

BRIEFING PAPER 7

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(Nutritional Improvement for children in
urban Chile and Kenya)

Transforming community participation

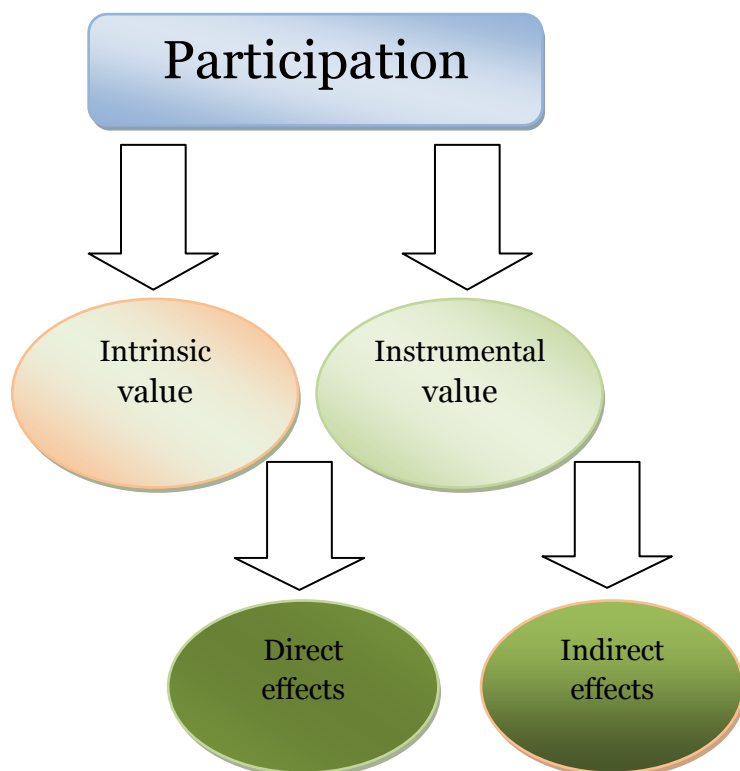
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'Participation' in recent decades has commanded at the same time widespread acceptance and determined critique. While it has been applied to a range of different spheres since the middle of the 20th century, it has been prominent particularly in political theory and international development. Strangely, despite substantial literature and practical experiences in both, until recently there had been little dialogue between the two, leading to an impoverishment of perspectives on both sides. Some commentators have aimed to bridge this gap and respond to the critique of the isolation of local participation from broader power structures. Gaventa (2004), for example, has shown how community participation needs to be seen in conjunction with reforms to national governance, addressing simultaneously the strengthening of citizen participation and voice, and the accountability and responsiveness of government.

Participation can be seen to have a number of benefits and justifications. It can be considered a fundamental human right, and in that sense not dependent on any benefits accrued. It may also have intrinsic value, being enjoyable, a source of positive contact with other community members and an opportunity for self-expression. Mostly, however, participation

is seen in terms of its instrumental value. These instrumental benefits may be direct -- i.e. in achieving the object of a development project -- or indirect -- through enhancement of democracy. For example, participation of community members in an environmental initiative may bring greater effectiveness in implementation of changes: e.g. greater acceptance of the need to use alternative fuel sources and to avoid cutting down trees in the local area. However, there may also be knock-on effects on democratic engagement. Through participation, individuals develop attributes such as capacity for deliberation, management skills, democratic values, sense of efficacy, inclusive attitudes and public speaking skills; communities, in turn, benefit from more effective communication, enhanced ability to keep government to account, social cohesion and social capital. The relationship can be seen in the following graphic:



As seen above, the instrumental indirect benefit feeds back into the participation, enabling communities to participate in increasingly effective ways. But how do we enter into this virtuous cycle? And how do we avoid the opposing dynamic of the vicious cycle? One case that serves as a useful illustration of the problems associated with participation is the *EDUCO* programme, one of a number of examples of school autonomy in Latin America. Many countries in the region (e.g. Chile, Brazil, Mexico) have implemented policies of decentralization of educational management to the regional or municipal level. Yet this process has gone one stage further in some instances, with management and financial responsibilities devolved to the individual schools and communities themselves.

EDUCO was set up in 1991 at the end of the 12 year civil war that crippled El Salvador and its education system (Cuéllar-Marchelli 2003). Schools in the programme are run by a community association, whose members are elected by the community, and which receives funds directly from the government in order to hire teachers and buy materials. The *EDUCO* schools are located in the poorest municipalities, with the focus primarily on preschool education and the lower levels of primary education. As with many decentralizing initiatives, the intention was that the contractual relationship between teachers and the community would increase accountability and reduce teacher absence.

