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## Beyond participation: strategies for deeper empowerment

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How to cite:

Mohan, Giles (2006). Beyond participation: strategies for deeper empowerment. In: Cooke, Bill and Kothari, Uma eds. Participation: The New Tyranny? London: Zed Books, pp. 153–167.

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# Beyond Participation: Strategies for Deeper Empowerment

Giles Mohan

*community action programmes and non-governmental sponsored projects..are surely projects that lead to greater autonomy and independence, factors vital for decolonisation. That these forms have existed separately from the enunciation of postcolonialism should not be forgotten*  
(Goss 1996: 248)

## **Introduction**

This chapter has two major aims. The first is to critique existing participatory practices, especially the ways in which local knowledge is generated as a necessary first-step in reversing the 'top down' approaches of many development initiatives. This critique is realised largely through the use of concepts derived from postcolonial studies. In order to do this effectively, the following section outlines some of the major themes within postcolonial studies as it is a relatively recent and poorly defined area of the social sciences. These critical insights are then used in section two to examine the ways in which participatory research methods tend to re-inscribe relations of authority between the outside facilitator and the grassroots. The second aim, which is dealt with in section three, is to re-work approaches to participatory development in light of the preceding criticisms. This is done through both theoretical considerations and a case study of a small NGO working in West Africa. While not wanting to portray the NGO as having overcome all barriers to participation, it is instructive in demonstrating how a reflexive, 'outside' organisation can deal with problematic power relationships at the local level.

## **Post-colonialism and local knowledge**

In this section I review the field of postcolonial studies and draw two major themes which have a bearing on the practices of participatory development. Recently, scholars and practitioners have challenged 'externally' imposed knowledge and policies and sought ways to create collaborative forms of knowledge which underpin more appropriate and sustainable social development (Nelson and Wright, 1995; Escobar, 1995). For postcolonial scholars this involves revealing the ways in which colonialism has impacted upon knowledge and subjectivity (Ashcroft et al, 1995).

As Watts noted 'The post-colonialism literature has unleashed a ferocious debate which speaks directly to the writing of development history and the practice of development' (Watts, 1995: 54; Kothari, 1996; Power, 1998). However, as Goss (1996) asserts, the postcolonial critique has become heavily textual involving 'the study of study' or 'armchair decolonisation' (1996: 248). Despite this well-founded criticism, this section discusses areas within postcolonial studies which might 'speak directly to' the practice of participatory development.

The postcolonial critique has grown in prominence over the past decade, but its colonisation of increasing areas of social theory threatens to render it meaningless as almost anything can be considered 'postcolonial' (Ahmad, 1995; 1997; Dirlik, 1994). Dirlik (1994) argues that 'postcolonial' has replaced 'Third World' in the political imagination while other scholars (Tiffin and Lawson, 1994) examine countries, such as Australia, which have historical connections with Europe and a legacy of subjugating indigenous peoples. Similarly, in terms of periodisation, postcolonial studies cover broad historical epochs ranging from colonial contact onwards. These conceptual uncertainties undermine the focus of postcolonial studies as a coherent critique.

Originating in literary studies, the postcolonial critique has become a fashionable label, but one which is increasingly formless. Postcolonialism can usefully be seen as referring to a condition

and/or a critique, in the sense that ontologically a given community can be considered postcolonial while postcolonial criticism attacks epistemologies which have privileged Western ways of knowing (Ahmad, 1995; Dirlik, 1994). Despite Ahmad's (1995: 9) warning of a self-aggrandising circularity whereby 'we have a globalised *condition of postcoloniality* that can be *described* by the "postcolonial critic"' (emphasis in original) there are, I feel, two areas where postcolonialism elucidates the practices of development.

