Empowering or Entangling?
Challenges of participation in development

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Is participation empowering? As participation becomes an increasingly popular concept in development, a debate is growing over the reality and potential participatory strategies in development. This paper engages several enduring questions from development in practice, and suggests a new way of thinking about the unanticipated opportunities participatory projects might give the dis-empowered to co-opt development on their terms.

Compromise is a common feature of development projects, and it can be one of the most basic mechanisms for producing legitimacy. Through this process, a community or political unit can accord some measure of *assent* to the actions of the aid institution. However, aid recipients, whether individuals, communities, or countries, often cannot equitably negotiate the price of their consent to participate. Typically, they have inflexible economic, political, physical, or health needs that greatly restrict their ability to bargain. In short, they may not be able to walk away from an offer of aid, even if they find it disagreeable or damaging to their dignity. The ensuing translation of the aid institution's political power into local development currency and political influence clearly results in complex shifts in power, authority, and dependency.[1]

Participatory development promises to reverse, or at least mitigate, this inequality of assent by providing participants with structures that offer opportunities for exactly the kind of empowered choices that they have customarily lacked when compromising.[2] Yet participatory approaches by definition require more of people than merely accepting material benefits. This increased involvement may not enable them to improve their situation, however, if there are not reasonable alternatives available to them, such as other ways of obtaining capital or achieving much needed outcomes.[3] The choice of joining a participatory project requires specific compromises that may not always be welcome.

Participatory projects are often framed as *people having a greater say* in a relationship with an NGO, suggesting that participation is better than other alternatives. Yet participatory approaches are often resource-intensive, and they require that people accept, if only in certain contexts and over specific periods of time, that imported patterns of interaction will define the way they are expected to engage, not only with the aid institution *but with each other*. Indeed, not only are participants usually expected to accept novel structures of authority and consensus process, they

are often expected to actively donate their time and labor. These aspects of the participatory process may result in *less* autonomy for aid recipients than one might have hoped.

Let me introduce two guiding questions. First, *to what extent might participatory processes constitute a mechanism to give consenting participants some form of substantive choice*? Second, *when are participatory projects likely to improve opportunities for equitable and dignified choices in developing countries?* I will not conclusively answer these questions, for I believe that there are as many answers as there are development projects. I will use these questions to frame the discussion of a number of criticisms relevant to participatory development before proposing some tentative structures for thinking about how participation might be integrated into other approaches to provide opportunities for societal change. Following the conclusion, I will provide a short case example that illustrates some of these questions.

Participation is (re)born

Starting in the 1970s, the optimistic outlook of international development projects began to fade. So much had been done (or at least spent), so many authors commented, yet with so few truly significant changes of scale to show for it. What is more troubling, many of the changes that could be discerned suggested the perverse effects of large volumes of foreign aid on poverty, culture, and society. The strategies, it turned out, may have been counterproductive, compounding the problems and dependencies of many developing countries (e.g. Chenery, Ahluvalia, Bell and Duloy 1974, Black 1991, and Escobar 1995). Even in cases in which development efforts resulted in economic growth, this sometimes appeared to create dramatically unequal asset redistribution (e.g. Adleman 1978), and at times clearly fostered greater unemployment and inequality (Little 2003).

On a local scale, the familiar formulas for development projects could be criticized for their imported models with a strong technical bent, and their often self-conscious

agnosticism about questions beyond water pumps and sewers (Fisher 1997). Yet, it was clear that the situation of potential recipients, in their shantytowns or squatter settlements, arose from causes beyond water and culverts. Increasingly, these larger questions came to seem relevant to some of development's most daunting constituencies of need.