How successful has this initiative been in terms of its impact on educational provision (direct benefit), and on democracy in the community (indirect benefit)? In terms of the former, the programme undoubtedly achieved its goals in expanding access. According to Reimers (1997), total preschool enrolment rates (4-6 year-olds) in rural areas increased from 15% in 1990 to 22% in 1992, with the programme supplying 37% of all preschool places by 1993. Enrolments in all *EDUCO* schools rose from 8,416 in 1991 to 206,336 in 1998, representing 40% of all rural enrolments (Cuéllar-Marchelli 2003). In terms of quality, Reimers (1997) found that there was no significant difference in student achievement or repetition between

EDUCO and traditional schools. This can be seen as something of a success for the former, given the greater socio-economic disadvantage of the pupils. The World Bank evaluation conducted by Jimenez and Yasuyuki (1998), controlling for background factors, actually found higher achievement levels in language amongst *EDUCO* pupils, as well as lower levels of student and teacher absence.

However, in terms of intrinsic benefits for social cohesion and democracy in the community, the little evidence there is casts doubt on the initiative's democratizing effects. First, it is not clear that a broad range of community members have been involved. School-based management is very often led by teachers and other education professionals, and in this case too, it appeared that the associations were dominated by school principals (Reimers 1997). In terms of the participant body, association members were clearly taken from the more educated members of the community, given the 95% literacy rate (compared to a 74% of overall literacy rate in rural areas) (Reimers 1997).

Cuéllar-Marchelli (2003) concludes that the programme has had some positive effect on social cohesion and encouraged closer relationships between school and community, but that these features have varied significantly across communities, depending on factors such as existing social capital, time availability and skills. This variance points to the need for development opportunities for participants. The programme was supposed to include "parent schools", intended to strengthen the community associations and promote relations between school and community, but only in a very few communities have these actually functioned. According to Reimers (1997) there has been little community awareness of the programme in general, with participation limited to members of the board of directors.

In the case of *EDUCO* the results of participation - provision of education for their children - are very tangible and immediate, leading to high levels of uptake by communities. Nevertheless, insufficient attention has been paid to the question of who is actually participating, the nature of that participation and the

developmental opportunities needed by community members to enhance their participation. The sustainability of the initiative will be fragile if ownership is not strongly felt by in the community.

In contrast, the success of the 'participatory budget' in Porto Alegre, Brazil, has been ensured by a strong sense of ownership and developmental opportunities for participants. This initiative involved a proportion of the municipal budget being set aside, and allocated according to the priorities set by each district, following extensive deliberation (Abers 2000). The model of participatory governance is distinctive in that it did not rely on membership of existing civil society groups, and was not a mere consultation, but involved neighbourhoods allocating finances themselves and monitoring implementation.

In terms of instrumental benefits, there was significant improvement to the city's infrastructure as a result of the participatory budget, particularly as regards housing, roads and running water. The proportion of houses with access to the sewage network rose from 46% to 85% between 1989 and 1996 (Novy & Leubolt 2005). Importantly, investment in the poorer districts exceeded that in the wealthier areas. The importance of these tangible benefits cannot be underestimated, in that "the reforms delivered public goods promptly to convince skeptical and time-pressed residents that participation is worthwhile" (Baiocchi (2003: 64).

As significant as these improvements to city infrastructure were the effects on the enhancement of democracy is uncertain. One success of the participatory budget was that its participants consisted of disproportionate numbers of the poorer segments of society, thus reversing the expectation. Despite very low numbers of women in conventional legislative councils, the gender balance was even in participatory budget meetings (Novy & Leubolt 2005). The numbers of those involved rose steadily since the initiative's inception, although opinions are divided on the extent of participation (Navarro 2003).

According to Baiocchi (2003: 47), unlike the EDUCO programme, the initiative "offers a successful resolution of the problems of deliberation among unequals through its didactic functions". Meetings were arranged to learn technical aspects such as procedures and rules, skills of budgeting and debating. In this way, the ever-present obstacle of uneven power relations between participants was mitigated by support for new participants and marginalized groups in developing their abilities and confidence in meetings.

As can be seen in these examples, learning opportunities are fundamental to ensuring that participation will be effective and not tokenistic. Only when people develop the required knowledge, skills and values can participation lead to both practical impact and deeper enhancement of democracy. In this, attention is needed not to just the existence of educational spaces, but also to the kind of education provided – requiring, as proposed by Paulo Freire and others, attention to critical understanding of social reality and the capacity for action.