

Participation, Empowerment, and Democracy: Three Fickle Friends

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Over the past twenty-five years, free participation in decision-making has come to be recognized as an essential ethical value of development. This recognition was not won easily. The development-as-growth strategies of the 1960s typically favored top-down decision-making structures in which development projects along with their managers and expert planners were accountable to international funders in conjunction with national governments. Wider popular participation was “normally restricted to some hastily organized meetings in which outside experts “brief” local people about the objectives and activities of the projects” (Brohman 1996, 202). Demands for greater stakeholder participation in development decision-making issued from several quarters. As a broad principle, free participation in development was advocated by the non-aligned movement and expressed in the Declaration on the Right to Development (United Nations 1986) and in the report of the South Commission (1990). More specific demands for participation were raised by development practitioners and researchers who found that successful development required popular mobilization of a kind that top-down management thwarted. This led to a flurry of initiatives to involve local people earlier in the assessment of development needs and options (Chambers 1983, 1994, 2005). Equal or greater impetus came from resistance to development projects by people who were (or were likely to be) harmed by them. Notably, significant resistance was raised by projects that displace people and their communities – once estimated to be 10 million persons per year (McDowell 1996). In this context people’s inclusion in development decision-making was called for as an essential means of limiting the harm it might otherwise cause them (World Commission on Dams 2000).

This slow and conflicted quarter-century dawn of acceptance for participatory development was anticipated by Denis Goulet as early as 1971. In *The Cruel Choice* he called upon developing countries “to optimize the participation of a populace in significant decision-making and to provide checks against manipulation by elites.” He advocated optimal participation not just as one policy goal among many, but as one of three “strategic principles of development” providing “normative judgments as to how goals are to be pursued” (Goulet 1971, 123).

From the start, Goulet recognized that the idea of “optimal” participation is problematic. Universal participation is unsustainable, for while large numbers of people may leap at the opportunity for decision-making at revolutionary moments when it has been wrung from the elites that formerly dominated them, what they prefer in the long run is not to replace leaders and officials but rather to hold them accountable in ways that allow the people to get on with their lives. Grappling with this problem, Goulet suggested a focus on the idea of “popular elites” or “natural elites” emerging to represent their communities more authentically – reminiscent of the Gramscian idea of “organic intellectuals”. However, he also recognized that working out the meaning of “optimal” participation” is a problem that had to be shared by many researchers and practitioners, over an extensive period of time: “no lessons can be dictated *a priori*; *praxis* must be our teacher ... only experimentation can provide specific answers as to the optimum blend of specialized competence with popular sharing in decisions” (Goulet 1971, 147-148).

Now, this wide and ongoing research problem, to determine what forms “optimal” participation should take, is not a merely pragmatic political problem, nor is it purely a problem

for empirical social research. It is also, as Goulet insisted, a problem of normative ethics. He was especially prescient in proposing one particular ethical value that participation should serve (if it is to be “optimal”), namely, to allow people “to become agents, and not mere beneficiaries, of their own development” (Goulet 1971, 123, 148, 283). Roughly speaking, this lies at the bottom of what people mean now, thirty years later, when what they expect of participation is “empowerment” (Narayan 2002, 2; Narayan 2005, 4).

In his own subsequent contribution to this project, Goulet distinguished four dimensions in which types of participation might vary: by whether it is introduced as a goal or as a means; by the scale of decision-making; by whether it was originated from above, below, or outside; and by the stage in decision-making at which non-elites begin to participate. The latter, he argued, had particular normative significance insofar as “The quality of participation depends on its initial entry point. ... if one wishes to judge whether participation is authentic empowerment of the masses or merely manipulation of them, it matters greatly when participation begins in the overall sequence of steps” (Goulet 1995, 95).

My own work on these topics has focused on two values that participatory development serves. One is empowerment, and the other is democracy. Primarily I have attempted to show what “empowerment” and “more democratic” should mean for participation, and I will present this in sections 1 and 2. In section 3 I discuss the participatory scheme recommended by the World Commission on Dams, in which I find confirmation of Goulet’s idea that the quality of participation depends on its entry point. Further complexity is added in sections 4 and 5, where I show that participation, empowerment, and democracy do not always coincide but sometimes part company.

1. Empowerment

In 1971 the idea of people becoming the agents of their own development was very far indeed from the forefront of orthodox development thinking. By 2006, not only has it become a major topic, but research teams supported by the World Bank had led the way in investigating it. While no one is betting heavily that this research will come to predominate Bank policy or practice any time soon, the Bank’s uptake of this idea at least as a research topic bears witness to how far it has come in the past 35 years.