Many drew the lesson that fine-grained approaches with mechanisms for feedback from target communities was the only reasonable way to address these problems (e.g. Chambers 1994a, b), and making development more participatory seemed a necessary first step. Muraleedharan (2006) and others have written that the transformative moment for the "alternative" development agenda happened at a conference held at Cocoyoc, Mexico in 1974. At the conference, representatives of the UNEP, UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, FAO[4] and other organizations joined to write the *Cocoyoc Declaration* (Cocoyoc Declaration 1975) stating that the then dominant development paradigm, couched in macroeconomic understandings of poverty and development, was insufficient to address growing poverty and that new considerations, such as "self-realization" and freedom of expression, belonged in the development agenda.[5] Participatory development was not born at Cocoyoc, but reborn. A few experiments in participatory development had been tried, but abandoned, in the 1950s and 1960s. The critique of traditional development led to a reawakening of interest in such models, and to their rechristening with an updated language of empowerment (Platteau 2003).

Participation has since spread rapidly as a development discourse and practice, and it is uncontroversially the "new orthodoxy" (Henkel and Stirrat 2001) of development. Indeed, even the World Bank, historically a lagging indicator of development trends, has incorporated the rhetoric of participation into its own projects. In this paper I will discuss the forms of participation that are often included as part of Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) and Community Based Organization (CBO) projects and initiatives: often these projects are referred to as Community Based Development (CBD) or Community Driven Development (CDD). Common features include empowering aid recipients, fostering community awareness, strengthening local communities or building new communities, creating social capital, and encouraging shared decision-making. I concentrate on "mainstream" models of participatory development and therefore will not discuss some of the most ambitious models of participatory development that lie outside the mainstream.

Participatory processes are not entirely static, and their evolution suggests an almost artisanal process: practices are tried out and abandoned based on a growing wisdom about what kinds of things work (Abbot 1999). It is likely that, as participation continues to be used, the ways of encouraging participation, acceptance, and consensus will continue to grow, filling the toolbox of development workers.[6]

Although the academic and practical definitions of CDD / CBD model of participation differ, a quote from the 1995 World Bank Participation Learning Group provides some common language:

> [participation is]…a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them. (World Bank Participation Learning Group 1995)

Variants on this language have become nearly ubiquitous in the language of development projects, yet concerns are emerging among development practitioners and scholars that the hopes for participatory techniques greatly outstrip actual success to date. Recently, development scholarship has sought to come to terms with an increasingly common critique of participation: *it lacks sufficient engagement with the actual political processes in the countries and communities where it is practiced.*

The criticism might be mitigated if participatory development could be shown to be dramatically more effective than alternatives, yet there are surprisingly few empirical studies evaluating the success of participatory development projects. Indeed, in these few studies, participatory projects seem to be effective at encouraging greater community participation than traditional projects, and they do seem to help projects "integrate" into communities (*for review, see*: Mansuri and Rao 2003). Yet the studies also show that participation can detract from the technical quality of projects, and in some comparative analyses, it has been shown to make little difference to projects' overall success. Such studies are specific to local projects and contexts and are of limited generalizability, but their findings make the obvious clear: the rhetoric and current best practices of participation have not experienced unambiguous successes, even in terms of effectiveness at delivering resources.

Compromises are inherent to the development imperative by which agencies seek effective mechanisms to get resources to communities, and, if possible, make sustainable positive changes in their ways of living. For development institutions, participation might be best understood as a technique to avoid actively disempowering individuals, while, in some contexts, promoting the growth of some form beyond the technical, and some opportunities for creative co-participation in the development process. Yet,

the many limits to these processes suggest that, if we have high hopes for what participation might accomplish, it will be necessary to engage more intensely with culture and context. The real challenge may be to incorporate efforts, participatory or otherwise, into broader processes for social and political change.

Participation and Social Change

Some aid organizations clearly prefer to use participatory strategies primarily for practical purposes, to gather information or elicit community interest and compliance, while others apply participatory frameworks with the belief that participatory development is essential to democratizing decision-making processes (e.g. Bhatnagar and Williams 1992, Bergdall 1993). Unfortunately, the rhetoric that surrounds participatory approaches often conflates these two issues (Cleaver 1999), substituting discussions of efficacy, as measured in quantifiable outcomes, for questions of transformation and politics.

