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SOCIAL FORUM

Participation, development and human rights

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* The document was submitted late because of the consultation and coordination needs of the author.

Introduction

1. In Pune, a city in India, a non-governmental organization (NGO) of women architects is conducting a housing project with the active participation of the inhabitants, particularly women, under a government programme that grants families without resources a subsidy to build their own homes. The living space subsidized by the State is small, and the dwellings turned over to the beneficiaries are constructed by private firms. In this project, the architect's NGO brings people together and discusses with them the location, design and construction of the new dwellings. Thanks to the involvement of the beneficiaries at the planning stage, many ideas were put forward to improve the small dwellings, such as by introducing split levels to give more living space and improving access and communal areas. Each family knows in advance which flat it will occupy, makes sure that the work is done properly and that the surface area is as promised, and closely monitors the building process. Many of them also help with the construction work, thereby lowering costs. The result is there for all to see: families, and women in particular, not only take care of their flats, but take pride in what they have built (see document E/CN.4/Sub.2/2004/25).

2. As is well known, in many parts of the world social housing is not conducive to sociability, and often, despite good intentions, does not alleviate the problems associated with poverty and sometimes even aggravates them. In more than one case the State has had to demolish social housing units because they were sub-standard and, above all, because they did not make for a sociable living environment. In such cases, the lack of participation is the main reason for the failure of poverty alleviation policies.

3. In the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, we learned about a "participatory budget" programme. The city authorities had given the population and its organizations figures on the resources available, drawing attention to the priorities and the various alternatives. These often complex figures were posted on the Internet to make them available to everyone in a democratic manner. Following long meetings and discussions, the city's budget and the work to be undertaken were agreed upon. The budget approved in this participatory manner was presented to the public, which could then follow its implementation step by step and track the costs incurred, prices paid for materials, salaries and fees: in short, there was maximum transparency.

4. In Santa Rosa de Copán, Honduras, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is conducting a very interesting experiment in participation.

"To draw up the Santa Rosa de Copán strategic development plan, 13 citizens' committees made up of 148 organizations and institutions were organized, as part of the participation strategy promoted since mid-1998. Each committee was entrusted with the preparation of strategic sectoral plans.

A total of 96 workshops and meetings were held to draw up and coordinate the plans. The Santa Rosa process lasted about 10 months and directly involved more than 200 leaders. Technical and financial assistance under the decentralization and municipal development project was a major source of support in the process."¹

5. The mobilization of indigenous people in Latin America is perhaps one of the most important phenomena of recent decades. In many countries, this process has brought indigenous persons to power in municipalities where they are in the majority. In Ecuador, a programme of assistance to indigenous municipalities has been producing interesting results and is being closely watched by many observers.

“The aim of the project is to help strengthen Ecuador’s alternative indigenous municipalities, which, since the 2000 general elections, have either an indigenous mayor, one who is not indigenous but is backed by some indigenous political movement or one who, whether indigenous or not, adheres to the principles and vision of local and national development which indigenous municipalities advocate and seek to put into practice.

The project has three components: (1) the administration of municipal development policies and strategies at the local, regional and national levels; (2) the development of planning and management tools for the various levels; and (3) training and exchange of experience.”²

6. Many other examples could be cited. Today, those who work in the area of local development, on economic development projects or on programmes to improve the quality of life of the poor regard participation in the programmes as crucial. It could be said that there is a consensus that, without the participation of the population, development programmes have no chance of success. Participation is the key to development.

7. It is vital that the 2005 Social Forum, which is dedicated to “social accountability” as a strategic element of social development, should stress the importance of participation in development and economic growth. Without high levels of participation by the people, economic growth is usually selective and segmented. There are many recent examples of countries in which good macroeconomic figures for economic growth have not led to a decline in poverty and extreme poverty; on the contrary, growth has been accompanied by the pronounced marginalization of large segments of the population.

8. The Millennium Development Goals to which States have committed themselves should take this key point into account. The Social Forum itself reflects an explicit desire to participate in the highest levels of the debate within the United Nations on economic, social and cultural development.

I. THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION

9. Participation is a right set out in article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association”. Clearly, the participation of persons in public affairs is a hallowed principle and is the basis of democracy. Equally clearly, the sense of the Declaration is to prevent the authorities from restricting freedom of association, but it is also debatable whether a freely elected government can be required to establish and consult participatory mechanisms for each and every one of its decisions, or even some of them.

10. There have been many initiatives to extend the concept of the right to participation so that it is not merely negative - in the sense that the authorities cannot prevent the free association of citizens - but also positive or proactive, whereby the authorities, in addition to being democratically elected, would be required to listen regularly to citizens' groups and consult them on important decisions.