Currently “empowerment” is the term favored to convey the idea of people becoming the agents their own development. Whatever it is called, this is a complex and rather difficult concept. The source of difficulty is that it has a normative dimension as well as an empirical dimension. Normatively, saying that people have been “empowered” means that they have become better able to shape their own lives, which is a goal that everyone has reason to value. From a more empirical perspective, “empowerment” means gaining a number of factors that make this goal achievable. So it counts as “empowering” when individuals acquire key abilities (literacy) or psychological traits (self-confidence), or when, together, they acquire organizational capacity to acquire needed resources or improve local conditions. It also counts as “empowering” when their social institutions become less domineering of them and more inclusive, or, indeed, when democratic rights are introduced or become better respected and supported. In other words, “empowerment” can refer to two sorts of change, either making gains in the extent to which they can and do shape their lives for the better, or making gains in possessing the means to do so.

This ambiguity between empowerment normatively conceived as a goal and empirically conceived as a means can be troublesome if it is ignored, especially if the task of measuring

empowerment is limited to measuring gains in the means of empowerment. Literacy is an empowering factor, especially for women, and yet there are other factors that can counteract it; for instance, if family decision-making is controlled by the men, it may turn out that a woman is no more able to shape her life after she has learned to read than before. Anyone who defines “empowerment” simply as augmentation of empowering factors (such as literacy) will have to regard people as empowered even if they have actually made no gains in their ability to shape their own lives – even if they are no more the agents of their development than they were before. On this conception, people are regarded as empowered even when what we value as empowerment is absent. Measures such as literacy, if understood as measures of empowering factors, are important and informative, but understood as measures of what we value as empowerment they are highly misleading.

One ethical challenge that is posed by much of the recent work on empowerment, then, is to keep this distinction clear and to keep our focus on what “empowerment” means, insofar as it is something that people have reason to value, namely enhancement of their ability to shape their lives. However, this immediately raises two further challenges. First, “shaping their lives” is a metaphor, and the challenge here is to work out its literal meaning. Second, the historical meanings of “empowerment” challenge us to consider whether, as we use it now, it should mean having more power. In response to these challenges, I have argued elsewhere for defining “empowerment” in the following way:

DURABLE EMPOWERMENT (WITH POWER): People are empowered to the extent that:
 they exercise enhanced decision-making and influence over strategic life-choices and barriers to agency and well-being freedom, and
 their capacity for such decision-making and influence have also been enhanced, and
 given (i) the capabilities they have and assets they control, individually or collectively, and (ii) the opportunity structure in which they act, it is probable that they can make these gains prevail, in the face of opposition (Drydyk 2007).

Each of these three clauses needs to be unpacked and explained.

(a) *Decision-making and influence.* What “shaping one’s own life” implies, in the first place, is making one’s own decisions. In particular, it means active decision-making, in contrast with passive acceptance of decisions by others. This is the “practical reasoning” that Martha Nussbaum has identified as a central human capability (Nussbaum 2000, 79). It is especially important as a defining feature of “empowerment” for women, whereby they take an increasingly active part in decision-making, rather than simply acquiescing in decisions by other family members. It is particularly empowering when these include the “strategic” decisions that have the greatest impact on a person’s life. Among these, Naila Kabeer has included such decisions as “choice of livelihood, where to live, who to marry, whether to marry, whether to have children, how many children to have, who has rights over children, freedom of movement and choice of friends that are critical for people to live the lives they want” (Kabeer 1999, 3). It is also particularly empowering when people can make choices that can reduce barriers to their well-being. These barriers may include individuals’ lack of assets and abilities, e.g. lack of skills, of opportunities for employment, of land or credit; lack of collective assets and capabilities may also function as barriers, such as absence of networks or organizations to protect and advance shared interests. Others may be social or political barriers such as unresponsive, hostile, or repressive governance. Finally, it seems obvious that people are not, properly speaking, “empowered” just by making more decisions; they must also have some greater success in carrying them out. Consequently, “empowerment” must mean a combined enhancement of

decision-making *and influence* over strategic life-choices and barriers to agency and well-being freedom.

