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## The Participatory Empowerment Approach to Gender and Development in Africa: Panacea or Illusion?

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by

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Approaches to women, gender and development have shifted over time and continue to be a matter of considerable debate. The initial focus on women in development (WID) in the 1970s gradually shifted to a greater concern with gender relations and socio-economic inequality. This gender and development (GAD) approach reflected a growing concern with the limitations of a women-centered approach and called for consideration of the way cultural assumptions and practices affect social, economic and political opportunities for women (and men). Of late, however, some scholars and activists have questioned the continuing top-down, Western-focus of most development practice, and called for a more participatory approach that incorporates the poor into analysis, project design and implementation. This critique has spawned a literature on participatory empowerment approaches to development that has gradually gained acceptance in the development community, including those concerned with women and gender.

While initially largely supported by alternative development institutions, a growing disenchantment with established development policies has led to increasing acceptance among mainstream institutions of both participation and empowerment. Expectations for participation vary. Mainstream agencies see participation as a means for increasing efficiency and productivity within established structures, while alternative institutions are more apt to emphasize social transformation. But participation and empowerment have become a watchword in such development institutions as disparate as the World Bank, government development agencies, Oxfam, and many small Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). Moreover, all of these institutions find the methodologies and techniques of Robert Chamber's Participatory Rural Appraisal (RPA) appropriate and useful. This is especially true of gender and development projects and policies.

This chapter will explore the apparent contradiction of such widespread popularity for PRA and participatory empowerment approaches, particularly in Africa. It will investigate both the strengths and weaknesses of the approach from the vantage point of women -- one of the groups most often acknowledged to be left out of development decisions and activities and thus a group most in need of participation and empowerment. The chapter thus examines participatory empowerment through the lens of PRA. It also considers the possibility that the "practical," experiential focus of this perspective could benefit from a more explicit theoretical analysis, particularly the conceptual tools provided by political economy, with its focus on material structures, and current debates about the discursive, relational and fluid nature of power and subjectivities.

## **THE TWISTS AND TURNS OF DEVELOPMENT DEBATES**

The development enterprise was initially introduced in the 1940s as a very top-down affair. The less developed regions of the world were regarded as underdeveloped because they lacked modern, Western knowledge and technology. Development was defined for the most part as a technical problem, which could be "solved" by Northern experts with the necessary skills and information. The success of these interventions depended upon cooperation with, but rarely the knowledge or leadership of colonial subjects and later postcolonial states (Crush 1995). While development discourse has not been entirely hegemonic -- it has provided ammunition for colonial and postcolonial

struggles over power (Cooper and Packard 1997) -- the rhetoric of development has more often been appropriated by colonial and postcolonial politicians and bureaucrats to legitimate the extension of state, and personal, power. Thus, development in practice has often (sometimes inadvertently) reinforced state authority and autocracy in the South in the name of "helping the poor." This has been particularly true for Africa (Ferguson 1991).

The failure of development institutions to alleviate poverty, much less eradicate it, has inspired various critiques of the development enterprise. Alternative approaches to development began to emerge in the 1970s. Dependency analysts blamed Third World underdevelopment on Northern expertise and capital, castigating their Southern allies as sell-outs (compradors) who cared nothing about the poor or the well-being of their societies (Amin 1974; Schuurman 1993). More recent critiques have retained this critical stance towards the development enterprise. The focus, however, has shifted to the way development discourse/language has defined development "problems" and "solutions" in ways that fit Northern agendas, and silenced the voices and knowledge of indigenous peoples, which might provide insights into alternative approaches and practices (Crush 1995; Escobar 1995). These critics call for a new approach to development, one that advocates collaboration and partnership as well as attention to local knowledge and accumulated wisdom (Friedman 1992).

Interestingly, while mainstream development agencies resisted many of these arguments, the failure of many state-led development projects began to undermine the easy belief that Third World governments were "natural" allies in the development process. The dramatic decline of most Southern economies cast doubt on earlier state-led development strategies, and provided ammunition for an increasing focus on the invisible hand of the market. Neo-classical economists argued that states should be reduced both in size and function; development should be left to the wisdom of market forces. This has been argued with increasing force as the globalization of world markets reduces the relevance of states around the world (Hoogvelt 1997). Collaboration with states has become hedged round with demands for good governance, democracy and economic liberalization. While economic development remains the goal, its achievement is increasingly seen as something requiring alliances with "good" states, civil society and the market. This assumes good policies and sensitive experts, but also "listening to and learning from the poor" (World Bank 1999: 153). While the growing concern with knowledge based economies has reinforced the superiority of Northern expertise, transmitting this knowledge is often cast in terms of participation, partnership and empowerment (Freedman 1997; Rugh and Bossert 1998; World Bank 1998).