Moreover, the rhetoric of participation often seems tailored to suit different audiences, who receive different justifications, which further obscures what role organizations see for participation. Indeed, the receptive audience for participatory discourse is surprisingly diverse. Not only does participation have strong support from liberal democrats, it also has advocates among market liberals (e.g. the growth of "social entrepreneurship" programs at US Business Schools),[7] multilateral donor agencies, and even the occasional authoritarian regime (Hirschman, 1984).[8] Since these groups often have deeply different goals and mandates, the current consensus about the virtues of participatory development is perplexing.

Perhaps part of the answer is that each group sees in participatory development something of *what they expect will happen when the poor are integrated into society.*[9] Even authoritarians are aware of the positive effects of better integration–less crime, better workers–, and participatory development may be one way to achieve these outcomes. Nevertheless, participatory discourse can be ambiguous about some of the global-level social and political goals of the enterprise. While models of participation are often highly specific about the processes of participation at a project level, there is much less clarity about the nature and tangibility of the empowerment expected to take place, and whether it is to be genuinely political. Some of this lack of clarity is probably of uncomplicated origin: competition between organizations for institutional legitimacy and donor funding may lead some organizations to avoid articulating radical agendas in their projects.

More broadly, participatory development may be acceptable precisely because much of its discourse relies on an apparent parallel between participatory development and political democracy, and because of the supposed synergy between democratic means and longer-term developmental ends. This raises an important question: do participatory processes in development encourage the growth of democratic politics, or are these processes themselves supposed to embody a scalable version of more inclusive representation?

Criticizing Participation: Rhetoric and Realities

Criticisms made of participatory approaches have tended to contrast the failures and qualified successes of participatory projects with the high rhetoric favored by its most visible proponents (e.g. Kapoor 2002). Many are damning. Yet, it is important to move beyond the contrast between rhetoric and reality to address the question of whether specific problems in participation disqualify it, or simply require that it be used with greater care and attention to its potential weaknesses. In this section I will introduce several criticisms made of participatory development practice including: (i) lack of politicization, (ii) cueing and local coercion, (iii) superficial or artificial community identity, and (iv) lack of transferable social knowledge.

(i) The new participatory development: antiradicalism?
The origins of participatory development are radical, as Cleaver points out (Cleaver 1999), linked to the work of Paulo Freire and others who attempted to reorganize the process of development. Freire and others saw development as potentially both transformative and anti-colonial because of its potential to break down the teacher-student / development worker-beneficiary dichotomies. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 2000) and later works articulate a vision for an adult literacy education in which there is no textbook. Instead, communities are encouraged to choose the words they would like to learn as part of a process intended to give them the language and concepts necessary to developing an actionable class-consciousness. Participatory approaches borrow much from this model, substituting an empowerment discourse for traditional Marxist categories: when people are enabled and encouraged to choose among options, to select *for themselves*, they are said to experience *empowerment*. Similarly, this may represent an interesting modification of Marxist notions of *ownership* as a means of achieving control of production to include the idea of "stakeholders" as having a mechanism to engage in democratic social control.

One can appreciate the radical potential of participatory development when one realizes that participation looks a lot like decentralized democracy. Despite a rhetoric imported from Freirian notions of shifting the balance of power, it is unclear whether anyone in the aid community/

political community really expects or even wants to see the loss of power this would entail in a large institution-managed project. Participation has been criticized on these grounds: it is too institution-driven and too bounded by expectations, unstated inequalities, and power dynamics (e.g. Mohan and Stokke 2000). Today, institution-driven participatory development rarely seems to have a radically egalitarian edge, and it is unlikely that World Bank projects have ever radicalized communities with their nominally participatory community contact. Certain participatory strategies, such as Robert Chambers' Participatory Rural Appraisal (Chambers 1994a, b) have been strongly criticized for being too focused on practical questions, while avoiding difficult questions of gender, politics, and legitimacy (Kapoor 2002). Critics, often citing Freire's ideas, question whether participatory development's frame of reference is too local and project-defined, making it difficult to engage or make sense of possibilities for wider political change (Mohan and Stokke 2000).