(b) *Capacity building*. One of the traps that can surround empowerment is that people can be induced to expand their short-term decision-making in ways that undermine their capacity for further expansion in the longer term. These have been called “disempowering contexts of choice” (Kabeer 1999, 40). For instance, women who become more active in family or community decision-making may still live within a value system that will give them higher esteem in connection with sons than with daughters. Empowerment, in the sense of greater scope for active decision-making, may just give these women greater scope for behaviour that favours their sons, but this, in turn, is disempowering for them and their daughters alike, in the longer term. So we must recognize that “empowerment” cannot mean simply greater active exercise of decision-making in the short term, it must also imply expansion rather than restriction of people’s *capacity* for decision-making and influence over the longer term.

(c) *The power to make empowerment durable*. Since we are trying to define “empowerment” as a value, it would seem perverse to include the possession of greater power as part of its meaning, for that would seem to imply the repellant view that power is valuable for its own sake. On the other hand, there is a more limited (and less repellant) reason for including power within empowerment. This has to do with making empowerment durable. If empowerment matters to us – especially the empowerment of the worst-off – then it should also matter to us that empowerment can often be frustratingly ephemeral. Even when people do manage to gain more scope for shaping their lives, these gains can be swept away by the vicissitudes of politics in their own countries or the vagaries of decision-making in countries and institutions far away. In light of this, we should regard even the ephemeral gains as somewhat empowering, but we should regard people as more empowered still to the extent that they can make these gains prevail against resistance by other actors (political, social, or economic, near or from afar). If we think of power in Weberian fashion as the probability that one can prevail against resistance, then this is the power that must be included within empowerment (Uphoff 2005).

2. Democracy

Another virtue of participation is that it can make a development process more democratic. More precisely, some participatory practices make development decision-making function more democratically. In order to apply usefully to development, the notion of democratic functioning cannot be reduced to electoralism, the idea that those who rule must be chosen in elections. Elsewhere I have argued that the following provides a more flexible and appropriate standard:

FUNCTIONING MORE DEMOCRATICALLY. Political life functions more democratically when political influence on decision-making affecting valuable capabilities is better shared.

BETTER SHARING OF INFLUENCE. Sharing of influence is better when one or more of the following is true:

There are more types or instances of political activity in which people are capable of participating.

The political activity of which people are capable has greater influence over decision-making that would affect valuable capabilities.

Decision-making influenced by political activity is more effective in preserving or enhancing valuable capabilities.

Here “political” activity is meant to embrace any attempt to achieve an outcome by mobilizing the support of others. Besides electoral politics within states it includes office politics, family politics, sexual politics, church politics, and politics within institutions. Development politics takes place at many of these levels. It takes place within development projects but also within broader development processes (such as the Green Revolution).

Perversely, “democracies” sometimes function to frustrate the desire of a public to enhance or protect their well-being. In some cases democracies deprive particular groups of the influence they need to protect themselves – or indeed to altruistically protect other groups that are being disadvantaged. The oppression of minorities is particularly salient. How democratic *is* a system of majority rule that deprives a racial or ethnic group of influence over basic social conditions (housing, employment, education) affecting their well-being? By the standards outlined above, politics that disadvantage people along racial lines are not as democratic as they might be, and the test of this is that influence over well-being ends up being poorly shared.

Each of the three clauses refers to a way in which an activity can be made more democratic. Greater access to political activity makes political life more democratic, but it is yet more democratic if that activity influences decision-making, and more democratic still if the decision-making affected has a real impact on the capabilities that people value as building-blocks of a good life. What if (b) occurs without (a)? This might occur when decision-makers become more attentive to the people. In this way, *good governance* (for example, through good consultation) can render political life more democratic without requiring increased political activity on the part of citizens. This may be especially important in developing regions, where, for people struggling to make a living, time is scarce. This may also clarify the democratic role that can be played by civil society organizations. They need not be seen as distorting democracy by imposing special interests. On the contrary, if, by making decision-makers more attentive, then, by achieving greater influence for citizens upon decision-making, they may contribute to making political life more democratic. And if (c) occurs without (b) or (a)? This would occur if decision-making is more effective in preserving or enhancing capabilities, even though the influence of political activity is no greater. This might occur if external circumstances change, so that government is better able to meet the needs and demands that are expressed in political activity. A good reason for considering this an enhancement of democratic functioning is that, in the contrary case, where external (*e.g.* international) circumstances made a government less able to meet politically expressed needs and demands, we would want to count this as a democratic setback.