Scholars and activists concerned with women, gender and development have both contributed to and been influenced by these debates. Women rarely surfaced as on the development agenda until the 1970s, and then only reluctantly. By the 1980s, WID had established a foothold in development policy and practice, but for the most part, it concentrated on improving women's options and opportunities within the status quo. The failure of this approach to fundamentally improve women's position in the South (and North) inspired new thinking, especially in the South. The GAD approach evolved from these debates, arguing that cultural assumptions and practices defining gender roles often impeded women's development. It called for more attention to the voices and experiences of poor women, particularly their collective action, and for a focus on gender roles and relations, culture and socio-economic inequalities (Parpart et al 2000; Sen and Grown 1987; Young 1993). While these remain crucial issues, this approach

has been hampered by its modernist roots and Western-centered notion of development (Hirshman 1995).

The search for a more culturally responsive, grassroots approach continued. Inspired by Third World feminist scholars and activists, an empowerment approach to women's development began to emerge. Articulated by Caroline Moser and others in the late 1980s, this approach emphasizes the need to empower grassroots women through participatory policies and projects. Moser does not explicitly situate this approach in ongoing debates about gender and development, nor does she theorize about power. She does link empowerment to increased self-reliance and internal strength, defining it as "the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources" (1993: 74-75). Thus, while acknowledging the importance of Third World conditions, scholarship and activism, Moser comes up with a rather individualized, Western-centric approach to empowerment (1993:56-57).

Naila Kabeer (1994) places her analysis of empowerment more specifically within gender analysis, asserting its central place in any efforts to achieve gender equality. She also takes a more explicit approach to power. Drawing on the work of Lukes (1974), she criticizes the liberal emphasis on the *power to* make individual decisions. Adding Lukes' focus on institutional *power over* agendas and discussions, she also highlights feminist concerns with *power within*, which emphasizes conscientizing women so they can both understand and challenge gender inequality in the home and the community (1994: 224-229). Above all, Kabeer sees collective, grassroots participatory action -- the *power to work with* others -- as the key to women's empowerment. More concerned with action than theory, she continues to explore practical, measureable ways to empower women (1999).

Jo Rowlands (1997) brings a broader analytical perspective to the discussion of participation, power and empowerment. She draws on Foucault's notion of power as both relational and permeating all of life, but adds a feminist concern with internalized oppressions and their impact role in maintaining gender inequality. She argues for an understanding of power in its multiple guises, including *power over*, *power to*, *power with* and *power from within*. She argues that "empowerment is more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions" (1997: 14). It is personal, relational and collective. She recognizes that empowerment is not just a gender issue, but a development issue affecting women and men. While acknowledging the complexity and difficulties of empowerment as a concept and a practice, she remains convinced that the key to empowerment lies in mobilizing the participation and knowledge of marginalized people, especially women

In recent years, even mainstream development practitioners concerned with women's development have become increasingly skeptical of purely top-down development practices and close alliances with Third World states. Poverty alleviation has become a central concern, and it is seen as requiring a variety of interventions and alliances, most notably the participation of the poor and marginalized in the development process. Development practitioners, scholars and activists are increasingly persuaded that empowerment of the poor and women can only come "through shared knowledge and the experience of action" (Thomas-Slayter et al 1995: 9). The goals may differ – mainstream development agencies see participation and empowerment as a way to improve the efficiency and productivity of the poor without challenging the status quo (World Bank, 1995), while alternative development practitioners more often seek

societal transformation (Friedmann 1992; Craig and Mayo 1995; Mayoux 1995). Remarkably, both agree that participation and empowerment are keys to success.

Participatory empowerment approaches to development have become the new mantra, the solution to past development failures and the keys to a more equitable future. The participatory methodologies of Robert Chambers have found a particular niche in this consensus. His participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methodology has caught on and is currently the method of choice among a large number of development practitioners of various persuasions. Chambers' methodology thus provides a lens into the world of participatory empowerment approaches used by both mainstream and alternative development practitioners, and an entry point for critically assessing this approach from a gender perspective (Guijt and Shah 1998; Mayoux 1995; White 1996).