Nevertheless, by working at the day-to-day level and enabling women to occupy roles of importance, or peasants to participate in basic decisions about how the work is to be done, participatory development may be having a very direct effect on the social and political consciousness of people—more so than a larger, more abstract governance structure where they do not have hands-on experience running things. Yet, in the context of hopes for structural change, "think globally, act locally" makes sense only if there is room for thinking globally (e.g., about governance or gender roles) *as well as* acting locally—but the projects rarely offer mechanisms for this second kind of engaged political citizenship.

While a project may elicit participatory input through workshops organized around Community Action Planning or other strategies, the ticking clock of donor funding and the organizational objectives that the NGO brings to the table may deeply constrain the selection of how much participatory feedback is turned into projects. These constraints may be inexplicit and may involve the subtle cueing by NGOs to focus on certain kinds of "uncontroversial" needs like water or sanitation, or to make requests that fit the NGOs' own resources and mandates. The process of participation may involve multiple levels of interaction, with the community well aware of the aid organization's expectations and favored rhetoric, and aware too of what the community will and will not be able to ask for. These expectations predetermine a great deal of the actual content of participation. Here are some reports, chosen at random from a list of reports on communities organized by an NGO in Phnom Penh, submitted following participatory community consultations:

People decided to solve the problem of sanitation, communal toilets as a priority and they hope that they can save some money for their children go to school, have better health, less skin disease, and good sanitation.

People decided to solve the problem of walkway in priority and they hope that they can spend less money, good health, and good sanitation, easily access in/out community.

People decided to solve the problem of sanitation, garbage management, in priority and they hope they can spend less money, good health, and good sanitation.

People decided to solve the problem of a laterite road as a priority. They hope that they can then save some money for their children to go to school; improve their health (less skin disease) and sanitation; have easier access out/in community, and better clothes. (URC 2003a, b, c)

While not necessarily representative, the stock phrasing, summarizing the outputs of participatory processes, describes what people have "decided" after a participatory process. However, underlying issues of poverty are apparent: health, inability to afford schooling, inability to afford clothing, and physical marginalization of the community, among others. Clearly these issues contribute to the structural context of the problem, yet the outcomes of the participatory process are requests for very specific things that the NGO is prepared to offer.

(ii) Projects and resources

The project model of community intervention has a specific timescale and, in practice, can provide only a limited set of resources to communities. A program may, for example, be able to offer specific services such as the improvement of basic infrastructure or certain kinds of savings and credit loan schemes. When such organizations undertake participatory workshops to encourage communities to state needs, the list is unlikely to yield broader requests like fair taxation, government transparency, or equal representation. A development planner may well want to ask: *to what extent, in countries lacking participatory political processes, does providing a community with an experience of participation restricted to the choice of, say, water taps vs. toilets, actually advance their social capital?*

Part of the difficulty in answering this question is that, without certain formal structures of legitimacy, representation, and voice, it is nearly impossible to evaluate just how participatory a process is. It is important to recognize the reality that the ongoing legitimacy of the NGO is not really affected by whether the communities in

which it works accord it some sort of mandate. Moreover, we need to ask what measures NGOs use to ensure that they are accountable to important community needs. Sometimes limits are alluded to, but just as often they may be dismissed.

> *It is not clear whether the strong leadership meant that some families were "left out" of discussions and meetings but in general it seems that there were opportunities for people to take part in meetings and voice concerns.*
>   -Quote from URC report on participatory process for community relocation, Phnom Penh (URC, 1999).

This quote illustrates the problem: the "participatory" interactions that the NGO will have with the community are themselves often limited to public meetings and focus groups where people take turns speaking (I am unaware of any participatory projects that incorporate the secret ballot). The mere fact that people are talking or "voicing" concerns, does not guarantee equal civic participation or political influence on decisions. This problem is aggravated by the fact that there often is great pressure for decisions to take the form of a consensus.

As Cleaver and Kaare (1998) note in reference to a rural Zimbabwean water project, complex local norms determined the actual processes of decision making, yet these subtle norms are often not discussed in development literature. Furthermore, many of the features of participatory approaches cited as contributing to their effectiveness, such as community pressure to participate during public forums, are not likely to elicit full and fair individual participation.