The foregoing still falls short in two respects. Imagine a political scenario in which relatively privileged interest group that had previously been politically quiescent is awakened by political threats to its position and succeeds in protecting its privileged position by capturing greater political influence. They enjoy high levels of health, education, and earning power, and their political intervention succeeds in preserving these advantages. Call this the “elite awakening” scenario. If better sharing of influence were the only criterion by which to assess this case, we would have to conclude that the elite awakening scenario does make political life more democratic. This raises an interesting conceptual challenge: in what sense is elite awakening *not* an improvement in democratic functioning? To answer this, we must focus on democracy as a normative concept and ask: What does democratic functioning involve, insofar as it is a worthy social goal? Even if we cannot give a full affirmative answer, it does seem reasonable to say, as a partial response, that the proper goal of democratic functioning is *not* the

creation and preservation of elites. This suggests a contrasting stronger sense of “democratic functioning”:

STRONGER DEMOCRACY. Sharing of influence is better *in a stronger sense* when its effects on capabilities are non-privileging, *e.g.*, in the following ways:

the social standards for service and outcomes relevant to basic capabilities (such as health, education, employment) are raised;

shortfalls in such capabilities, below the social standards, are reduced;

support for exceptional capabilities (such as higher education, coaching in arts and sports) are made more widely accessible.

Whether democracy is *stronger* in this sense depends on what it can accomplish. The idea is that democracy is stronger if public influence creates or widens access to capability-enhancing institutions (such as schools) and programs (such as social welfare) for the population as a whole, rather than for elites. It may do this by raising social standards (such as rates of literacy or educational attainment), by reducing poverty (capability shortfalls), or widening accessibility to high-achievement activities (such as higher education, arts and sports). The awakening elites scenario moves in the opposite direction, towards preserving well-being privilege.

3. When do the people “enter in”?

One of Denis Goulet’s most important contribution to the study of participatory development consisted in assessing it by the stage at which the non-expert population enters in. He distinguished six possible entry points:

- initial diagnosis of the problem or condition;
- a listing of possible responses to be taken;
- selecting one possibility to enact;
- organizing or otherwise preparing oneself to implement the course of action chosen;
- self-correction or evaluation in the course of implementation; and
- debating the merits of further mobilization or organization.

“The quality of participation,” he proposed, “depends on its initial entry point” (Goulet 1995, 95). The importance of this principle is reflected in the new benchmarks for participation that have been developed by the World Commission on Dams (WCD).

The Commission sought to devise a participatory scheme that would give people who were to be displaced or otherwise disadvantaged by the dam sufficient leverage not only to prevent or at least mitigate this harm, but also to share in the benefits of the project. This scheme identified a sequence of principal decision points and required that negotiated agreements be obtained and independently monitored at each stage before the next stage is begun. These decision-points overlapped substantially with Goulet’s: needs assessment, selecting alternatives, project preparation, project implementation, and project operation.

Stage 1: Needs assessment. In the context of dam development, needs assessment reduces essentially to assessing needs for water and for hydroelectric power. The first step prescribed in this process is one of identifying stakeholders – including not only those whose needs for water and power are at issue, but also potential “oustees” and others who could be affected by projects aiming to meet those needs. A consultative forum is to be established, at which stakeholder groups are to be effectively represented. This forum is to be a primary site for

public deliberation concerning two key starting-points: verifying needs for water and power, and setting development objectives for the region (river basin).

What is called for, then, is that stakeholders be democratically organized and effectively represented in a forum of free discussion, which shapes the official and working understanding of *needs* (for water and energy) and regional development *objectives*. In addition, certain research is required: on legal impediments to open and participatory planning, on social and environmental impacts of previous development in the region, as well as ecosystem baseline studies and maintenance needs (WCD 2000, 265). Deliberation on options for meeting those needs and objectives are not to begin until this work is complete.

Stage 2: Selecting alternatives: identifying a preferred development plan. Stakeholders are then to participate in "creating the inventory of options, assessing options, and in negotiating those outcomes that may affect them" (267). Options other than dams need to be included. In addition, their agreement must be obtained to a dispute resolution mechanism. Free, prior and informed consent is required from indigenous groups for inclusion of any planned option that would affect them. Assessment of options is to be based on needs and objectives developed publicly in the previous stage. Leading options are then subjected to social and environmental impact studies (with stakeholder participation), followed by negotiations. By the end of this stage, benefit-sharing mechanisms need to be identified and agreed by groups adversely affected by the preferred project, and outline agreements regarding compensation, mitigation, resettlement, development and monitoring measures need to be negotiated (269). If they cannot be negotiated successfully by the parties directly, the dispute resolution mechanism (e.g., arbitration) is to be engaged.