### *Eurocentrism and the politics of representation*

The first emerges from attacks on Western discourses which 'place' the non-West and thereby determine who has authority over knowledge. Clearly, Edward Said's (1979) Orientalist analysis has been the most influential (Ahmad, 1994). Said argued that the West has constructed the Orient as 'other' and fashioned exclusive authority over its representation. This means that the Orient has only been seen through Western eyes which enables other processes of domination to proceed. Similar critiques have followed which challenge Eurocentric thought (Shohat and Stam 1994) while Jonathan Crush's (1995) collection examines the power of Western discourses in shaping development interventions in the Third World (see also Escobar, 1995).

While making 'us', the Western critic, sorely aware of our complicity within colonising discourses, Said's work has been attacked for the ways in which it effectively silences the voices of the other. First, Said homogenises and essentialises both the West and non-West and treats them as undifferentiated and unchanging (Young, 1990). Analytically, he makes no 'qualitative distinctions between a variety of texts produced under a variety of historical conjunctures for a wide variety of audiences' (Porter 1994 [originally 1983]: 153). This flattening of history and geography does away with the possibility of contested discourses and, thus, any notion of

political agency. Second, there is an epistemological problem in that Said claims Orientalism is mythical and creates its own truth so that nothing we know can exist outside of it. At other times he dismisses Orientalism as representations and not 'the truth' which implies a reality exists independently of this hegemonic discourse (Porter 1994), yet he offers no clue as to how one might access it. These two tendencies, despite an apparently radical anti-imperialism, leave Said unable to suggest any alternatives to Orientalist thought. The result is that 'virtually no counter-hegemonic voices are heard' (Porter 1994: 152/3) which has important implications for researchers seeking to recover the subject from Eurocentric accounts of the non-West.

### *Recovering political agency*

A second strand of postcolonial criticism focuses precisely on this question. Various postcolonial scholars (Bhabha, 1983; 1984; Spivak, 1987; 1988) challenge the premise that colonialism was hegemonic implying a unity of purpose and totalising effects. Following Fanon, Lacan and Gramsci these scholars have explored questions of identity (Gates Jr., 1991) and counter-hegemony which destabilise the fixity of the coloniser-colonised dualism. Homi Bhabha (1983: 200) argues that Orientalism suggests that 'power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer'. Contrary to those who see the colonial moment as one in which two, distinct cultures meet and one is subjugated by the more powerful, Bhabha examines questions of 'hybridity' which is 'the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal' (Bhabha, 1994: 34 [original 1985]). One such 'productive' process is that of mimicry where the colonial subject takes on certain elements of the coloniser's culture so that s/he resembles the coloniser, but is at the same time different. Bhabha sees this as a subversive form of resistance because 'mimicry is at once resemblance and menace' (Bhabha, 1984: 127; Obeyesekere, 1992). Thus

Bhabha challenges the depoliticising effects of essentialist historiography and posits hybridity as a space of radical possibilities (Mitchell, 1997) although Ahmad (1997) criticises this for ignoring the overt challenges to colonial power such as anti-colonial struggles.

Other scholars have emphasised hybridity as a condition of postcolonialism (Mudimbe, 1988; Gilroy, 1993), but Ahmad (1995) argues that hybridisation as a cultural process is common where any different people meet so it cannot be seen as a defining feature of postcolonialism. Importantly, the focus on the subject as hybrid tends to obliterate any structural determinations (Mitchell, 1997). There is a tension between an ultimately situated *localised* experience and a *global* condition. One explanation for this is that the postcolonial critics are really the only people to whom these peculiar conditions apply; scholars shaped by hybridised education systems in former colonies who now inhabit the rarefied world of the Ivy League (Dirlik, 1994: 339, Ahmad 1997: 366). More importantly still is that in examining the cultural construction of global hybrids they tend to ignore the structural and material constraints of globalised capitalism. Politically this can be limiting since 'the term "postcolonial" in the Western academy..serves to keep at bay more sharply political terms such as "imperialism", or "geopolitics"' (Lomba, 1998: xiv). Katharyne Mitchell (1997) offers a way out which argues for the material and cultural to be analysed in tandem rather than abstracting the cultural as a metaphorical space outside of material conditions.