(iii) When the "community" speaks, what voice is heard?
Another approach to explaining the value of participatory development in NGO-sponsored projects might be that it provides mechanisms through which communities can exercise a kind of power and that, by providing a participatory project, communities are given voice and a chance to operate *as units*. A common criticism of this way of thinking takes issue with the apparently common assumption among NGOs that the community actors they are dealing with constitute and represent the "community." This often ignores pervasive power dynamics internal to communities, barriers to vocal participation, the multiple identities of community actors, and individuals' complex motivations (e.g. Cleaver 1999 and Parfitt 2004). While this community-level empowerment is interesting, community itself has proven to be an elusive concept.

NGOs have sometimes rejected the tactic of getting resources to people via formal government channels on principle, citing the corruption or lack of democracy.

Similarly, they may reject such dealings on the grounds of efficiency alone: corruption and lack of democracy may introduce greater inefficiencies in transmitting donor money to communities. Both are either sound bases to attempt to work around or reasons to avoid governments in developing countries. Yet even as they have learned to be cautious about working through undemocratic or corrupt *governments*, NGOs have often failed to submit their community leadership structures to similar scrutiny. It is in fact an open question whether the community structures that organizations choose to deal with in participatory approaches represent more essentially democratic alternatives.

In the course of developing the Boeung Kak Pilot Project, a large-scale participatory mapping and land rights program in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, I was invited to a dinner hosted by a local community leader. In Cambodia, community leaders are nominated by the lowest level of elected officials, Village Chiefs, often on the basis of party affiliation and patronage networks linked to the dominant Cambodian People's Party. Her house was the nicest in the community and was one of few raised high enough to avoid floods. As it turned out, she was among the wealthiest in the community and was a landlord of many other shacks. The position of such an obvious stakeholder, with economic interests that may not align with those of other community members, made it unclear whether she accurately represented the community's interests. Thus, while the obvious corruption of government officials may make it easy to declare them lacking in democratic mandate and un-representative of their constituency, evoking a more participatory approach does not obviate the need to be sensitive to the specific power structure and interests that motivate "community leaders" and other partners in participatory development (Bryant and White 1982).

Problems of informal coercion and lack of representativeness are difficult to assess in the political realm as well. The political class is usually a privileged or relatively wealthy group. While this does not mean that politicians are *de facto* unanswerable to the needs of a disadvantaged constituency, their relationships with traditionally vulnerable or excluded groups and individuals are likely to be less rule-governed and transparent than the politician-citizen relationship in an institutionalized democratic process. For this reason, even apparently open community forums may contain elements of informal coercion that are more difficult to evaluate and contend with (Mohan and Stokke 2000), especially if the participatory project is organized by a foreign NGO that lacks knowledge of local power structures.

The issue may be represented as a question of political identity and influence. The NGO, and perhaps the

community as well, may inadvertently have endowed roles that do not correspond to community interests or structures. In this way community participation may formalize the roles of certain stakeholders without appreciation for their multiple identities and motivations. It would be interesting to explore such relationships with a view to understanding whether they have certain structural similarities to forms of patron-client relationship politics.

More broadly, there is a question about the definition of community. According to Midgley et al (1988), a community can be defined in terms of shared needs, situation, or geographic locale. Others have defined communities in terms of collective action and autonomy (Edwards and Jones 1980). These definitions are useful to aid organizations because they tend to create a single community out of a shared need for some uncontroversial improvement, like water or sanitation, despite the apparent artificiality and transience of such approaches.

More recent approaches[10] have tended to avoid one-dimensional models, suggesting that communities not only are strongly stratified but also have shifting historical and political identities (e.g. Mosse 1995a, b). As Cleaver and Kaare (1998) point out, the "solidarity" model of unified community, common to development projects, may be desirable because of its simplicity, but nonetheless it is largely inadequate.