By the end of this phase, an independent review panel should be selected with the assistance of the stakeholder forum. Its first tasks should include reviewing the assessment of impacts and planning of social and environmental mitigation plans, but it should be empowered to push "stop lights" throughout this and subsequent phases of the project, if prior agreements have not been met. "Each of the five stages," stipulates the Commission, "requires a commitment to agreed procedures culminating in a decision point that governs the course of future action and allocation of resources." Until the appropriate agreements have been achieved, the next stage is not to begin: "At each decision point it is necessary to test compliance with the preceding processes before giving authority to proceed to the next stage" (262). The principal instrument for this "testing" is the Independent Review Panel. In addition, the IRP could also serve as "a mechanism to transfer best practice from one project to another, both nationally and internationally" (302).

Stage 3: Project preparation – verifying commitments are in place before tender of the construction contracts. In the detailed planning and design phase, the outline agreements that have already been negotiated become the bases for legally enforceable contracts protecting stakeholders' entitlements to compensation and other measures of benefit sharing. Again, the agreed-upon dispute resolution mechanisms, such as arbitration, can be engaged in case negotiations fail. "The negotiated agreements will result in signed contracts between the developer and affected communities and individuals, with clear targets for assessing compliance" (270). To pay for claims wrongly ignored or rejected by the developer, the WCD called for an independently administered fund to be established, a trust fund in case a government is the developer, otherwise a performance bond.

Stage 4: Project implementation: confirming compliance before commissioning, and Stage 5: Project operation: adapting to changing contexts. The controls recommended for these

phases may be specific to dams or similar facilities: the Commission recommends that all large dams be subject to licensing, and that a condition of being licensed for operation is that the various social and environmental commitments made in previous stages of the project be reviewed and found to have been carried out satisfactorily.

The WCD recommendations make distinctive use of Goulet's earlier-is-better principle. Their starting point is the observation that dams impose high impoverishment risks on the people they displace.¹

Two further dimensions of Goulet's typology for participation come into play in relation to these procedures. Participation can vary in scale, from small scale decision-making in families to large-scale decision-making at regional, country, or international levels. It can also vary according to the way it comes about, introduced from below by stakeholders, from above by governments or development agencies, or from outside by NGOs or other organizations playing an animating role. Historically, what the WCD is calling for is an extrapolation from the kinds of inclusion that groups of displaced people have often struggled for (Oiver-Smith 1996). However, the WCD scheme is meant to be introduced from above, as a necessary condition for large-scale dam projects, at their inception. Under these procedures, stakeholders would have gain access to processes (stakeholder fora, negotiations) with decisive influence over project planning and management; insofar as they are thereby enabled to protect themselves from being harmed by the project and share in its benefits, these procedures will make project decision-making more democratic for them, insofar as all three conditions for better sharing in influence would be met. On the other hand, the impact on empowerment may be somewhat more mixed. Some individuals may be drawn into a more active decision-making role, but on the other hand it may be those who are already the most active decision-makers who take the leading roles in representing their communities and families within the project. Mainly what these procedures accomplish vis-à-vis empowerment is to prevent or reduce in degree the disempowerment that is inherent in involuntary resettlement.

4. Three fickle friends

Participation, empowerment, and democratic functioning are an unsteady trio in several interesting ways. We value participation most when empowerment and democracy come along with it. However, as we have seen in relation to the WCD, even highly democratic participation does not guarantee empowerment. On the other hand, empowerment sometimes does best when it goes its own way, outside of democratic structures. But, finally, neither empowerment nor democratic functioning are secure within development activities unless the public sphere (embracing state, civil society, and international institutions) also function more democratically.

Unequal empowerment

The first gap – between democratic functioning and empowerment – gives rise to a distinctive set of problems in participatory development. One criticism that is often made of participatory development schemes is that they sometimes reproduce social inequalities within communities. Some stakeholders will end up having less voice and influence than others, and often it is women who are marginalized in this way. “In one smallholder project in The Gambia, difficulties arose when land allocation committees failed to ensure access by poor women to newly cleared swampland. This was because the committees, designed to give women full representation, were gradually co-opted by the men who did the clearing work”. Resolving this inequity required intervention, rather than a hands-off approach to community decision-making

(Alamgir 1989, 16). In this way, as Cornwall has observed, adducing numerous further cases, “the very projects that appear so transformative can turn out to be supportive of a status quo that is highly inequitable for *women*” (Cornwall 2003, 1329). Moreover, even in cases where women achieve formal representation on decision-making bodies, having a voice may be far less than equivalent to having influence, and even where influence is achieved, it may end up being used by some women against others (1329-1330), or, in other cases, it can be met with a damaging male backlash (1334).