A Marxian attempt to recover the voice of the marginalised has come through the work inspired by the Subaltern Studies (SS) Group. This is important for grassroots development, because it seeks to move the focus away from elite perspectives to those of the marginalised. It also opens up the question that if we can 'hear' these non-elite voices will new social forms unfold? SS

emerged from a group of Gramscian historians (Guha, Chatterjee, Chakrabarty, Prakash) who were disenchanted with the existing histories of India. Ranajit Guha (1982) describes these as élitist because the agents of history are presented as the colonial and post-colonial elites. Both colonial and postcolonial versions of history ignore 'the contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite to the making and development of this nationalism..(who are)..the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country' (Guha, 1982: 4). The key for Guha is that this was 'autonomous' from the elite politics described in the earlier histories so that his analysis re-covers the voice of the subaltern. Subaltern politics is based around resistance and horizontal community linkages rather than vertical linkages into élitist state structures.

One obvious criticism is that these analytical categories are still generalised; the 'subalterns' are the residue of the 'non-elite' and there is little differentiation within this massive category. A second criticism concerns the whole question of political organisation being 'autonomous' from any elite influence which presents a highly dichotomised view of political processes (Young, 1990). SS does raise important questions about intellectuals and politics which centres upon the question of *representation*. Representation can mean 'speaking of' - constructing accounts and writing texts - or it can mean 'speaking for' - advocating and mediating. The SS scholars combine the two, believing that by speaking of the subaltern experience they would change the political relations in their favour.

It is here that Spivak's (1988) famous intervention is aimed in a piece entitled 'Can the subaltern speak?'. She argued that SS is blind to gender differences and that women's voices are suppressed by class, ethnicity and patriarchy. The 'Third World Woman' becomes a signifier

who is unable to represent herself and is 'assigned no position of enunciation' (Young, 1990: 164). Any discussion of subaltern consciousness is always intermediated by scholars who can never know the subaltern and hence the latter cannot speak. By this logic the only true subaltern is the one which cannot speak so attempting to recover their voice is pointless, a logic which Peet and Watts (1996: 15) describe as 'indefensible'. In deconstructive style Spivak seeks to destabilise textual representations, but does not 'confront these with another knowledge' (Parry, 1987: 43). As Henry Louis Gates Jr (1991: 464) adds 'Considering the subaltern voice to be irretrievable, they devalue the actual counternarratives of anticolonialist struggles as mere reverse discourse'. He suggests that we distinguish more sharply between cultural *resistance* and the more generalised forms of cultural *alterity* or hybridity identified by Bhabha and Spivak.

Postcolonial studies alerts us to the epistemic violence of Eurocentric discourses of the non-West and the possibilities of recovering the voices of the marginalised. Yet much of this abstracts cultural processes away from material conditions and is unable to stand outside (or suggest alternatives to) the dominant epistemological frameworks against which they argue. In this sense many analyses run the risk of re-inscribing authority over the non-West rather than subverting it. As mentioned earlier, similar processes of challenging Western constructions of the Third World are central to participatory development. The latter has become prevalent in development practice (Chambers, 1997) and centres upon the valorisation of local, non-Western knowledge. This has important implications for practitioners since it rejects the assumption that 'expert' professionals know best and makes epistemological questions central to the process of change and not separated from concrete 'policy' actions. In the next section I demonstrate that even when a conscious effort is made access local knowledge the reverse is often the case.



## **The pitfalls of participatory research**

In this section I use some of the insights of postcolonialism to interrogate participatory research. Participatory research is centred upon the reflexive awareness that power and knowledge are inextricably bound up (Chambers, 1997) and it is PRA which has come to dominate this field (Chambers, 1994a/b/c; Mohan, 1999). While we should welcome approaches which seek to alter power relationships in favour of the marginalised, this section looks at participatory research as a set of practices which re-inscribes power relations between expert and other. Here I disagree with Goss' (1996) argument quoted at the start of this chapter that NGO activity is likely to produce a decolonisation of knowledge and action. In the third section I look at ways in which this tension might be resolved.