Cleaver (1999) has explained the problem as reflecting a kind of expediency, a blindness to multiple identities that might be convenient for both community members and NGOs. Community members, discovering the access to power, prestige, and money that come from contact with NGOs, may be sophisticated enough to represent themselves as having whatever roles the NGOs steer them towards. In the meantime, working with these "community leaders" allows NGOs to state that they are involving the community, and hence are engaging in a "participatory process" without the burdens and risks associated with full-scale community organizing. Nevertheless, there are certainly many examples of organizations for which this is not the case, and in which large-scale community organizing and political change have grown through participatory projects. The work of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights in Bangkok, Thailand, may be one example (e.g. Boonyabancha 2005).[11]

There is, however, a broader question: whether community identity itself is a construct or something with indigenous meaning. In the case of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, for example, the term "community" was at least partly introduced by NGOs, including member NGOs of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (such as the Urban Sector Group and the Solidarity for the Urban Poor

Federation) and UN-Habitat[12] in the early 1990s. It may be the case that these communities function as identities deployed by or coexisting between the NGO and the community and, as such, are unorthodox and difficult to evaluate sites of negotiation for resources, voice, and identity. Here we find a potentially important possibility: that the interest-based communities *constituted* by the NGOs' projects can become a new political force in their own right—a site not only where the NGO provides resources, teaching, and empowerment, but where more enduring community cohesion and capacity for collective action can be built. At present, we know little about this, and more research is needed into whether, and when, this occurs.

(iv) Participation: taking it with you.
What, then, is the value of participation in such projects? Perhaps the very process of participation can itself be a source of value. Through the development process, community members might be able to exercise some influence, though this structure may be transient and constrained by the budget, project, and timeline of the participating organization. Aside from the idea of the value in an *empowering arena*, Putnam's popularization of the concept of *social capital* is often used to describe what communities will derive from the development encounter (Alkire et al 2001). In this model, networks of social re-lations themselves possess a kind of value in fostering productive activity, vesting participating individuals with social capital, which they can subsequently deploy by calling upon such networks (Putnam 1993, 1995). Consider, for example, this description of a participatory development project in Indonesia originally organized around Community Based Natural Resource management:

> …*human capital* was clearly enhanced. People's leadership skills increased, their technical knowledge and skills were enhanced, communication ability improved, negotiation abilities advanced, and individual motivations to act on problems were triggered. We noticed also that stakeholders with different social status developed the confidence to improve relationships with each other.

Changes in *social capital* were, however, even more noticeable. Trust was established among different stakeholders which, in turn, improved relationships and balanced power differences. (Kusumanto et al. 2005)

Here, the concept of social capital is used to assert that social competence learning (beyond, for example, technical learning) took place. While something will always be learned in an encounter, it may be asked whether this learning actually provides knowledge and political awareness that translates into social capital in interactions with other

social and political institutions. Community members might indeed learn the virtues and skills of political and social negotiation in a consensus-based process, but how well do these equip them with techniques and strategies for the many other interactions that form their political and social identities? Such a question is especially pertinent when the participatory development project is taking place in a highly authoritarian society.

The use of the concept of increased social capital, or versions of Amartya Sen's notion of augmented *capacities* (Sen 1997) to justify participatory development, has been criticized as a deep oversimplification of power dynamics, change, and political knowledge (Mohan and Stokke 2000, Mansuri and Rao 2003). Those who advocate strategies to increase social capital assume that its acquisition will decrease certain *relative* inequalities (e.g. inequalities of influence on shared activities, though perhaps not wealth inequalities as such). Yet providing social capital to individuals embedded in preexisting structures of power and influence may not decrease relative inequality, as different classes and genders, may have quite different capacities to leverage gains quite differently (Mansuri and Rao [2003], citing sociologist Pierre Bordieu, note that the elite have access to more powerful and influential social networks in the first place). Arun Agrawal's recent quantitative work demonstrating that level participation (i.e. time, voice) in community based projects is positively correlated with economic status may also suggest another avenue for exploring the issue of differential learning and benefit in CBD contexts (Agrawal and Gupta 2005).

Conclusions: A Tentative Framework for Thinking about Qualified Successes

A likely rejoinder to the problems identified above is: despite the many problems of participatory development, some of which can probably be fixed over time, *it is much better that projects be participatory than not*. Who would disagree?