The democratic functioning approach acknowledges the complexity of these cases. As long as their outcomes are actually to enhance valuable capabilities, and if this occurs at least through the influence of some members of the community, then at least *in a weak sense* the life of the community has been made somewhat more democratic. On the other hand, to the extent that others remain excluded from this influence, democratization remains incomplete. And if the outcomes privilege those who have seized the lion’s share of influence, then to that extent the ideal of stronger democracy remains distant. This may highlight a lack of democratic functioning for the community’s women, or for poor women in particular. When one dysfunctionality is reduced, others may be revealed, or even exacerbated, for instance by male backlash. These backlash cases also illustrate the flexibility of the democratic-functioning approach: it is not a criterion that applies just to structures, it also applies to the politics, to particular ways in which those structures may operate. Even if women gain greater voice, their influence may be temporary, and eventually the political process may turn out be damaging to their well-being. The normative conclusion to draw is not that it was wrong to seek voice, for that would have been to avoid one shortfall in democratic functioning by accepting another. The normative conclusion is rather the obvious one, that women ought to enjoy political activity and influence without having to pay for this with beatings and a higher divorce rate (Cornwall 2003, 1334). Of course, this normative conclusion is also reinforced by another powerful premise: the value of empowerment.

Subdemocratic development

A second fracture point – this time between empowerment, on one hand, and democratic participation on the other – arises insofar as micro-level practices that are empowering may not require much democratic structure in order to succeed. For instance, micro-credit empowers people at a level that, shall we say, is “subdemocratic,” which is to say that it empowers people in a way that does not depend on any better sharing of influence.

In arguing that market access needs to be included within the wider mix of development strategy, Amartya Sen has noted (drawing on the work of others) that some simple types of market access can be important empowering factors for women. Freedom to seek employment outside the family can enable women to take more active control of their lives in a numbers of ways: adding to their economic independence, leading in turn to less unequal sharing of family resources, and providing opportunity for wider social recognition (Sen 1999, 115). Access to credit can also be an empowering factor, insofar as it finances new income-generating activities in which women control assets, manage the activity, and bring a new income stream into the family.

Of course, market access does not constitute empowerment, it is only an enabling factor, and so it may or may not have empowering results, depending on other factors. As Karen Mason has observed, one key variable intervening between access to assets or income and empowerment is control of those assets or income, and women’s control over income or assets

can be undermined by “traditions, taxation policies, employer practices, and many other factors” (Mason 2005, 92). She cites one extreme case in which an employer paid women’s wages not to the women but to their husbands. Even in less extreme cases, the impact of outside employment on women’s influence within household decision-making is variable, even pertaining to matters of greatest impact upon them, such as family size, freedom of movement, and the permissibility of disagreeing with their husbands (Mason 2005, 93). The extent to which micro-credit empowers women is likewise context-dependent (Malhotra and Shuler 2004, 82).

Nevertheless, access to employment and credit are at least somewhat empowering factors that are distinct from democratic participation in decision-making. Similarly, literacy, education, and property rights have been recognized for more than two hundred years as empowering factors for women (Wollstonecraft 1792).

Finally, it is not just by making decision-making more democratic that *participation* can be empowering. We can see this by applying the distinction between four dimensions of power that is often cited by scholars of women’s empowerment: power over, power with, power to, and power within (Rowlands 1995, Rowlands 1997, Townsend et al. 1999, Csaszar 2004, 144-46). When a community group undertakes a joint income-generating activity, it will achieve power-to simply if it is economically successful; probably it will not achieve much in the way of power over others. The influence that they gain through participatory management of this activity will be limited to these first two dimensions, power-to and power-over. However, quite apart from these effects, taking part in the group’s decision-making will likely add to the skills and self-confidence of the participating individuals (power within) and it may also add to the capacities of the group (resolving disagreement, learning from each other, confidence to take initiative and negotiate with outside groups and agencies (power with). An interesting example is provided by Sabina Alkire’s case study of a lending scheme enabling a group of women to raise goats. Based on interviews with the participants, Alkire traces much of the scheme’s empowerment impact simply to the fact that the women met, talked, and deliberated – learning from “the best opinion” offered to each other – on topics far removed from the business of loans for goats (Alkire 2002, 251). The empowering factors were discussion and deliberation per se, quite apart from the influence that this deliberation may have had over the success of their goat business.

