaucratic and hierarchical organizations. For much the same sort of reasons, there is a similar tendency at work with regard to the accumulation of political power in the hands of the chief executive to the detriment of collective responsibility and decision-making. Large organizations such as government ministries, private enterprises, non-governmental bodies or international agencies are all characterized by bureaucratic and hierarchical systems of management and administration and thus tend to be non-democratic and non-participatory.

Despite these trends towards concentration of power, there are opportunities in all societies for expansion of participatory processes. Some of the technological changes in production and information systems are facilitating organization of activities on a smaller scale and on a collective basis. There is a vigorous growth of institutions of civil society in a number of countries. And the world has witnessed in recent times the dramatic dilution of concentration of political and economic power in several communist States. It is thus worth reflecting on the changes in institutions and mechanisms likely to promote more participatory societies through greater dispersal of political and economic power.

In the political domain, there is need to stress the importance of the old principle of the separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers. This

principle is enshrined in most constitutions but is seldom observed in actual practice. Likewise, there is scope in many countries for experimentation with devolution of power at the regional and local levels. This may be particularly important in countries where demands for greater autonomy are at the root of the conflicts arising from ethnic, religious and linguistic differences among the population. Effective devolution of power may thus contribute both to resolution of such conflicts and more widespread participation in national affairs. But if these constitutional principles are to become a living reality, they would need to be accompanied by political activity by the broad masses of the people.

Once again this point underlines the importance of a democratic environment in enabling the people to participate effectively in the political life of the country. In addition to the basic human rights discussed earlier, regular elections with universal suffrage and secret ballots are essential to ensure mass political participation. Furthermore, political parties and civic organizations provide the institutional framework for individuals and social groups to participate intensively in formulating strategies, debating issues, implementing policies and evaluating progress. In one-party States, authentic internal democracy becomes a necessary condition for effective political participation by different sections of the society.

Likewise, in the economic domain, a more even distribution of wealth and income creates a better environment for widespread participation and provides a surer foundation for a broad-based pattern of economic growth. The requirements for such patterns of growth were outlined above. In larger enterprises, both in the public and the private sector, the logic of a participatory approach calls for closer consultation and discussion between the representatives of management and the workers on issues of concern to both parties. Likewise, there is scope for more participatory processes and leadership accountability in large bureaucratic organizations in both the public and private sectors. Many organizations have experimented with various schemes to promote discussions, consultations and collective decision-making among staff members. They offer a wealth of experience to draw upon in devising more participatory processes in hierarchical organizations.

V. Participatory development through grass-roots organizations

It was argued above that participation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon and that the ability of different groups to participate effectively is closely determined by the power they wield. Furthermore, organization was identified as one of the important sources of power, especially for the marginal and excluded groups. In this section, we discuss some key features of a participatory approach to development based on grass-roots initiatives.

(a) Role and characteristics of participatory grass-roots organizations

Organizations of marginal groups can play a variety of roles. First, they can serve as a vehicle for participation first at the local and subsequently at higher levels for members of such groups. Secondly, such organizations can provide a basis for the initiation of a wide range of social and economic activities in accordance with the priorities of their members. These activities may comprise provision of economic service es such as credit, marketing,

extension or training, welfare work and social services or directly productive
activities organized on an individual or group basis. The important point is
that the members themselves decide upon them. Closely related to this role,
organizations of the marginal groups may serve as mechanisms for delivery of
resources or services received from national or foreign development agencies.
In the past, such agencies have often found it difficult for a number of reasons
to reach the poverty groups. Grass-roots organizations can play a major role
in ensuring efficient distribution of resources and delivery of services to the
urban and the rural poor.

The third role of such organizations may be to serve as pressure groups
for the promotion of the interests of their members. This can also involve a
wide spectrum of activities depending on the major problems faced by their
members. These may range from action to influence national policy on improvement
of housing and water supply in slum areas to enforcement of existing legislation
on agrarian reform or minimum wages in rural areas.

Finally, such organizations can contribute to the building up of
managerial, organizational and technical capacities of their members, encourage
debate, discussion and reflection among them, and promote decision-making through
consensus; in short, inculcate the values, attitudes and procedures indispensable
for the functioning of a vigorous democracy. In third world societies where
democratic systems are still at an early stage of development, the importance
of this aspect of the role of grass-roots organizations cannot be overemphasized.

These multiple roles of grass-roots organizations are reflected also in
the diversity of the organizations themselves. These vary a good deal in terms
of objectives, size, membership, activities undertaken, structure and
functioning. They also, of course, have their own dynamics of growth. It is
in the nature of the participatory process that no hard and fast rules can or
should be laid down on the form, structure, and functioning of grass-roots
organizations. These are matters to be deliberated and decided upon by the
members themselves. Nevertheless, experience indicates that if they are to
function as truly participatory organs, it may be desirable for them to conform
to some principles.

Among the most important of these principles would appear to be the
following. First, the membership of these organizations should be homogeneous
economic interests. If this principle is not observed, there is a danger that
the organizations may come to be dominated by the more powerful and affluent
members. Indeed this seems to have been the experience of many co-operatives
and community organizations. A wide diversity in economic interests may also
engender continuing conflicts within the organization and thus sap its strength.
In both cases the participatory character of the organizations may be seriously
compromised.