Let me begin to answer with reference to a concept found in market economics: the problem of the second best (Lipsey and Lancaster 1957, Blackorby, 1990). In a market system that has some uncorrected market externality or market imperfection like imperfect information, the system may produce an output very different from a Pareto-optimal equilibrium (in other words, a situation in which doing any more good for one actor would cause loss to another). Even if we accept the premise that, in a perfectly functioning market, a Pareto-optimal outcome would be obtained, it does not follow that *improving* an existing imperfect market condition (e.g. by providing more information or increasing competition) will produce

a *nearer to* optimal outcome. Giving consumers more accurate information about nutrition in packaged food, for example, may not lead to better consumer choices, since they may be scared away from packaged food and consume more unlabeled prepared food that is worse for them. Incrementalism, therefore, is not guaranteed to yield improvement. Thus, a piecemeal solution to a problem in a second-best situation cannot be expected to have the same effect as it would under perfect market conditions. A key implication of second-best problems is that no universal rule for solving them exists, because there is no guarantee of how an imperfect market will behave.

The second-best problem indicates that piecemeal approaches to improvement, say, in markets or welfare, may not result in improvements in system-level equilibrium. Do piecemeal changes in potential political influence and choice, such as inclusion in a participatory project, in the absence of wide-scale participatory political processes, guarantee that the net effect will be an improvement in individual or community equity? The answer is probably mixed. The concerns articulated in this paper suggest that there is reason to believe that a little bit of participation will not result in more equitable dynamics of power or resource distribution, even between individuals in a face-to-face encounter. Equity gains and losses for individuals may be diverse, reflecting inherent community dynamics, as well as dynamics of the interaction between NGO, government, and community. The situation of the urban poor is clearly multiply determined, so that a "start somewhere" participatory intervention may fail to produce net benefit.[13] What if it creates continued dependencies between the NGO and the community for legitimacy (e.g. Desai 1999), or if it results in increasingly conflicted relationships, such as the polarization of relations between the community and the state (e.g. Sanya and Mukjija 2001)? Moreover, what if it strengthens the situation of informal community leaders at the expense of ordinary community members? Or exposes individuals to greater political risk? These questions suggest interesting possibilities for future research.

What if development projects took as their goal not just addressing the causes of poverty, but also the causes of the poor? That is, what if development projects took on board the idea of helping to create novel social and political structures for those ordinarily marginalized in society and politics? In such a setting, some of the limitations imposed upon participatory development by extant power structures could be addressed directly. One key limitation to participation mentioned here and elsewhere is the difficulty of quantifying its effectiveness on equality and transformation. Yet this criticism may contain the kernel of an answer: in the context of extant power structures,

participation alone is unlikely to provide an alternate power structure in which societal problems are resolved. Yet *if participation is complemented or paired with novel social and political structures,* such as coalitions, social movements, or political parties, the significance of an education in social and political competency becomes clearer. One example is the case of Community Based Federations that operate on principles of grassroots decision-making and strategizing, often with the assistance of Community Based Organizations (Satterthwate 2001, 2006), and another might be the work of the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights in Thailand.

Such thinking is not always likely to be attractive to NGOs and other international development agencies. Not only could supporting such coalition-building seem like political interference, but *causes of the poor* are not the same thing as the *cause of alleviating poverty.* NGOs will need to evaluate what their real priorities are.

The inequality of assent in the original compromise of some participatory development projects will likely be mitigated by what undoubtedly ensues: negotiated manipulation of the participatory process, partly on individuals' terms, and definitely to their own ends. Does the way projects inadvertently make resources susceptible to *extra-procedural manipulation,* especially by the non-elite, constitute part of their value? What if participatory projects aren't just proto-democratic learning experiences, or empowerment as defined in development discourse, but opportunities for resource-taking and strategizing by non-elites that go beyond inequality of the original compromise. Participatory projects might offer rare opportunities for disadvantaged individuals to strategize within a proto-civic sphere. Participatory approaches often attempt to ensure participation by disadvantaged actors, and it would be intriguing to explore whether this creates new opportunities for disadvantaged actors to benefit, more on their own terms than through credulous adherence to the discourse of empowerment.

