

How Important is Democratic Participation in Development?

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ELIZABETH LYNCH, APR 29 2013

How Important is Democratic Participation in Development? Discuss with Examples

The 'miserable' (Chang, 2004, p.16) failure of neoliberalism in encouraging economic growth led to the increasing acceptance of alternative conceptions of development (Leftwich, 2000, p.50). Whereas growth based indicators of development sufficed before the failure of the Structural Adjustment Period, undoubtedly appreciation for wider social and political, if not also cultural, factors must now be considered when analysing development. Whilst democracy itself can be critiqued when improperly defined (Huntington, 1993, p.6), through focusing on the 'indirect' benefits that it creates in developing countries (Drury, Kriekhaus and Lusztig, 2006, p.125) development can come to be critiqued through accountability and efficiency. Indeed, following Sen's inclusion of political organizations, public discussion groups and debates as central to the understanding of democratic institutions (Sen, 1999, p.158), participation's positive influences on development can be fully comprehended. Whilst efforts must be made not to generalise about processes of development (Sen, 1999, p.247) an analysis of the extent to which participation aids development through empowerment suffices as a partially comprehensive illustration of the greater accountability, efficiency and sustainability spawned through democratic participation. Of particular importance to this mode of enquiry is the consideration of cases *lacking* in participation with attention given to highlighting the grievance of partial civil liberties.

Considering Daniel Webster's utopian conception of democracy as one that should be a "people's government, made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people" (Webster *cited in* Lijphart, 1999, p. 1) suggests deliberative participation should be considered inherent in democratic systems. Such definition mirrors the effects of participatory budgeting in Brazil in the sense of empowerment through deliberated decision making and consequential accountability (Fung and Wright, 2001, p.18). Fung and Wright emphasise how the relinquishment of decision making in Porto Alegre "loosen[ed] the grip of traditional political elites", consolidating their argument for Empowered Deliberative Democracy as a means for developing a more efficient and equitable society through extensive empowerment (*ibid*, p.18); thus concurring with Sen's prioritisation of "valuational debates" over assumptive judgements (Sen, 1999, p.110). Indeed, participation in the case of Porto Alegre, Avritzer argues, allowed for three actualities: the inclusion of the poor, an "inversion of priorities" and bottom up participation (Avritzer, 2010, p.183), and by consequence an unprecedented "access to public goods" (*ibid*, p.176). Development by means of a participatory democracy in the instance of Porto Alegre has allowed for sustained participation through inclusive debate and devolution of economic control, facilitating development through access to opportunities and improved standards of living (Avritzer and Wampler, 2004, p.292, Fung and Wright, 2001, p.21)

Another effect of bottom-up participation is emphasised by Sen's argument surrounding the "constructive role of political freedom" (Sen, 1999, p.153). He argues that not only does participation instigate a greater likelihood of a sufficient policy response, but also that it allows for the "conceptualization" and "comprehension" of "economic needs" (Sen, 1999, p.153). Contrary to Leftwich's analysis that the "size and daunting complexity" of India has resulted in top-down development and thus incurred patronage politics (Leftwich, 2000, p.189), the Panchayat systems of rural delegation in Kerala illustrates the development of constructive freedoms through empowering the lower level authorities, integrating women in local decision making and increasing accountability through deliberation

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systems known as *Gram Sabhas* (Fung and Wright, 2001, p.15). Indeed, recent praise by the UNDP highlights the necessity to understand grassroots deficiencies to facilitate effective development (The Hindu, 2012). Furthermore, Fung and Wright emphasise the significance of deliberative participation as far more educational than participation through an electoral democracy (Fung and Wright, 2001, p.29); mirroring Sen's analysis of development as shown by the negative correlation between rising female literacy rates in Kerala and subsequent falling birth rates (Sen, 1999, p.153). However, Fung and Wright's consideration of "enabling conditions" (Fung and Wright, 2001, p.24), as essential to their Empowerment Deliberative Democracy, also highlights the important significance of the mutual reciprocity between education and the subsequent deepening of participatory practices such as the Panchayat system. Development as allowing for constructive civil, political and social empowerment can therefore be seen to necessitate a greater allowance of participation.

