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For discussion*

Participatory approaches under scrutiny: will they have a future?

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Participatory approaches to research and development have been widely discussed and promoted from the mid-1980s onwards. These approaches emerged as a response to lengthy and top-down planning processes in rural development projects and to the failure of the transfer-of-technology model in marginal, heterogeneous areas which had been predominant from the 1960s to the early 1980s. Whereas the usefulness of participatory methods in agricultural research has been discussed controversially, participatory approaches in development have become popular in planning and managing conservation-based interventions and have been incorporated into development manuals, project plans and workshops throughout the developing world. Following a boom period throughout the 1990s, the theoretical, conceptual and methodological foundations of participatory approaches have attracted increasing criticism in the last years. The main issues include: (1) methodological limitations and lack of scientific rigour; (2) naïvety about the complexity of communication processes, group dynamics and power relations; (3) reduction of participatory methods to the diagnostic stage; (4) myth of instant analysis of local knowledge; (5) 'tyranny of techniques' and instrumental character of participatory methods; (6) underestimation of the costs of participation; and (7) participation as a substitute for good governance. They also guide the discussion of this contribution.

Three recently issued books discussing key issues of participatory approaches to research and development may be placed under the lead question: will participatory approaches have a future in the development discourse and in international agricultural research? Within the anglophone science and development community the volume *"Participation: The New Tyranny?", 2001, 207 pages, edited by BILL COOKE and UMA KOTHARI and published by Zed Books, London* has the potential to become particularly influential. Focusing primarily on participation in the development discourse (rather than on participatory research), 11 chapters authored exclusively by social scientists and development specialists set out to provide a rigorous conceptual

* In this section of the journal the editors provide a forum for discussing issues of relevance and interest to our readers. Reactions are welcome and, given sufficient interest, may be published in subsequent issues.

and ideological examination of the theory, methods and practices of participatory approaches to development.

For the francophone readership the book *"Les enquêtes participatives en débat: Ambitions, pratiques et enjeux (Participatory inquiries debated: Ambitions, practices and controversies)", 2000, 543 pages, edited by PHILIPPE LAVIGNE DELVILLE, NOUR-EDDINE SELLAMNA and MARILOU MATHIEU and published by Karthala, GRET and ICRA* brings together a more diverse group of authors from the field of agronomy, economics and social sciences, representing a wide range of positions from strong believers in participatory approaches in research, extension and development up to those who approach them with a great deal of scepticism. Organised into 18 chapters grouped in four parts, the aim of the volume – as stated by the editors – is to open a constructive debate on participatory inquiries and to propose a state of reflection that allows the reader to make up his or her own opinion about the conceptual, methodological and socio-political potential and limitations of participatory approaches.

In contrast to the very critical stance of these two volumes, the monograph *"Participatory monitoring and evaluation: A promising concept in participatory research?"*, *2002, 220 pages, written by KIRSTEN PROBST and published by Margraf Verlag in the series "Kommunikation und Beratung" edited by H. BOLAND, V. HOFFMANN and U.J. NAGEL* provides a more balanced account of the potential of participatory approaches to agricultural research and natural resource management. It is one of the most recent outcomes of a system-wide program on "Participatory Research and Gender Analysis" of the Consultative Group of International Agricultural Research, convened by the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in Colombia. Drawing on lessons from two case studies in Honduras, the author examines both the factors of success of the concept of Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation as well as its challenges, limits and risks. She also provides an excellent review of the state of the art of participatory approaches in international agricultural research.

Despite the somewhat contrasting ambitions and objectives of the three volumes, a number of issues are discussed in all of them alike. The first important issue is about the **methodological limitations and lack of scientific rigour** of participatory approaches. In chapter 9 of *Participation: The new tyranny (PNT[1])* KOTHARI states that "the methodological tools and techniques of participatory development […] require a purification and cleaning up of knowledge and experience: a tidying up of

[1] To facilitate reading, I will use the following acronyms for the three volumes: "Participation: The new tyranny" (PNT), "Les enquêtes participatives en débat" (EPD), and "Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation" (PME).