### *Western 'primitivism' and the (re)authorising of knowledge*

Participatory research involves the valorisation of local knowledges and seeks to empower grassroots communities. As such it raises serious questions about the relationships between expert and non-expert, how we define 'decision-makers', and the ways in which the world is represented to different groups. This sub-section examines how a subtle Eurocentrism infects and shapes the interventions of non-local development workers despite claims to the contrary.

Our current fascination with the local, community and uniqueness reflects both older traits and newer concerns of Western society in the way it confronts the non-West. Campbell (1997) argues that in participatory research one is viewing the other as 'unknowable', that their 'rationality' is different and difficult to understand. In talking of Africa, Chabal (1996: 41) makes a similar point when he writes that it embodies

the mysterious and the exotic. Mysterious not just in the sense that we do not understand its reality well but also in that its reality is not really amenable to our understanding. Exotic in that it fulfils in us the most enduring need to find in some (suitably distant) 'other' that quality of inexplicability which is both frightening in its apparent irrationality and reassuring in that it highlights our own rationality

From the point of view of research this 'predication of mystery allows the obliteration of dialogue' (Kanneh, 1999: 5) as complex societies are reduced to 'discrete entities, entirely separable from each other in space' (Kanneh, 1999: 7). In this sense the ontological pitfalls of Said's dualism between Occident and Orient are repeated.

Additionally, it reflects the belief that their knowledge is more 'organic'. However, what might appear to be less energy-intensive technology may not be born out of an innate wisdom over their relationship to nature, but a result of necessity. As Campbell notes (1997: 50/51) 'interpreting African dire necessity as a product of "indigenous knowledge" rather than a product of grinding poverty, the concept of indigenism can then be served up to gullible Westerners as a "sustainable" system that they should be proud to live by'. Again we see a privileging of the cultural realm over the material and its appropriation by Westerners. As Dirlik (1994: 346) observes 'By throwing the cover of culture over material relationships, as if one had little to do with the other, such a focus diverts criticism of capitalism to the criticism of Eurocentric ideology..(and)..provides an alibi for inequality, exploitation, and oppression in their modern guises'.

Both Campbell and Chabal argue that this appropriation is not innocent, but stems from 'our' growing doubts about the modernist project. In Africa 'we' see the antithesis of rationality, yet one which is at the same time recognisable and, in this sense, threatens our own sense of identity and progress. Kaplan's (1994) infamous *The Coming Anarchy* is the most bald statement of this paranoia. While Campbell perhaps stretches the point, there is an assumption, which I will return to throughout this section, that in participatory research there are distinct realms of knowledge that exist prior to the research process. One is Western, rational and familiar, the other is local, multiple and strange.

The practical effects of this 'primitivist' discourse concerns the way in which PRA techniques are biased towards seeing 'communities' as consensual and harmonious, the childlike way in which PRA treats the 'participants', and issues of cognition and interpretation. First, the primitivist notion of the local as harmonious community is reflected in the way in which PRA tends to promote a consensual view (Goebel, 1998). In Chambers' work, as Brown (1994) points out, there is a tendency to romanticise and essentialise the poor and the social systems by which they operate. The 'poor' are set against an unspecified 'elite' whose only defining feature is their 'non-poorness', with the former group operating through affective ties of, for example, kinship and ethnic group and the latter utilising the 'modern' methods of state channels. Such binary ontologies repeat the arguments about subaltern politics being 'autonomous' while undermining the stated intentions of PRA of seeking diversity. We saw above that the early work of the Subaltern Studies Group tended to do the same by labelling 'subalterns' as all those people who were 'non-elite' which concealed the important differences within the marginalised along lines of class, gender and ethnicity. Such discourses smooth and homogenise.