Conversely, the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) of the 1980's exemplify the flaws of external impetus as irrespective of domestic participation, adjustments resulted in negative development (Roy, 1993, p.1941). The major academic consensus that the 1980s are considered as being a "lost decade of development" (Esteve, *cited in* Leftwich, 2000, p.49) emphasises how the disempowerment of civil society undoubtedly restricted political freedoms (Ibhawoh, 1999, p.160). In Nigeria (under the Babangida regime, 1985) SAPs led to the usurpation of fiscal sovereignty through the World Bank's financial aid and resulted in reactionary state control of the judiciary and media, as well as inflation, growing unemployment, a diminished welfare system and human rights abuses (Ibhawoh, 1999, p.160) thus negatively adjusting Nigeria's economy and social structure. Whilst Babangida began his presidency on the false premise of debate and discussion (Ibhawoh, 1999, p.161), external pressures for economic development irrespective of social consequences supports Sen's assertion that development must be inclusive (Sen, 1999, p.247). Such conclusions were also retrospectively reached by the World Bank, who now concede that respected involvement of the individual allows for appreciation of the "realities on the ground" and thus more "effective" development (World Bank, 2011, p.83).

Moreover, emphasis on the individual must not neglect to appreciate the importance of supportive institutions as protective of individual freedoms. Indeed, Lijphart's reasoning that democratic constitutions require an independent judiciary through which to "restrain...parliamentary majorities" (Lijphart, 1999, p.212), supports the idea that democratic participation must be legitimised through an independent judiciary holding the governmental majority to account. Such mutual support of state institutions and civil society is inferred through Sen's argument for institutional commitment to individuals' freedoms (Sen, 1999, p.284). Whilst caution must be observed in analysing African politics synonymously (Allen, 1995, p.301) the lack of independent civil institutions in both Nigeria and Zimbabwe illustrates how not ensuring accountability weakens participation by neglecting individual autonomy. Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, Igor Judge, asserted the significance of such independence through comparison with the corrupt control of civil society in Zimbabwe's democracy by President Mugabe (Judge, 2008 and *The Economist*, 2010). Comparatively, in Nigeria, despite lobbying to address the corruption in the 2007 elections (*The Economist*, 2010), ten out of thirty-six states were still unable to participate in the 2011 elections (Freedom House, 2012). As the UNDP Development Report of Africa asserts, considerations of accountability should come to "complement" Sen's commitment to participation through public debate (UNDP, 2012, p.122). This account does not reduce the significance of democratic participation in the process of development, rather it addresses a mutual relationship of institutions and civil liberties that must be protected in order for stable development.

Leftwich's emphasis that developed democratic societies should support "a rich and pluralistic civil society" (Leftwich, 2000, p.146) highlights the instability of contemporary Nigerian development due to its poverty, ethnic and gender divisions (Freedom House, 2012 and DFID, 2012, p.i). Considering Sen's assertion that by inverting the outcome with the presupposed impetus greater participatory freedoms can be gained (Sen, 1999, p.49), Nigeria's poverty would, by this theory, benefit from encouraging education, thus facilitating increased participation, rather than from financial input. Indeed, Nigeria's poorest areas in the North-east also suffer from the greatest disparities in education, both in terms of ethnic minorities (Mustapha, 2006, p. 12) and women's literacy rates (DFID, 2012, p. v). Outcomes for increasing women's participation are highlighted in DFID's 2012 report on Nigeria, namely that they will allow for improvement in the allocation of household income, increase awareness of violence against women and reduce fertility rates (DFID, 2012, p.61); which largely concurs with Sen's analysis of lower fertility rates having broader positive influences of social development (Sen, 1999, p. 201). Furthermore, restricted participation due to

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ethnicity was apparent in the latent ethnic bias when considering public service applications (Mustapha, 2006, p.11); aggravating the consequences of poverty in minority ethnic regions such as a lack of access to health care, limited schools and no electricity (Mustapha, 2006, p.14). The restriction of civil society due to poverty, ethnic and gender divisions is undoubtedly detrimental to development as a collaborative concept of the relationship between the state and civil society (Sen, 1999, p. 298).