people's lives through the exclusion of anything that is messy or does not fit the structured representations implied by participatory tools" (*PNT*: 147). The validation of the information obtained from PRAs, however, is often done with much less rigour, as OLIVIER DE SARDAN observes in chapter 16 of *Les enquêtes participatives en débat (EPD)*. He is concerned about the illusion of objectivity in participatory approaches resulting from the impression of having listened to and taken into account all local perspectives. In chapter 3 of *EPD,* GUÈYE states that the fascination that participatory tools exert on many development specialists and some scientists often goes hand in hand with insufficient analysis. Only few PRA practitioners acknowledge the need to provide detailed records of discussion processes within focus groups. Many of them are unaware of the fact that they translate and interpret their findings based on their own cognitive concepts as MOHAN reminds us (*PNT*, chapter 10). Is CHAMBERS' prescription (1997: 116) to PRA practitioners to "use your own best judgement at all times" sufficient to ensure validity and reliability of information generated from PRA exercises? And do we really know what level of 'optimal ignorance' we can afford and how much 'error' we can 'embrace'[2]? SELLAMNA suggests that these often repeated PRA principles have made the approach immune to criticism of its methodological weaknesses. He thus unveils one of the major dilemmas of participatory approaches: to combine the innovativeness, simplicity and flexibility of participatory tools with the demand for scientific rigour which calls for a high degree of formalisation of methods, a certain precision of approaches and the systematic validation of results (*EPD*, chapter 18). Obviously worried about the widespread tendency of adding PRA to the methodological portfolio of the social sciences, LAVIGNE DELVILLE and MATHIEU emphasise firmly that PRA is not a scientific method because the criteria for validation are different between action-research approaches and academic research (*EPD*, chapter 19). They acknowledge, however, that individual methods from the PRA 'toolbox' can well be integrated into academic research processes. In *Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PME)* PROBST examines the methodological limitations of PM&E, a method that has strong conceptual links to PRA, from a different perspective. Coming clearly from an action-research background, she argues that the focus on groups inherent in most participatory research processes and in PM&E in particular often conceals the interests and priorities of those (marginalised) individuals who are not organised into groups. She concludes that more conventional and consultative surveys are necessary complements to participatory research approaches in order to capture the perspectives and concerns of non-organised stakeholders (*PME*: 179). This brings us to the next important issue discussed in the three volumes.

[2] The principles of 'optimal ignorance' and 'embracing error' are fundamental parts of the orthodoxy of both RRA and PRA.

Naïvety about the complexity of communication processes, group dynamics and power relations. Most participatory methods have in common that they produce a 'front stage' in which people perform certain roles that are not independent from the actions of the interventionist. In contrast to the intention of PRA practitioners to create an atmosphere of informality and relaxed interaction, a PRA exercise or the establishment of a Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation scheme is usually a highly formal and public event for a local community as stated by PROBST in *PME*, MOSSE in chapter 2 of *PNT* and FLOQUET and MONGBO in chapter 11 of *EPD*. It is argued that the public and formal character of PRA events, taking place in the presence of local authorities and outsiders, further manifests local power relations rather than reversing them (MOSSE in *PNT*, chapter 2). LAVIGNE DELVILLE and MATHIEU state that the group is often a place of social control, of self-censorship, of confirmation of power and of on-stage behaviour (*EPD*, chapter 19). Contributions in all three volumes point to the danger of being too naïve about internal power structures in the community when applying participatory approaches to research and development. Drawing on experiences from Guinea, MOITY-MAÏZI states that meetings declared open for all members of the local community were essentially monopolised by village notables (*EPD*, chapter 4). In most PRA exercises insufficient attention is paid to the heterogeneity of the target groups - as regards differentiation by gender, ethnic origin, age, and social position - and to conflicting interests among them. It is necessary to acknowledge that there is not just one 'local reality', but a myriad of positions, interests and needs. Making these differences transparent, ranking differing but legitimate priorities and mediating between conflicting perspectives and interests is a considerable challenge and few PRA practitioners have received training in the competences needed.

Reduction of participatory methods to the diagnostic stage. In the introduction to the second part of *EPD*, LAVIGNE DELVILLE states that the period of diagnosis and inquiry signify only moments of participation. Questions of sustainability of development activities and ambitions of empowering local groups cannot be addressed through these snapshots. FLOQUET and MONGBO suggest in chapter 11 that a PRA is just one step in a process of negotiated and continuously revised actions. As PROBST states in *PME* participatory methods have to be embedded in longer-term action research processes and the continuous involvement of project staff with local communities. Only then can participatory approaches challenge inequalities and become a means of negotiating project outcomes, of creating room for manoeuvre and of mediating between different interest groups at the local level. The suggestion of the Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihood Centre at the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) to develop PRA into the broader concept of Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), tried to take into account the criticism of the often short-term character of participatory approaches and their reduction to the stage