The second principle relates to the independence of the organization. It
is clear that if a grass-roots organization is under the patronage or control
of another body, it is unlikely to be able to defend the interests of its members
or undertake activities reflecting their priorities. The third related principle
is that the self-reliance. This should not be interpreted to mean that such
organizations should not accept assistance from outside sources. Rather the

principle of self-reliance implies that the organization must be able to mobilize funds from within to enable it to carry out the minimum functions necessary for its functioning. If the organization is heavily dependent upon outside finances, its independence and integrity may be jeopardized.

The fourth principle relates to democracy in the structure and procedures of the organization. It implies, among other things, that the members should be able to discuss and take decisions on matters of concern to them. It also implies the selection of its leaders through elections or consensus. It would seem that at least in the early stages the democratic and participatory character of such organizations can best be assured by having small and manageable groups. The expansion in their numbers may be achieved through horizontal replication of such groups. The federations of such groups at higher levels can be an instrument for influencing policies at regional and national levels.

(b)   Promoting grass-roots organizations

How can such grass-roots, participatory organizations be promoted? Once again the actual experience of such organizations can provide some guidelines on this matter. As might be expected, such groups have emerged under a wide variety of circumstances. Natural catastrophes such as floods or earthquakes may trigger off an organized response. Similarly, a social disaster such as famine or an epidemic may jolt the people to set up an organization to mitigate its impact and seek solutions. Acts of social injustice such as eviction from their lands, demolition of urban shanty areas, or continued disregard of laws favouring the poor, may provoke organized resistance. All these are examples of organizations arising spontaneously to confront threats faced by the vulnerable. Very often such organizations disappear once the danger is over, but some persist and take on new roles and responsibilities.

In the majority of cases, however, the grass-roots organizations emerge in response to continuing problems of poverty and social injustice. And in most cases, it is intervention and stimulus from outside which initiates the process. The entry point can vary a good deal as also the processes and mechanisms used to promote organizations. The initial impetus to group formation may be provided by a primary health care scheme or an adult literacy project. Or the groups might be organized around a credit, irrigation or employment scheme. The outside agency may be a non-governmental organization (NGO) or a government department. The same diversity may obtain with respect to the methods used to promote these groups. It is not the intention here to review the different approaches and methodologies to promote participatory organizations of the excluded but it may be useful to say a few words about one particular approach that appears to have worked well in a wide variety of situations.

The essence of the approach is to encourage the people themselves to take the initiative at all stages of the process from the initial enquiries to the full-fledged development of their organizations. The role of the outsider, the catalytic agent or the animator, is to assist in the development of the intellectual, organizational and technical capacities of the people to enable them to analyze and find solutions to their problems. The first step is for the people to understand their socio-economic situation through a process of investigation, reflection and analysis, undertaken by the people themselves.

This serves at one and the same time to sharpen their awareness of the social reality. enhance confidence in their ability to articulate and analyze their problems, and encourage them to work out feasible action proposals. Collective reflection and analysis is not a once-and-for-all action but rather an integral and continuing part of the participatory process.

Typically, the initial phase of social investigation and reflection is followed by the establishment of the group on an informal basis. This leads naturally to a consideration of the action possibilities to improve the economic base and social welfare of the members. The social and economic activities the groups decide to undertake can vary a good deal ranging from efforts to raise wages, seek improvements in working conditions, obtain higher incomes through the development of new marketing channels and new sources of credit. The stimulation of collective energies unleashed by such participatory initiatives do not end with economic pursuits but extend also to programmes of self-improvement and social reform such as literacy, personal hygiene, attacks on caste and ethnic prejudices, and improvement in the status of women.

The external animator plays a vital role in the entire process but his task is delicate and difficult. He or she must have a deep understanding of the socio-economic situation of the marginal groups, assist in the development of people's intellectual capacities and organizational skills, facilitate their access to resources from the public and private sectors and generally be available to help the groups with their numerous problems. At the same time, he should accomplish these tasks without imposing himself on the people and blocking their initiatives. The ultimate test of the success of an animator is his ability to make himself redundant to the grass-roots organizations. It is evident that such a role calls for exceptional human qualities of sensitivity, understanding, compassion, dedication and enthusiasm.

Apart from the contribution of the animator, external support in the form of credit, grants, technical knowledge and training can play an important role in facilitating the emergence of grass-roots organizations. But such external support should go hand in hand with efforts to mobilize resources from the economic activities undertaken by the groups and should serve to strengthen self-reliance by supplying critical inputs.

The approach outlined above draws upon and is illustrated by the experiences of a large number of participatory initiatives in different parts of the world. In most cases, the initial stimulus for the establishment of the organization came from a non-governmental organization but there are also examples of participatory initiatives launched under the auspices of ministries, development banks and corporations. Some of the most successful owe their origin to the leadership provided by indigenous activists but there are also many examples where the catalytic role was played by foreign agencies, generally international organizations or NGOs. In addition to receiving support from national sources. most of the better-known participatory initiatives continue to receive financial and technical assistance from international agencies, bilateral donors or non-official bodies.

VI. <u>Conclusion</u>

In this paper we have argued that participation is a multi-dimensional activity embracing several domains and spaces. A key feature determining the nature and extent of participation is the relative power wielded by different individuals and social groups. Therefore mechanisms and processes contributing to the empowerment of the excluded and marginal groups constitute the central elements in participation promotion. The paper has highlighted the vital role of a democratic environment in stimulating participatory processes. Likewise, it has emphasized the importance of a broad-based development strategy focused on meeting essential material needs and promoting education and skills of the people. Finally, the paper has drawn attention to grass-roots organizations as a vehicle for the economic progress, social emancipation and political empowerment of the poor.