A brief analysis of China and possibility of participation is undoubtedly necessary considering the success rate of China's growth in the last half a century (Ross, 2012), and its lack of individual freedoms (Gallagher, 2002, p.338). Whilst Ross argues that China's long term economic growth necessitates a degree of reverence, there are areas in which participation would have, and has the potential to, aid in development. Firstly, the Great Leap of Maoist China exemplifies where the extreme state development failed to effectively provide for or develop individuals' freedoms (Chang and Halliday, 2005, p. 444-447). As Sen posits by restricting the public sphere, Maoist China was not held to account internally and restriction of information resulted in a failure of the allocation of resources (Sen, 1999, p. 181); this led Mao to concede that democracy had its benefits in allowing for a better understanding of what was happening "below" (as cited in Sen, 1999, p. 182).

Indeed in modern day China, despite the impressive growth record (Rodrik, 2003, The World Bank, 2012), in terms of development as enhancing freedoms (Sen, 1999, p.53), the lack of effective participation in government decision-making has, Pei argues, perpetuated inequalities that now threaten the sustainability of China's growth (Pei, 2012). Academic consensus concurs that the growth of the middle class through economic expansion and prosperity has largely resulted in the push for greater accountability via democracy (Huntington, 1993, p. 39 and Korzeniewicz and Kimberely, 1992, p. 610); mirroring the conclusion of The World Bank Report that appeasing the middle class would assure social harmony and sustain Chinese growth to 2030 (The World Bank, 2012, p. 18). In reality, as Pei asserts, the Chinese government's decision to involve a substantial proportion of the social elite in governmental activities has led to them being "politically neutralised", thus stunting extensive broadening of participation (Pei, 2006, p. 40). However, the unprecedented freedom of expression experienced by internet users in China has increased the discussion of the failures of state activity (Economist, Oct 2012). Thus considering the illustration of the failure Maoist China in failing to consider the flaws of the Great Leap, the opinion of Pei that state led development cannot be sustained, and the recommendations of the World Bank of harmonisation through participation, it can be argued that the mutual support of state and civil society on a participatory level aids development as freedom (Sen, 1999, p.53), rather than just considering development by economic means.

In conclusion, the success of participation in facilitating for a more accountable, efficient and sustainable development can be illustrated through societal engagement in political decision making in Brazilian Participatory Budgeting, and in empowerment from below in Kerala allowing for education and thus increasing the longevity of the developmental impact. Failures of Structural Adjustment Policies as seen in the example of Nigeria, arguably emphasises that economic development with little emphasis on democratic engagement, and no bottom up participation resulted in the destructive upheaval of society. Indeed, social cleavages in modern day Nigeria in terms of poverty, gender disparities and ethnic clashes also illustrate restrictions on participation. Moreover, the consideration of the need to consolidate participatory freedoms through judicial independence heightens the significance of ensuring accountability within democracy, necessary to exercise substantive freedoms. Final analysis of China allows for an appreciation of its economic success but a realistic understanding of the lack of freedom and participation; both as evidently negative, in the case of the Great Leap, and potentially restricting as Pei asserts. Overall, comprehensive analysis of the successes of democratic participation in allowing for substantive development through, for example, educational improvements and social mobility has proven the significance participation has in aiding development. Moreover, where participation is not protected through independent civil institutions or is prohibited as a consequence of ethnic and gendered cleavages and where freedoms are hindered through poor governance, development through means of providing substantive freedoms is far less attainable.

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