of diagnosis of problems and priorities. The shift from PRA to PLA, however, has been performed much faster in the rhetoric of donors and development practitioners than in the reality in the field. In reporting on an attempt to institutionalise participatory approaches in the national agricultural research system of Morocco, BAUR and KRADI state that results from PRA exercises were rarely integrated into consecutive research activities (*EPD*, chapter 5). In a case study of a community forestry project in Honduras, PROBST draws the conclusion "the claim that [participatory] Monitoring & Evaluation results inform decision-making has only partially been substantiated" (*PME*: 117), particularly when priorities, objectives, activities and responsibilities changed rapidly within the project's context. Related to the criticism of the reduction of participatory methods to the stage of diagnosis is the **myth of instant analysis of local knowledge.** In an exciting chapter of *EPD* entitled "Ballade d'un expert anthropologue", MATHIEU describes how she discovered significant discrepancies between her own findings of a long-term anthropological study and results from short-term PRA exercises carried out in the same study area. This confirms evidence from other long-term anthropological studies that local knowledge and perspectives are not common goods of a local community, easily extractable through a short-term PRA event. In fact, most local knowledge is non-linguistic, tacit and generated in practice (MOHAN, *PNT*, chapter 10). In chapter 5 of *PNT*, Francis expresses his concern that much of the richness of subtle multi-dimensional and multi-sensory knowledge is lost by reducing it to flat, two-dimensional, and language-free matrices. In referring to the scientific paradigm debate (positivism versus constructivism), KOTHARI suggests in chapter 9 of *PNT* that local knowledge is culturally, socially and politically constructed, embedded in power relations and continuously reformulated in participatory development processes. This debate is also taken up by PRETTY in chapter 2 of *EPD* and by PROBST in her chapter on theory and concepts (*PME*: 15 ff.). PROBST argues that researchers holding a constructivist perspective are likely to put more emphasis on social learning and dialogue between different stakeholders, whereas believers in positivist science approaches would perceive participatory methods primarily as a means to extract qualitative data on rural people's knowledge to be incorporated into scientific research and to identify demands and needs of local communities that would help to design solutions *for* them rather than *with* them. This leads us to the next criticism of participatory approaches.

'Tyranny of techniques' and instrumental character of participatory methods: CLEAVER criticises the widespread belief among practitioners of PRAs that "getting the techniques right is the principal way of ensuring the success of such approaches" (*PNT*, chapter 2: 36). She claims that the focus on techniques risks the disengagement of participation from its original political content of empowering the marginalized. Indeed, many PRA exercises are carried out by poorly trained 'facilitators' who tend to

use the approach as a blueprint, apply tools mechanistically (*PME*: 13), and focus on products of PRAs rather than on the process itself. While the proponents of PRA often stress the flexibility of its methods and tools, paradoxically PRAs often follow rather standardized and rigid procedures. In chapter 11, HENKEL and STIRRAT remind us "it is also crucial to recognize that to a large extent PRA already presupposes the frame of what can and cannot be done as it canonizes the kinds of visualizations acceptable" (*PNT*: 182). 'Handing over the stick' as prescribed in many PRA manuals does not mean that local people are actually put in a position where they can determine autonomously what is put on paper: the 'grid' is already provided by outsiders. LAVIGNE DELVILLE and MATHIEU claim that this tendency of structuring processes through pre-established frames entails an alienation from local representations, particularly when traditional norms and types of communication remain unknown or are simply neglected by the interventionists (*EPD*, chapter 18). A PRA then risks to be "translated into a managerial exercise based on 'toolboxes' of procedures and techniques" (CLEAVER, *PNT*, chapter 2: 53) and to become "a well-honed tool for engineering consent to projects and programmes whose framework has already been determined in advance" (HILDYARD et al., *PNT*, chapter 4: 59-60). HENKEL and STIRRAT (*PNT*, chapter 11) and FARRINGTON (*EPD*, chapter 2) point out that participatory approaches are frequently used instrumentally by development agencies to implement their projects more efficiently. In going a step further, MOSSE states "participatory approaches have proved compatible with top-down planning systems, and have not necessarily heralded changes in prevailing institutional practices of development" (*PNT,* chapter 3: 17).

Underestimation of the costs of participation. Initially, the RRA/PRA movement was a response to the pressures for quick results by national organizations and donor agencies. Lengthy formal surveys and feasibility studies appeared too costly and did not deliver results rapidly enough to satisfy the growing 'aid industry'. However, by trying to overcome the methodological and conceptual shortcomings of RRA and PRA through their conversion into long-term learning cycles under Participatory Technology Development (PTD) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) participatory approaches themselves are now becoming questionable in terms of their cost-effectiveness. Apart from the costs on the project side, participatory approaches to research and development also often involve high opportunity costs for the local people. In chapter 3 of *PNT*, CLEAVER states that costs and benefits of participation for individuals are little pursued by development projects. She suggests that projects should first analyse the resources that poor people need in order to participate effectively in development efforts. PROBST found in her case study on a community forestry project in Honduras that only if individuals felt that participation 'pays off' they were committed to participate in Monitoring & Evaluation activities (*PME*: 116). In her second case study, she also provides a detailed calculation of opportunity costs

for participation in Monitoring & Evaluation activities. Given these quite considerable costs, LAVIGNE DELVILLE and MATHIEU scrutinise the demand for involving a maximum of rural actors in participatory processes. They suggest that a certain division of labour in collecting and analysing information can be consistent with the aim of participation if there is a real debate on objectives and conclusions between the project and the 'target groups' (*EPD*, chapter 19).