5. Participation betrayed from outside and above

A third disjuncture is this: both empowerment and democratic functioning *within development* can be dependent on democratic functioning in the wider public sphere, including civil society, government, and international institutions. It is possible, therefore, for empowerment and democratic functioning within local development processes to be frustrated by democratic deficits at national or international levels.

There has now been sufficient research on factors enhancing and hindering empowerment to support a framework for categorizing those factors, with a view to identifying conditions in which empowerment is more or less likely to occur. As a central part of the *Measuring Empowerment* project led by Deepa Narayan, the framework developed by Petesch, Smulovitz and Walton (2005) attributes substantial impact over empowerment to broader social and political conditions at national and international levels. While the authors did not address democratic functioning as I have presented it here, it is clear that the same factors have an impact no less substantial on the degree of democratic functioning that is achievable.

The framework distinguishes factors primarily affecting *agency* from those comprising the surrounding *opportunity structure*. Here “agency” means the capacity to pursue purposeful

courses of action individually or collectively, and factors affecting agency fall into three kinds. Economic and human capital comprises property and other economic assets, along with personal skills, knowledge, and good health. The second category is what Appadurai has called “the capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2004), comprising culturally shaped capacities to envision and aspire to different futures as reference-points for navigating the present along with framing and voicing dissatisfaction and hope. The third category, organizational capacity, has two parts. One is the capacity within a community to develop social ties, common goals and norms, and coordinated action, sometimes in spite of divisions by class, caste, race, ethnicity, and religion. The other is a capacity to form liaisons from one community to external groups, governments, and organizations (Petesch et al 2005, 42-44).

Some of these agency factors can affect democratic functioning as well as empowerment. The ability of groups and individuals to achieve better sharing of influence can depend on individual assets ranging from literacy to leadership skills. Absence of the capacity to aspire can trap people in clientelistic domination by elites. Lack of organizational capacity can also hinder political advocacy and promotion of issues affecting their well-being.

Contrasting with agency factors, which limit empowerment and democratic function from within a community, the opportunity structure creates prospects and limitations from outside as well as from within. Again, three sub-categories are proposed, of which the first is the openness of formal decision-making institutions and less formal customs and practices. This category includes formal and informal “rules of the game” prescribing how and by whom decisions are to be made, insofar as these enhance or “reduce the prospects of influence by poor and subordinate groups.” In Latin America and the Caribbean, for instance, these might include “clientelistic political structures, deeply entrenched patterns of unequal gender and social relations (notably with respect to indigenous and Afro-Latino groups), top-down corporatist forms of inclusion, and, in extreme cases, the capture of the state by powerful private interests” (Petesch et al 2005, 45-46). The unity, strength and ideology of dominant groups form a second category, since the influence of poor and subordinate groups can be blocked decisively by unity among elites and middle strata to defend their positions of advantage. The third category is state implementation capacity, including administrative capacity of the state to regulate and implement new policy and programs, and to do so throughout a country, in the hinterland as well as in the capital and other centers.

The importance of these factors underscores the importance of democratic functioning. Insofar as they affect empowerment, they do so indirectly, by affecting democratic functioning, that is, by affecting how well or badly people (poor and subordinate groups in particular) share in decision-making that influences their well-being. I noted earlier that, due to local structures of privilege such as gender privilege it is possible to introduce more participation without making development function more democratically for the local women, and without empowering them. Local empowerment and democratic influence can also be blocked by a closed and inequitable opportunity structure at higher levels of governance, especially since resources for development and public services flow top-down. The implications are twofold. First, the influence of opportunity structure upon empowerment is mediated by democratic functioning. In other words, opportunity structure is disempowering via depriving people of influence on decision-making affecting their well-being. Second, empowerment locally can be blocked by closed and inequalitarian opportunity structures at local or higher levels.

Nevertheless, to be fatalistic about these effects would be a mistake. Change in the direction of greater democratic functioning and empowerment can take place from above or

below. Examples of change from above could include the introduction of participatory budgeting in Brazilian municipalities, insofar as it was led by a national party, Partido dos Trabalhadores after its initial establishment in Porto Alegre by a municipal party branch (Petesch et al. 59; Alsop et al. 95-151; Baiocchi 2003). On the other hand, with superior organizational ability, decision-making powers can sometimes be wrested from below, as illustrated in Norman Uphoff's studies of Gal Oya (Uphoff 1996, Uphoff 2005). In this 1980 irrigation project in Sri Lanka, water use associations for farmers were introduced as an afterthought, because their voluntary labour was required in order to make the irrigation project functional. Slowly they gained more influence with the engineers and officials who made higher-level decisions, and eventually they were able to reverse a decision to cease irrigation altogether in the low-water year of 1997. But the previously closed and bureaucratic approach to water management had already been cracked by 1988, when the Cabinet introduced participatory irrigation management country-wide.