11. According to the Irish philosopher Philip Pettit, under the new concept of democracy that is emerging in the world today, the State must continuously explain its decisions to the public in order to establish a relationship of mutual confidence with civil society. The concept of "republicanism" which Pettit develops stresses that a leader not only needs to be formally elected by citizens, but should also be acting at all times as though he or she were running for office, so that there is a constant interchange between the electors and their elected representatives. Pettit even says that elected leaders should encourage criticism and that in many cases the State should provide financial support to critics so as to ensure transparency and accountability.³

12. These ideas, in which there is a growing interest, show the importance of citizens' participation at all levels of public activity. One minimum requirement of a modern democracy - though insufficient on its own - is the free election of the government and the prohibition on its interfering with freedom of association and opinion. A further requirement, and one dictated by "good governance", is that the government should consult with, promote the participation of, accept criticism from and establish an ongoing relationship with civil society groups. It is in this sense that the expression "right to participation" is used today.

13. In various Sub-Commission documents we have spoken of "low-intensity democracy" to designate those political systems which, although created democratically, are not necessarily democratic in their daily workings. Decisions are taken by an elite that controls the levers of power and uses them for its own benefit to ensure that it is continually re-elected. The right to participation imposes an obligation on States on the basis of the imperative of good governance, at the heart of which lies the need to ensure that all citizens enjoy the benefits of economic growth. The participation of civil society is what mainly distinguishes low-intensity democracies from the "substantive democracies", that guarantee stability and peace.

14. In areas related to development, this right is now a must. Freely elected governments do not have the means to establish the mechanisms needed to ensure that their economic measures, such as those aimed at overcoming poverty, are properly carried out without the active participation of civil society organizations. In such cases, active participation is a precondition for the success of the programme and thus for compliance with the principle of good governance.

15. At the most recent session of the Working Group on Minorities, various programmes were analysed for overcoming poverty in the context of the Millennium Development Goals as they relate to minority groups. It was seen that in many cases the need to obtain positive results leads States to focus policies on the sectors that are easiest to deal with, leaving the sectors that have more complex problems increasingly marginalized and excluded (see document E/CN.4/Sub.2/2005/27).

16. In many parts of the world, the lack of effective participatory mechanisms could lead to new divisions, with one sector taking part in globalized economic growth, and another excluded from it.

II. PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

17. Technological change always has consequences for forms of social organization. The structure of modern enterprises, advanced technology and, ultimately, the technical processes which stem from the modern information and digital revolution have triggered structural changes in the organization and exercise of power.

18. Pyramidal and vertical organizational structures are associated with working practices developed during the first industrial revolution. Factories and armies were organized on this basis. For centuries, manufacturing and military organizations were characterized by a strict separation between those with technical know-how and those who had to perform discrete, limited manual operations. Today, all studies and trends point to a radical change in this area. The absence of communication between management and workers is in general not only a source of conflict but also leads to a weakening of innovation and creativity and, ultimately, of the production process. A bad organization is one in which there is no participation.

19. It is for this reason that for some years now it has been customary in the business world to speak of the need to devolve more decision-making power to all the various levels. This process is known as “empowerment”.

“Empowerment is when the optimum benefits of information technology are attained. Individuals, teams and the organization have full access to and use of critical information, and will have the technology, skills, responsibility and authority to utilize that information and conduct the organization’s business.

This tool replaces the old hierarchy with self-directed teams, where information is shared by all. Employees have the opportunity and the responsibility to do their best. Any person from outside a company can easily see where it is inefficient. The problem is that the people who work for it do not even notice things that are going badly, or if they do, they act as if nothing is wrong.”⁴

20. Today these definitions, which are fully applicable to production processes, are increasingly being applied to social processes, in particular those related to development.

21. Without a transfer of power, self-directed teams and access to critical information (i.e. oversight), a given programme will neither be possible nor appropriate. Empowerment thus becomes a precondition for development.

22. The Company manual refers to three elements that are vital to empowerment.⁵

“The first element has to do with relationships. The relationships you have with your people must have two fundamental attributes: they must be effective for the purpose of achieving the proposed work objectives; and they must be sound, that is, they must be durable and not dependent on a whim.

The second element stresses discipline. Empowerment does not mean relaxing discipline or allowing paternalism to pervade the firm. It is therefore important to promote: (1) order, so that people can work in a structured and organized system,

thereby enabling them to do their job properly; (2) the definition of roles, setting out precisely the scope of people's duties and responsibilities. In this way, staff always know where they stand.

The third element is commitment, which must be consistent and wholehearted at all levels and promoted by management and agents of change. It includes: (1) loyalty, that is, being loyal to your own people so that they will be loyal to you; (2) persistence in pursuit of objectives and in relations at work, so that your people follow suit; and finally (3) energy in action, which encourages and enthuses people and produces dynamic leaders.”