Participation as a substitute for good governance. Local people might well be willing to *learn* with and from outsiders, but to *act* requires sufficient scope for action. Farmers might be well aware of their problems but they are not always in the position to do anything about it. This applies for the majority of the rural people living in protected areas, in marginal hillsides and in semi-arid regions in which the scope for action of residents is limited by insecure land tenure, lack of citizenship rights, restrictive land use regulations and/or unfavourable agroecological conditions. These wider issues of marginalisation and inequity are often left out in participatory approaches centred on interventions at the local level. All too often, participatory approaches to development have been used as a substitute for democratic structures and good governance. COOKE and KOTHARI claim that the emphasis on micro-level interventions in many development projects tends to conceal and sustain inequalities and injustices at the macro-level (*PNT*, chapter 1). Obviously, a well-planned PRA is of no use to the poor if bad governance and a distorted legal and political system limit the scope for action of rural people and prevent farmers from getting access to natural resources. In chapter 10 of *PNT*, MOHAN states that only by linking participatory approaches to wider processes of decentralization and devolution of decision-making, long-term changes are likely to occur. A conducive socio-cultural and political context and functioning local organisations were also identified by PROBST as key factors for the success of participatory approaches such as Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation (*PME*: 181). LAVIGNE DELVILLE and MATHIEU suggest that in changing the 'rules of the game' and in modifying the modes of control of decision-making and of financial fluxes, real change in power and status differentials can take place (*EPD*, chapter 19).

What are the **main conclusions** drawn by the editors and authors of the three volumes and what are the lessons that the reader can derive from them? COOKE and KOTHARI'S conclusions in *Participation: The New Tyranny* are as provocative as the title and most of its contributions. Advocates of participatory approaches might be stunned by the consideration that participatory development could inevitably be tyrannical in both concealing and reinforcing oppressions and injustices in their various forms. While the editors emphasise that they do not want to be labelled 'anti-participation', the rigorous deconstruction of participatory approaches and the demystification of the "quasi-religious associations of participatory rhetoric and practice" (*PNT*: 14) will come as a shock for many true believers in participatory development. SELLAMNA's conclusions

in *Les enquêtes participatives en débat* are not much more encouraging. He sees only two alternatives for the participatory movement: either it goes back to its empirical roots and solves the conceptual, theoretical and methodological contradictions underlying its philosophy which would mean to stop 'embracing errors' and to clarify its message; or it goes "further down the road of relativism" and sees its relevance fading out, leaving behind a set of techniques and tools to be used and abused. The other two editors, LAVIGNE DELVILLE and MATHIEU, present a more optimistic itinerary of participatory approaches. Practitioners of participatory approaches are advised to recognise the diversity of interests, accept their being just another stakeholder and get involved with power relations. The editors emphasise that the participatory character of interventions is reflected in processes rather than in initial diagnosis and that empowerment takes place in institutional arrangements rather than in inquiries and meetings. Hence, they identify two types of prerequisites that are critical for truly participatory approaches: (1) political sensitivity and social skills of the interventionists and (2) a socio-political and institutional context that provides sufficient scope for negotiation and reversal of power relations. The final advice given to practitioners of participatory approaches is to be more modest and pragmatic in their general ambitions and to be more precise and rigorous in their specific objectives. The call for more modest expectations from participatory approaches is also one of the major conclusions of PROBST in *Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation*. She acknowledges that the applicability of community-based Monitoring & Evaluation schemes for research purposes will be limited to long-term action research approaches where research goes hand in hand with processes of social and institutional change. It will also require new competencies of researchers and farmers alike, which have to be backed by training and facilitation. In complex settings of natural resource management, in particular, the costs involved in this long-term assistance would be rewarded through insights and knowledge whose quality is likely to differ from conventional and consultative types of inquiries and evaluations. The work of PROBST is an important step towards more realistic assessments of the degree and depth of participation that can be achieved in a given local context. She thus sets a contrasting point to the sombre perspectives for participatory approaches drawn by COOKE and KOTHARI and their colleagues.

The authors of all three volumes deserve to be commended for revealing the gap between rhetoric and reality of the participatory movement and for providing convincing evidence and reasoning for self-reflection to re-evaluate our own roles as scientists and development practitioners. If successful attempts are made to assess the potential, limits, costs and benefits of participatory approaches, to identify the criteria of their successful use in development and to find the niches in academic research where they can be applied, participatory approaches will have the chance to remain relevant beyond the fashionable rhetoric of the mainstream participatory discourse.

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