## **PARTICIPATORY RURAL APPRAISAL: THE NEW METHODOLOGY**

Chambers has been developing his ideas and methodologies for the last fifteen years, and has had an enormous impact on the field of participatory development. His approach builds on the work of rural development specialists and the evolution of rapid rural appraisal (RRA), which emerged in the late 1970s. RRA called for greater attention to local people's knowledge, but still relied on the expert to obtain and organize this knowledge. PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal), which emerged in the late 1980s, and is still evolving, shifted the focus from gathering indigenous people's knowledge to encouraging their analytical skills. Western development experts are no longer in charge, rather they aim to empower local peoples so they can analyze and solve problems in ways that lead to sustainable development practices. This approach is highly critical of Western experts, criticizes top-down approaches to development, and assumes the knowledge and analytical skills of the poor, no matter their education, can be brought to light and strengthened through participatory methods which will lead to true empowerment and development (Chambers 1994b: 1254; 1997).

PRA is above all a methodology, emphasizing experiential innovation rather than theories and abstractions (Chambers 1994a: 1263). It has developed a cluster of very assessable easily understood techniques, usually with groups rather than individuals. For example, one group activity is called "do it yourself," where the PRA team learns a local skill and then participates in the activity; "they do it" has villagers interviewing, collecting and analyzing data. Participatory "analysis of secondary sources" has groups evaluate information such as aerial photographs, maps of resource types, and other documents. Participatory "mapping and modeling" has local people draw maps and create models of social, demographic, health patterns and natural resources. "Transect walks" require local people to walk with the PRA facilitators around an area identifying local resources. "Time lines, trends and change analysis" engage local folk in making chronological lists of events in their history, especially on subjects normally left out of historical discussions, such as ecology, education and women/girls. "Well-being and wealth groups and rankings," asks groups to identify wealth rankings of groups or households, and to point to key indicators of well-being; the "analysis of difference," explores contrasts, problems and preferences by gender, age, social group, wealth. "Story telling" and "presentations" of findings are also important. This cluster of methodologies (and others) are often used in particular sequences in order to maximize knowledge production and inclusiveness, especially among the most marginalized. Triangulation also encourages feedback by cross-checking sources of information at regular intervals. These methodologies are designed to facilitate

participatory data collection, analysis, planning, implementation, report writing and monitoring in order to empower broad-based participation in development (Chambers 1994; 1994a; 1997).

Above all, PRA is designed to bring the least privileged members of society into the development process. Inclusiveness is thus a central pillar of this approach. In order to include those with poor verbal skills, many techniques emphasize visual as well as verbal participation. While the problematic potential of local power structures are recognized, Chambers believes inclusiveness will solve any problems -- that giving voice, whether verbal or through visual inputs, and bringing the poor and better off together to discuss differences and identify problems will empower the disadvantaged and resolve conflicts. While acknowledging the possibility that local knowledge could be used in unsavory ways, Chambers argues that highly trained PRA experts can stop potential abuses if they take the time and care "to find the poorest, to learn from them, and to empower them" (Chambers 1994b: 1441, 1445).

While Chambers openly worries about the current popularity of PRA, warning that formalism and practitioners with little understanding of PRA could make a mockery of this approach, he places considerable faith in PRA techniques for overcoming this problem. He outlines various methods for neutralizing development practitioners' preference for top-down development and for maintaining awareness and sensitivity to power imbalances between development experts and the people (Chambers 1994a: 1256-57). While calling for more research on the "shortcomings and strengths" of PRA, most reports of PRA, according to Chambers, have been positive (Chambers 1994: 963).

## **PARTICIPATION, EMPOWERMENT AND PRA: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE**

Research on PRA has grown considerably since 1994, and we now have a better idea of both the successes and pitfalls of this methodology and approach, in Africa and elsewhere. The World Bank has formalized its interest in participatory approaches, and established a working group on the subject, although this is still hardly mainstream Bank policy (World Bank 1995). A 1990 study of 52 USAID projects discovered a clear correlation between participation and success (Weekes-Vagliani 1994: 31-32). More recent studies record numerous "success" stories (Krishna, Uphoff and Esman 1997; Uphoff 1998). A number of scholars have reported considerable enthusiasm for participatory techniques in villages, especially mapping and transect walks (Kelly and Armstrong 1996; Tiessen 1997). Visual mapping techniques are particularly popular as they enable participation by illiterate people, who are frequently women. The mapping can reveal the gendered character of daily life. In a Zimbabwean resettlement area,<sup>1</sup> for example, maps illustrated women's focus on the home locale while men paid more attention to roads, fields and pastures. The maps then provided a talking point for discussions of environmental use (Goebel 1998). Group activities are also quite popular, although attendance often drops over time, especially by women who have little free time (Mayoux 1995; Wieringa 1994). Participatory methods thus often