As Nelson and Wright (1995: 15) observe '(c)ommunity is a concept often used by state and other organizations, rather than the people themselves, and it carries connotations of consensus and "needs" determined within parameters set by outsiders'. PRA has tended naïvely towards this consensual view which conceals powerful interests at the intra-community level (Byrne, 1995). The danger from a policy point of view is that the actions based on consensus may in fact further empower the powerful vested interests that manipulated the research in the first place. Pottier and Orone (1995) describe how in one case the chief purposefully failed to invite the very poor so that as Richards (1995: 15) notes 'decisions made generally favour village élites'. Recently, such criticisms have been addressed with conscious efforts made to disclose difference and heterogeneity. For example, Norton (1998) and Milimo *et al* (1998) demonstrated that gendered differences exist over the importance of water availability to poverty in Zambia while Goebel (1998) successfully analysed gender differences over resource management in Zimbabwe.

Second, as Chambers (1994b: 1255) notes 'Local people and outsiders alike are encouraged to improvise in a spirit of play' while the experience reverses 'frustration to fun' (1997: 154). It should be noted that the emphasis on playfulness can be seen as a reaction to the stresses of contemporary capitalism whereby 'a whole generation of consumers has toddled into early middle age with the infantile desire to be surrounded by...things that remind them of their childhood' (Bracewell, 1998: 26). Hence, we should be wary of such universal claims that play is necessarily good at all times. Similarly, the PRA exercise is intended to be informal and practitioners talk of the 'relaxed' nature of the research meeting. In such cases the outside facilitators are making cultural assumptions about the best milieu in which to conduct research. Mosse (1994) notes from his experiences in India that what the outsiders consider to be informal

is taken by the community as an important and highly formal event.

Third, as Mosse (1994; see also Richards, 1995; Thrift, 1998) warns, Western models of cognition assume knowledge is mediated by language but most knowledge is non-linguistic, tacit and generated in practice. The weakness of PRA is that it relies heavily on linguistic representation of knowledge (the diagrams provide a talking point or the results are written into a report) which is probably not amenable to such explicit codification. Hence, much of what is important is left unknown. As Robinson-Pant (1995: 80-81) observes various PRA techniques 'represents a way of thinking that may be peculiarly Western....we can all see, but do not necessarily understand or interpret diagrams in the same way'. In this way research is biased away from local knowledge from the start, because only the opinions of locals who are conversant in such media are heard. In particular, Katz (1993: 104) observed, while working in Sudan that 'boys tend to exceed girls in spatial and mathematical ability' which in turn prejudices the results and decisions based upon them. Goebel (1998) argues that for PRA to move onwards it needs to allow local people to generate their own categories, concepts and criteria for understanding and changing their lives. I return to this point in the third section.

Leading on from this is the construction of texts and the authority this imposes. Such problems are also part of the 'economism' of development agencies whereby 'soft' information has to be made acceptable through its pseudo-scientism to hardened decision makers. Dogbe (1998) on Ghana and Moser and Holland (1998) on Jamaica discuss this problem of translation where the openness and subjectivity of the PRA findings need to be made intelligible to a sceptical audience in the major development institutions. Again, these practices represent wider ways of apprehending the non-West. In discussing ethnography in Africa, Kanneh (1999) argues that the

production of 'the text' gives legitimacy to the subconscious knowledge of the informants. In doing this the ethnographer-researcher assumes that the people being researched lack the capacity for self-analysis and that only s/he can truly 'decode' and 'interpret' reality for them. Kanneh (1999: 18), echoing Spivak, adds 'This system of unequal exchange has significant repercussions for a project of knowledge which is founded upon literacy. If written representation effectively erodes the chosen self-representation of another, how can ethnographical writing allow another to speak for herself?'. In much the same way the findings of PRA are translated and interpreted by the researcher which undermines the value of local knowledge. It also raises questions about 'chosen self-presentation' which I return to below in discussing alternative criteria and methods for PRA.

