

People's participation in Development

POINTS TO DEVELOP

People's participation in development becoming important.

Meaning of participation.

Ways, forms, and objective participation.

Participation as a means and an end.

New hopes and openings.

Some suggestions and comments.

People's participation is becoming the central issue of our times. The democratic transition in many developing countries, the collapse of many socialist regimes, and the worldwide emergence of people's organizations- these are all part of historic change, not just urge- to participate in the events and processes that shapes their lives. And that impatience brings many dangers and of social disintegration. But if properly nurtured in a responsive national and global framework, it can also become a source of tremendous vitality and innovation for the creation of new and more just societies.

Participation means that people are closely involved in the economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives. People may, in some cases, have complete and direct control over these processes – in other cases, the control may be partial or indirect. The important thing that people have constant access to decision –making and power. Participation in this sense is an essential element of human development.

Participation, certainly not a new term, has been a part of the development vocabulary since the 1960s, or even before. But it has generally referred only to people's involvement in particular projects or programmes. But today participation means an overall development strategy, focusing on the central role that people should play in all spheres and greater participation enables people to gain for themselves access to a much broader range of opportunities.

People can participate as individuals or as groups. As individuals in a democracy, they may participate as voters or political activists or, in the market, as entrepreneurs or workers. Often, however, they participate more and more effectively through group action- as members of a community organization perhaps, or a trade union or a political party.

Since participation requires increased influence and control, it also demands increased empowerment- in economic, social and political terms. In economic terms, this means being able to engage freely in any economic activity. In social terms, it means being able to join fully in all forms of community life, without regard to religion, colour, sex or race. And in political terms, it means the freedom to choose and change governance at every level, from the presidential palace to the village panchayats. All these forms of participation are intimately linked. Without one, the others will be incomplete.

Any proposal to increase people's participation must therefore pass the empowerment test- does it increase or decrease people's power to control their lives? This test applies to all institutions that organize or affect human lives- whether markets, governments or community organizations. Each must advance the cause of the people.

Participation, from the human development perspective, is both a means and an end. Human development stresses the need to invest in human capabilities and then ensure that those capabilities are used for the benefit to all. Greater participation has an important part to play here; it helps to maximize the use of human capabilities and is thus a means of increasing levels of social and economic development. But human development is also concerned with personal fulfillment. So, active participation, which allows people to realize their full potential and make their best contribution to society, is also an end in itself.

The dangers arise as the irresistible urge for participation clashes with inflexible systems. Although the achievement in human development have been significant during the past few decades, the reality is one of continuing exclusion. More than a billion of the world's people still languish in absolute poverty, and the poorest fifth find that the richest fifth enjoy more than 150 times their income. Constituting more than half the votes, have great difficulty securing even ten per cent representation in parliaments. Rural people in developing countries still receives less than half the income opportunities and social services available to their urban counterparts. Many ethnic still live like separate nation within their own countries. And political and economic democracy is still reluctant process in several countries. Our world is still a world of differences.

But many new windows of opportunity are opening. The cold war in East-West relations is over, and there is a good chance of phasing it out in the developing world. The ideological battles of the past are being replaced by more pragmatic partnership between market efficiency and social compassion. The rising environmental threat is reminding humanity of both its vulnerability and its

compulsion of common survival on a fragile planet. People are beginning to move to centre stage in national and global dialogues.

Many old concepts must now be radically revised. Security should be reinterpreted as security for land. Development must be woven around people, not people around development, and it should empower individuals and groups rather than take away power from them. And development cooperation should focus directly on people, not just on nation-states.

Many of the old institutions of civil society need to be rebuilt, and many new ones created. And because future conflicts may well be between people rather than between states, national and international institutions will need to accommodate much more diversity and difference, and to open many more avenues for constructive participation.

All this will take time, for participation is a process, not an event, it will proceed at different speeds for different countries and regions, and its forms and extent will vary from one stage of development to another. That is why it is necessary to pay attention not only to the levels of participation, but also to whether participation is increasing. What is important is that the impulses for participation be understood and nurtured.

The implications of widespread participation are profound, embracing every aspect of development, markets need to be reformed to offer everyone access to the benefits they can bring. Governance needs to be decentralized to allow greater access to decision-making. And community organizations need to be allowed to exert growing influence on national and international issues. We must realize the fact that human development is the development of the people, by the people, and for the people. Unless and until we ensure people's participation, democratic development will remain elusive.