23. Jayne Leone, an American disability advocate, makes the following point: “Power can be positive, or it can be negative. Power that is used to overwhelm, to subjugate, or to compel conformity is negative. Power that is used to enhance or enrich is positive. Empowerment is positive. Empowerment may be enabled, but in order to be real, it must come from self; that is, it is self-motivated - and self-motivating. Associated with empowerment are concepts such as vigilance, persistence, persuasion.”⁶

24. The concept of “cultural control” developed by the Mexican anthropologist Bonfill Batalla is directly related to the concepts of vigilance, persistence and persuasion, which, although they stem from the latest management and organizational practices, are also vital for understanding political, social and development processes. “Cultural control” is the ability of a community to take its development into its own hands. This means that the community establishes the pace of development, decides on how to modernize, sets the pace of technological change and, in particular, has a say in decision-making and in which measures are taken and which not. Ultimately, cultural control means that the community is not split up, uprooted, or swamped by outsiders and can control its own development, not through opposition but through active involvement.

25. Empowerment is a precondition for participation in general, but particularly with regard to development, economic growth and the changes resulting from globalization.

III. PASSIVE AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

26. In development programmes, participation is usually understood as nothing more than “consultation”. This is called “passive participation”. People are consulted on decisions taken earlier by the authorities.

27. “Active participation”, as seen in the examples at the beginning of this paper, refers to the entire decision-making process, from project design to implementation, follow-up, oversight and evaluation.

28. The following points can be made about active participation: first, it is a long-term and thus slow process. It takes a long time to prepare the groups targeted for development and to find the best way to organize them into autonomous groups that are not dependent on the planned programme. It requires stronger civil society organizations and States must take their experiences and views into consideration.

29. Second, active participation is expensive. This is perhaps the main argument used against it. An investment in the organization of meetings, oversight and training is a prerequisite for any development programme, but often does not fit in with the agendas of the implementing organizations and governments or the pressures of development work. Complying with bureaucratically established and quantifiable goals has in most cases led to a shift from active participation to participation of a passive or merely consultative nature.

30. Third, active participation is conflictual. When a group targeted for development is empowered, it tends to have its own views and takes decisions that are not always to the liking of those in positions of authority or with responsibility for the development process. In this situation, it is important to be aware that knowledge and solutions can come from sectors outside the ruling classes - sectors that are usually regarded as ignorant or lacking in technical know-how. But when people are involved in their own development, they tend to find solutions that are appropriate to their specific circumstances.

31. Fourth, active participation limits the independence of sectors with power and decision-making authority. These should be consulted on every aspect and at every stage of the project.

32. Fifth, active participation means external monitoring and thus holds the authorities accountable for the results of each of the processes involved. Active participation is a permanent monitoring process.

33. Sixth, active participation is the only way to limit the dangerous phenomenon of corruption, which greatly undermines development programmes. Studies on poverty show that corruption is one of the biggest threats to the eradication of poverty. Active participation ensures the transparency needed for the proper implementation of programmes.

IV. PARTICIPATION, THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND COMBATING EXTREME POVERTY

34. The Millennium Development Goals, which have been solemnly adopted by most of the world's countries, set ambitious targets for overcoming poverty. The goal of cutting poverty is at the core of the international community's objective of building a more humane global society.

35. It does not seem possible to devise a programme for realizing the Millennium Development Goals without significantly boosting the participation of organized civil society, particularly poor people, poor countries and NGOs working with the poor.

36. The growing tendency to consider the fight against extreme poverty as being a question of charity, humanitarian aid and emergency planning often results in a split between the beneficiaries and the relief agencies. This tendency can be seen on many continents and in many regions, and it often only complicates matters further, increases dependency and makes poverty even more difficult to uproot.

37. The international community should make the “right to participation” a sine qua non of programmes aiming to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. In this way, development assistance and humanitarian aid will have to be adapted to the characteristics of each impoverished group, enabling people to be proactive in shaping their own destiny.

38. At another level, and perhaps most importantly, the lack of participation in development is an outrage to human dignity, particularly the dignity of individuals wishing to take charge of their own lives. It also perpetuates poverty, dependency and lack of choice.

39. The aim of the Social Forum of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights is to promote a dialogue at the international level between organizations representing the poor, NGOs working with the poor, international agencies and governments, and to pave the way for citizens’ participation in the area of economic, social and cultural rights - hence the importance of the Social Forum as an expression of the desire for active participation and a new departure in the field of economic, social and cultural development.

Notes

¹ www.santarosacopan.org/participacion.

² www.aeciecuador.org/aeci/web/pro1.php?id=5.

³ Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, Clarendon Press, 1997.

⁴ Banners Interchange Program, 2004.

⁵ Empowerment means delegating power and authority to subordinates and giving them the feeling that they have ownership of their own work. Empowerment is a total quality management tool which, in the context of continuous improvement and restructuring, as well as in big firms, contributes to enhancing the processes that enable enterprises to grow. Empowerment is becoming a strategic tool which strengthens leadership, gives meaning to teamwork and does away with the notion of total quality as a motivational philosophy seen in purely human terms and changes it into an extremely functional system. Banners Interchange Program.

⁶ Jayne Leone, “Power, control, confidence, and courage”, Independent Living Institute, www.independentliving.org/docs5/Leone97.html.