#### *Identity, scale and politics*

In this part of the section I argue that the focus on the personal and local as the site of empowerment and knowledge circumscribes consciousness and action. Participatory research assumes that local knowledge will reverse the previous interventions which treated locals as passive recipients. However, the reversal has almost been complete so that subjectivity and the locality are reified as the only valid political sites. For example, Chambers (1997: 14) acknowledges the 'many levels' of causality within underdevelopment, but chooses to focus on 'the primacy of the personal'. This reductionism is at odds with the increasingly globalising tendencies of many economic and social processes. As Dirlik (1994: 336) notes 'local interactions take priority over global structures in the shaping of these relationships, which implies they are better comprehended historically in their heterogeneity than structurally in their fixity'. This returns us to earlier discussions regarding the politics of hybridity-subjectivity versus more overt forms of action and resistance.

The participatory research agenda assumes that the insider/outsider division is the most important problem blocking meaningful development. By revealing our self-conscious appreciation of this we place ourselves back at the centre of the (under)development process and therefore re-inscribe the authorial voice, because only 'we' can really change things. As Rahnema (1990: 213) notes they 'express this superiority by the very fact that we recognise and respect the validity of traditional knowledge, whereas nobody else does'. The familiar character of westerner as enlightened and omnipotent saviour re-appears while the emphasis on (under)development as cultural difference ignores the materiality of the development process.

The corollary is that by valorising the local and being self-critical of our colonising knowledge 'we' behave as if we do not have anything to offer. The populist line treats all knowledge from 'the West' as tainted (Young, 1990; Goebel, 1998) and prevents genuine dialogue and learning; even though in practice, as we have seen, facilitators intervene which biases knowledge away from locals. This homogenising and demonising of Western discourses repeats earlier criticisms of Orientalism in that 'everything that originates in Europe should be consigned so unilaterally to the "heritage of imperialism", unless we subscribe to an essentialist notion of an undifferentiated "Europe" where everything and everyone is imperialist' (Ahmad 1995: 5). I return to a more hybridised conceptualisation of knowledge below.

Another effect of 'going local' is that the state seems to disappear. The liberal assumption of participatory research is that better research will make bureaucrats more aware and in touch with locals so that appropriate development ensues (Rew, 1985). This belief is based upon a technocratic view of the state, in which it is a 'black box' which responds to 'inputs' in a balanced

and rational manner. Such an assumption ignores the ways in which the state has manipulated civil society and used 'the local' as a political discourse which disempowers. For example, colonial Indirect Rule and the Apartheid system were at one level about celebrating and politicising local difference in order to govern, but its corollary was that it fragmented opposition and fuelled divisions between 'ethnic' groups (Young, 1988). What is needed is a more critical view of the state and central-local relations.

### **Alternative possibilities of going local**

In this third and concluding section I take on the preceding criticisms and examine the possibility of moving beyond them. So far we have seen in much participatory research and development a re-authorising of knowledge whereby assumptions are made regarding the separate rationalities of the insider and outsider. Linked to this is an assumed homogeneity within communities which encourages a localism and populism that leaves structural constraints relatively untouched. So are there ways of moving beyond participation as currently practised and bringing about deepened empowerment?. Clearly there are problems, many self-acknowledged by practitioners, with orthodox approaches to participatory research, but researchers and NGOs have been attempting to move beyond them. This section serves as an extended conclusion on alternative possibilities whereby I inter-weave general theoretical observations with my own based on the work of Village AiD (VA) in West Africa.

#### *Radicalising hybridity*

One over-arching criticism of participatory research is that it assumes a dualistic notion of knowledge generation. Following from postcolonialism we can overcome this by using concepts such as liminality and hybridity, but avoid the reductionism which treat these as an 'ahistorical



eternal present' (Goss, 1996: 244) or which collapses all hybridity into a romanticised form of resistance (Gates Jr., 1991). This can be done by simultaneously studying up, down and sideways (Schrivjers, 1995; Mitchell, 1997). Most participatory approaches tend to study down to the local level, but more transformative approaches would also study the global economy and transnational organisations such as the major development agencies and be prepared to criticise bad practice.