Participatory approaches may (sometimes inadvertently) create the conditions for disadvantaged actors to advance their interests in ways unanticipated by the aid institutions, through their strategic manipulation of the very process of participation. The NGOs might get more participation, empowerment, and ultimately development than they bargained for, but on the community's own terms rather than in terms of expectations of imported models. Thus, perhaps the original question of participation should be re-framed: not, will this process enable communities to live up to *our* expectations, but *will this process give communities access to resources so that they can set their own agendas for meeting their needs?*

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Endnotes

1 I thank Janan Delgado, American University in Cairo, personal communication, for suggesting the concept of political power vs. political influence as a way to conceive of the power relations between NGOs and communities in developing countries.

2 It is unfortunate that participatory development projects often highlight the value of community mechanisms (i.e. social pressure and coercion) as a technique for eliciting high participation rates without enquiring whether this has the effect making it more difficult for individuals to resist agreements that are disagreeable to them.

3 This may be especially likely in societies in which government is weak or has reached agreement with NGOs / CBOs that they will exclusively provide certain services.

4 United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Children's Fund, World Health Organization, United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

5 Renewed interest in participation also paralleled a new emphasis on decentralization of services and governance on the part of theorists and international aid agencies (*for reviews and discussion, see:* Bardhan 2002 and Muraleedharan 2006). For an example of a decentralizing project, see Miranda and Hordijk's (1998) discussion of Agenda 21 in Peru.

6 *Participatory Learning and Action Notes*, a journal, is an example of this sharing and refining of participatory techniques: http://www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/pla_notes/current.html

7 Some of an ever-growing list of Social Entrepreneurship programs at US and international Business Schools: Harvard, Duke, Michigan, Stanford, New York University, Columbia among others.

8 Albert Hirschman (1984, pp. 98-99) notes the case of Brazil in which *Communidades Ecclesiasticas de Base*, a Catholic grassroots, grew in the context of Brazil's strong authoritarian regime. A more recent example may be the growth of the Baan Mankong program lead by the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights in Thailand, which received strong support from the Thai Government under Former Prime Minister Thaksin.

9 Thus, supporters of decentralization might expect the emergence of market societies, while liberal democrats would project a greater chorus of voices supporting specifically poor issues. Even in 'democratic' and developed countries, there is a remarkable agreement, and a shared and often heroic discourse about the process even as the vision of the expected structural outcomes for society may be highly disputed.

10 Recently, others have tackled the question of community from the framework of Community Based Natural Resources Management, Arun Agrawal and Clark Gibson provide a useful introduction to current thinking about the problems of community definition (Agrawal and Gibson 2001).

11 The Baan Mankong program in Bangkok, Thailandis a large scale community-managed infrastructure subsidy program directed through the Community Organizations Development Institute (CODI). *For discussion, see*: Boonyabancha (2005).

12 Jack Jin Gary Lee, formerly of the University of Chicago, Personal Communication discussing ongoing unpublished research.

13 If individuals participate in consensus decision-making, the best choice may be unavailable; instead, communities may be pressured to agree to a second-best option. Yet in certain cases, such as housing rights, the best available choice (vs. possible) might result in outcomes that actually create system-level losses in power. A hypothetical example might be useful: a squatter community vulnerable to eviction accepts the help of an NGO concerned with housing reform. The community's first choice would be to receive land tenure from the government, but that is not offered. Instead, given the sorts of resources the NGO can make available, the community is led to accept a seeming second-best: upgrading infrastructure, with the possible effect of making residents harder to evict. But upgrading may have little deterrent effect on the government, and the extensive community time and labor it involves will be entirely lost if the community is evicted. In such a setting, members of the community might better have spent the time and labor consumed by the participatory project trying to improve their economic situation, so that they would be better positioned to cope with eviction. Examples of this problem may be found in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In one case a large community infrastructure improvement project (the "Monivong A B" Community) sponsored by the UNDP in central Phnom Penh was completely destroyed during a forced eviction in 2006, despite being cited for several years as a model for securing tenure through participatory infrastructure development.