Finally, efforts at empowerment and better sharing of influence may also be thwarted by and international institutions and unregulated international markets. Clearly the democratization that empowerment theorists have in mind is meant to reduce social inequalities and poverty, and so it coincides with what I have called "stronger democracy." This inequality-reducing aspect of empowerment and stronger democracy is threatened chronically by the unregulated functioning of international capital. As Robert Keohane has observed, "The ease with which funds can flow across national boundaries makes it difficult for any country with a market-oriented economy to institute measures that change the distribution of income against capital." Although there are exceptions, the consequence for most countries of the North and South alike is that "the international economic order of modern capitalism manifests a profound bias against policies promoting equality" (Keohane 1990, 191; cf. Porter 2001, Ross 2000). The effect of this underlying market pressure is that initiatives for egalitarian stronger democracy must swim upstream, against international financial currents. Compounding this chronic force of international finance are the acute financing needs that may be required to avert or mitigate economic crises. The effect of these acute needs seems to be to expanded chronic influence on the part of decision-makers at international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund. Formally, the dealings between the IMF and any government are voluntary and negotiated. In practice, these negotiations are commonly regarded as tilted heavily in favour of the Fund, especially when the consequences of not obtaining its financing are dire for a country, its people, and the government of the day. This influence is dramatically anti-democratic when it actually causes economic meltdowns, as Joseph Stiglitz alleges of the IMF role in the East Asian collapse of 1997 (Stiglitz 2002, 89-132).

The international public sphere does also include one feature that in some cases enables local groups to fight back when they are disempowered by national governments or international institutions. Transnational advocacy groups have grown considerably in the past fifty years, both in terms of number of groups and in terms of networking among them. In some cases they permit local advocacy groups an additional dimension of action, through what is called the "boomerang effect". Here a local group, being blocked by local government or an international institution, calls for support from sister organizations in other countries or from international NGOs, with a view to bringing international pressure on the recalcitrant government or institution (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 12-13). By "leveraging more powerful institutions," this mechanism can allow weak groups to "gain influence far beyond their ability to influence state practices directly" (23). Still, while these tactics are not to be ignored, they cannot be expected

to achieve stronger democracy on any wide scale any time soon. The space of transnational activism is structured by networks dedicated to particular issues. The two largest networks are dedicated to human rights and environmental issues. The development network is smaller, and on one accounting it is smaller than the network of groups advocating Esperanto (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 11). In addition, the boomerang effect gets off the ground more readily in response to problems that are not structural, but attributable to some agent who can be held responsible; consequently, the structural bases of poverty and social inequality will be more difficult to address by these means: “Activists have been able to convince people that the World Bank bears responsibility for the human and environmental impact of projects it directly funds, but have had a harder time convincingly making the International Monetary Fund (IMF) responsible for hunger or food riots in the developing world” (27-28).

If *The Life and Times of Participatory Development* were a novel, I suppose that its appeal to the reader would involve both the nobility and the fragility of the protagonist. Its nobility would stand out in episodes where participation achieves stronger democracy and empowers people to shape their own lives. We can thank Denis Goulet for beginning this part of the narrative in 1971. More recent narrators have brought out the fragility of participation: its difficulties in empowering the least powerful, its susceptibility to betrayal from outside and above. Some would finish the story by abandoning participation, even denouncing it at “the new tyranny” (Ranehima 1992; Cooke and Kothari 2001). This latter plot strikes me as a fatalistic fairy-tale pretending that empowerment and stronger democracy can somehow be achieved without participation – but without telling us how. On the contrary, I believe that the only plausible ending for this story is the one sketched by Denis Goulet more than thirty years ago: if we value empowerment and stronger democracy, then we must find, by trial, error, and further research, the ways and means to build the forms of participatory development that we need in order to achieve empowerment and stronger democracy.

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Portions of this chapter appeared previously in my 2005 article, "When is Development More Democratic?" *Journal of Human Development* 6(2): 247-267. [Permission forthcoming.]

¹ These risks are evident in the case studies conducted for the Commission. See www.dams.org. See also Cernea 1996 and 2000.