Participatory development could follow those notions of hybridity which acknowledge that inequalities of power exist, but looks at this productively rather than attempting to minimise a differential which cannot be readily removed. The first move is to acknowledge that those we view as powerless are not. Rahnema (1992) argues that '(t)heirs is a different power which is not always perceived as such, and cannot be actualized in the same manner, yet it is very real in many ways (it) is constituted by the thousands of centres and informal networks of resistance which ordinary people put up' (Rahnema, 1992: 123; see also Scott, 1990). Although such a recognition can be 'politically conservative' (Brass, 1995), it helps to move us beyond the patronising attitudes that 'they' need to be empowered according to our agenda. As Grossberg (1996, cited in Thrift, 1997: 150) asserts we need to give up 'notions of resistance that assume a subject standing entirely outside of and against a well-established structure of power'. Having begun from this ontological position the possibilities for a more transformative agenda are established.

In terms of research (Fine, 1994; Schrivjers, 1995) we need to move beyond the bounded notions of self/other and insider/outsider. Katz (1992: 504) argues 'this is not a project of getting 'others' to speak as all knowing subjects of otherness...but rather to undermine this very construction and

recognize that none of us are all knowing subjectivities'. This presents a very different starting point from most participatory research which posits bounded subjectivities and, concomitantly, discrete realms of knowledge. Melhuus (1995: 106) adds that '(s)ome things can perhaps *not* be explained within the terms set by the society under study' which opens a place for our own, guilt-free analysis. As Fine (1994) puts it we need to 'work the hyphen' between dualisms because it is within these inter-subjective worlds that meaning, knowledge and political action will emerge.

We saw that PRA never really overcame this problem largely because while 'they' may become subjects we never lose our grip of being the originating subject. So if we are to move towards more dialogic research which involves 'a different type of relation, a different balance, between the researcher herself, the "subject" of research, and whatever is being researched, the "object"' (Arnfred, 1995: 3) then the researcher him/herself must become an object of research which may involve reversing the roles of researcher and researched. As Schrijvers (1995: 25) asserts 'all parties create room to make explicit their points of view so that they can exchange and discuss their interpretations - among which are the images of each other and of the power relations at stake'. This strategy assumes knowledge is generated inter-subjectively and does not *a priori* privilege one form of knowledge as more complete or essentially more appropriate.

Goebel (1998) demonstrates this in her work with resettlement communities in Zimbabwe. She shows that gender and religion are important axes of social conflict, but in neither case are these beliefs and practices lodged in enclosed and static lifeworlds. She says "'indigenous knowledge" or "traditional practices" should not be constructed as part of a dichotomy, with "western ideas" as the other half. It is more useful to investigate the outcome of the interaction of the "western" and the "indigenous"..(since)..there is very little called "indigenous" that does not have

something "western" implicated in it' (1998: 294). Such a recognition opens up the possibility of constructive dialogue where 'we' do have something to offer.

One of the stumbling blocks in the application of participatory development has been the imposition of evaluation and monitoring criteria for projects which reflect the concerns and priorities of the non-local organisations (Goebel, 1998). Hence, there is a real need to pursue methods which put in place criteria which are locally-meaningful. VA has begun to do this in developing the REFLECT approach to literacy pioneered by Action Aid. In sharing learning with Action Aid regarding the widened application of PRA, VA argue that the application of PRA often carries flaws 'not in theory, but in practice. This is (because) PRA tools...are developed according to values, communication capacities and processes (which are themselves politically driven), and agendas of outsiders. So, albeit indirectly, people do not have control of their literacy and political processes' (Village AiD, 1998: 11). Instead they are working not at 'regenerated', but to explore the potential of 'self-generated literacy' through a programme called *Arizama* which is a Dagbani word roughly translating as 'dialogue'. Still working within the REFLECT paradigm, this involves the identification, adoption and adaptation (where necessary) of indigenous facilitation methods, such as dance, song and story-telling. This process can be extended from communications within communities to that between them and thereby challenge the damaging localism inherent in much participatory development.

