

VIEWPOINT:

Now you see it, now you don't

By David Drucker

Community participation is like a chameleon. Now you see it, now you don't. It came to prominence in the newly independent countries in the heady post-war years under the name of community development. Its democratic and now let's-do-it-all-together colours attracted much attention. Community development ministries, departments and institutions proliferated. Undoubtedly much was achieved in improving people's lives, but somehow by the mid-60s the land reform, rural co-operatives, agricultural projects, and training institutes had been largely forsaken.

Although community participation was not exactly in danger of becoming extinct, it was nevertheless in decline, espoused less and less - and then mainly by determined voluntary agencies.

Curiously enough, a 1968 conference of 89 ministers responsible for social welfare acknowledged the inadequacy of the largely Western concepts of welfare and development for conditions prevailing in the Third World. Such concepts allotted them simply the role of stretcher bearers. Their task was to assist unfortunates and the deserving poor who fell off the bandwagon of industrialization and the push to 'inevitable' economic growth.

The ministers' conclusions spoke of "ensuring social justice", "participation by the people", "institution building" and the need for "social policies and planning in development".

According to these goals, social planning apparently should become a full partner, if not actually determine economic planning, (at that time in its unchallenged ascendancy). In addition, the

improvement of the conditions of the people, especially the poorest, should become an objective of national policy, and participation a major method for change, in the nation-building endeavours.

Stirring words, but they seemed on their way to becoming an epitaph rather than a rallying cry, when, in the mid-70s, the World Health Organization turned attention away from curative medicine provided in urban 'disease palaces', and launched primary health care. Under this initiative, joined by UNICEF, and helped along not a little by accounts of the 'barefoot doctors' of the People's Republic of China, the chameleon of community participation began a come-back. It figured prominently in the declarations on primary health care at Alma Ata: "The people have a right and duty to participate individually and collectively in the planning and implementation of their health care." Health itself was now envisioned as a part of an integrated overall development process with the people.

In a climate of global economic euphoria that gripped the more affluent and revived the 'trickle-down' theory of development, community participation again was to inspire many good people to perform good things for improvement in their living conditions. There was a resurgence of sightings not only in exotic-sounding places but even in our cities near at hand. And yet ... and yet ...

At the other end of events, away from international declarations, among community participation enthusiasts at the field level there is also a situation of - now you see it, now you don't.

All the way in our jeep the programme officer elaborated clearly and convincingly that "the project must belong to the community, it must be their project, not the agencies' project, not the government's project, but the community's own project". He, I, and the lurah (the Indonesian village head man) stood inspecting the water hand-pump and its apron. We faced each other in a close knot while children, women, and a few men assembled and stood respectfully some way off looking at our backs. Three or four little girls were hunched down under the mouth of the pump, washing clothes by pounding them with sticks. Anyone coming for water would have to push them aside (as did one woman who placed her baby's soiled bottom under the spout).

I asked our community-oriented officer whether it would be good practice to separate the laundry and ablutions from under the pump which had been installed primarily to supply clean drinking water. "Yes of course." How would one design a place for doing the washing in this village? Would the villagers prefer to squat, stand, sit at a central trough and talk to each other...? He replied "I don't really know, I'll ask the lurah". I suggested instead we ask the large audience of ladies who were standing and staring at we orang tinggi (high persons). When the programme officer humoured me and put the question to them, they all began to laugh. "They are laughing" he said, "because they think it very strange - no one has ever asked them such things before!" So it seems no one had ever asked them how their project ought to be. How then could it really be their project?

Between the general theory of participation (or at least the rhetoric) and what actually happens in practice, a gap yawns. One knows and talks about participation but how does one feel it so that it permeates our attitudes and actions?

The above example is at the face-to-face level of the community where participation has to be manifest or nothing else counts. But in the middle - at the organizational and planning level, too - community participation has a way of vanishing - now you see it, now you don't.

An 80-country review of project documentation by an aid agency with a strong philosophical and policy mandate to community participation revealed that under the heading Community Participation, 45 of the 80 provided no information on such matters at all. Twenty-four indicated that free labour or a financial donation was the community's contribution. If planning was interpreted very generously (e.g. consultation regarding water distribution points) only 11 of the 80 indicated that the community played a part. Only one community was reported to have a role in evaluation of its project.

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) has a special programme focused on participation and has an on-going "dialogue" with about 700 interested persons around the world.

Reviewing the existing research they found that:

"large emphasis was given to the history, success and failure of particular 'participation projects' without however placing them in the wider social, economic, political, and cultural context ... technical and management issues were often given priority which ignored the social and political nature of such issues."

The research:

"showed convincingly that the central issue of people's participation has to do with power exercised by some people over other people... and implies an attempted redistribution of control over resources and of power in favour of those hitherto excluded."

UNRISD has concentrated on looking at the "generally hostile environment of anti-participatory forces" which "lies at the heart of the politics of development and social change but which receives scant attention or appreciation". The practice of participation seems, they say, to have borne little relationship to the bold declarations.

Projects examined in this context, it is argued, have only made marginal and limited gains. At best perhaps, they have provided basic learning experiences which take the local participants only to the starting point of envisaging, of asking more about and of seeking solutions to their local concerns - concerns which in fact reflect the fundamental development questions of our time.

Perhaps a case of a chameleon switch - then we didn't see it - now we do! Participation in this sense is not about bits and pieces but about systems, about change, about how and where to begin, about intermediate and long term goals, about organization and continuing open-ended processes, and, as the most current jargon has it, "empowering the people".

In a climate of economic decline and crippling Third World debt there is no surplus with which to fund community based programmes. It remains to be seen whether there will be a significant reallocation of resources away from our more familiar activities to tip the balance towards more radical, equitable and participatory change.

UNICEF is currently committed to a concerted effort to drastically reduce infant and young-child death and disease. The emphasis on child survival and development could certainly be effective as a determined first step towards a social revolution in which each child will have the opportunity to reach his full potential and truly participate in bringing about a world in which it is worth surviving.

Community participation... Now we see it... yes... yes... we still do! Can we rely on it?