### *Re-scaling politics*

Having introduced less essentialist conceptions of knowledge and geo-political power, the space is opened for re-scaling political action which moves beyond the locality. As Guijt and Shah (1998: 3) observe 'participatory processes have been increasingly approached as technical,

management solutions to what are basically political issues'. A more useful approach acknowledges the political nature of participatory development and the conflicts that this necessarily involves. In this regard it would be wrong to treat the state as separate from 'the local' and/or necessarily venal since the state can still protect and effect socially-beneficial change. This suggests that 'local' action must simultaneously address the non-local. As Nyamugasira (1998: 297) observes NGOs 'have come to the sad realization that although they have achieved many micro-level successes, the systems and structures that determine power and resource allocations - locally, nationally, and globally - remain largely intact'. Recent interventions have begun to deal with these limitations by looking at strategies for 'scaling up' local interventions (Blackburn and Holland, 1998). Only by linking participatory approaches to wider, and more difficult, processes of democratisation, anti-imperialism and feminism will long-term changes occur. For example, Whaites (1998: 346) argues that NGOs should 'also seek to build up the capacity of the state *as an integral part of* this localized, grassroots work' (emphasis in original) rather than creating parallel or alternative welfare systems outside of the state.

In terms of political interventions, VA's Cameroon programme works with an organisation which represents the Mbororo Fulani in North West Province. The political situation is complex where the government are attempting to suppress ethnically-based regional movements and local commercial interests are further marginalising these people. In such a situation it is impossible not to deal with political conflict. The local organisation, MBOSCUDA, is an NGO but is heavily involved in the anti-government and pro-democracy movements so that it receives sustained attack by the state. VA recognised that 'the deeper issues of marginalisation were central themes to address - not simply manifest "problems" of specific material needs' (Village AiD, 1997: 3). In response their programme aims to link together various NGOs through

traditional fora which aim to engender 'institutions of self-representation and advocacy' based upon complex psychological, emotional and cultural issues. Although in its early stages (14 months), the programme is largely about political empowerment within the state structures so that participation involves democracy and human rights rather than technical issues of material security. There is also a longer-term aim of linking communities together so that more concerted pressure can be placed upon the state, other powerful institutions of development and traditional social structures.

This leads us into the question of commitment. Although the 'rapid' in RRA has been replaced by 'participation', there remains an emphasis on short-term involvement. VA are dealing with this by moving, as they say, 'beyond participation' through a programme which seeks to end the 'supplicant' relationship between the NGO and villagers. They seek to develop a situation where 'village communities set the agenda and outside agencies become responsive' (1996: 8). For VA participation is much more than confirming some pre-given agenda or increasing the efficiency of institutional policy-makers. They start from the recognition that their role is not to impose external criteria for development intervention but to work with existing social realities. The process is long term and involves 'a willingness to work with a community over many years' (1996: 10).

Much of this involves the notion of 'capacity-building' so that communities are able to demand action from the Northern development agency whose role is responsiveness. The aim of VA is to move beyond traditional 'capacity building' which strengthens the areas which ensure the success of pre-determined interventions set by the development agency. Hence, more general capacity issues are being addressed where the outcomes are less circumscribed by a rigid project

framework. This need has been identified by local communities who 'complained that a particular project undertaken in the past had not been a high priority for the village, but was undertaken at the suggestion of an NGO' (Village Aid, 1996: 7). The reversal of this begins by building upon what exists in the community which involves acknowledging and working with traditional facilitators rather than using a rigid PRA framework for appraisal and monitoring. In the longer term it is hoped that 'this whole capacity building process is about confidence in the village in order to say "No" to organisations that do not meet the village's requirements' (Village Aid, 1996: 14).

This still leaves the problem that any intervention, even one which seeks to over-turn existing decision-making structures, can be criticised for 'originating' the process and thereby 'colonising' social change. While clearly a potential hazard, the themes outlined in this chapter - our common subjugation to increasingly global material forces and the possibility of transformative dialogues - makes the need and likelihood of collaborative alternatives more urgent and pressing.

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