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<sup>1</sup> The resettlement scheme in Zimbabwe was designed to provide land for African peasants -- a key demand of the liberation war. After independence in 1980, the government set up resettlement schemes on unused or abandoned land. The program has been a key element in the government's rhetorical commitment to land redistribution although in practice the transfer of land to landless peasants has been depressingly slow.

improve information gathering at the community level, and reveal gender differences, if the facilitators are sufficiently attuned to gender concerns (Mosse 1994:498).

However, certain problems keep surfacing in reports from the field, and they raise some difficult questions about some of the methods and assumptions of this approach, particularly for women. The emphasis on the local has encouraged participatory facilitators to ignore the impact of national and global power structures, discourses and practices. Yet, most development projects have to deal with government structures and officials at one point or another and these dealings are often problematic. While there has been a move to bring participatory practices into government bureaucracies, most government officials have little understanding or empathy for PRA techniques, nor do they tend to believe the poor (especially women) should have a say in policy making or program development (Thompson 1995). This attitude is often reflected in laws. In Senegal, for example, Jesse Ribot discovered that the political administrative laws systematically disabled local representation, despite official "support" for a community forestry project (1999: 26). Moreover, even sympathetic bureaucrats are frequently constrained by political and economic factors, such as structural adjustment programs or male dominated political and economic structures.

The participatory "solution" -- more broad-based representation on government boards and committees -- has done little to challenge national and regional power structures. An Oxfam project in Burkina Faso, for example, placed members of peasant organizations on a government/NGO participatory planning board, but discovered this had no observable impact on the board's planning agendas (Ashby and Sperling 1995:757). Indeed, the poor are rarely able to challenge national elites, and often require intervention by outside "experts" who can insist on participatory methods and processes (interview, CIDA consultant, Masakar, Indonesia, 20 Sept 1997). This is particularly true when the representatives are women, as government officials often operate within a cultural context that undervalues women's opinions and contributions to public discussions (Mosse 1994: 498-99). Participation in bureaucratic structures by women, unless it addresses these rather intractable and often unrecognized assumptions, can do little to alter the gendered context in which participation occurs (Mayoux 1995).

Moreover, despite the increasing popularity of participatory approaches, development practitioners often have deeply held reservations about the knowledge and capacities of the poor, especially women. In Zambia, for example, despite strong commitment to participatory methods, the evaluation of an agricultural extension program revealed male-bias among the project leaders and difficulties dealing with gender issues (Frischmuth 1998). Goebel warned that many PRA "experts" used the language and some of the methods of PRA "without adequately acknowledging the complexity of social realities, or properly absorbing or practising the intended notions of 'participation'" (Goebel 1998: 279). Moreover, some development practitioners believe in participatory development methods, but find it difficult to give up their authority over the poor. They want to empower the poor, but on their terms. This heavy-handed approach is particularly apt to happen with women, as most development practitioners come from cultures where women's subordination, and need for direction, is taken for granted (Rahnema 1990: 206-7). As Heaven Crawley cautions, the language of empowerment and participation "creates an aura of moral superiority," which can protect practitioners of PRA from criticism and "critical self-reflection about the truth of their claims" (1998:25).



Power structures exist at the local level as well. Indeed, even the smallest village has its own power brokers. Chamber's belief that these inequities can be transcended through persuasion, discussion and inclusion is frequently contradicted by reports from the field. Jesse Ribot, for example, discovered that local elites involved in participatory forestry projects in French West Africa had neither support from villagers nor an interest in participatory practices (1996; 1996a). Local officials often reflect and support a gendered social context that dismisses women's contributions to public discussions. In such a context, simply placing women on project committees can do little to make them heard or to bring them into committee activities in a meaningful way (White 1996). Mayoux points out that "statistics on co-operative and peasant movements indicate a continuing marginalization of women in mixed-sex participatory organizations (1995:240). In Zimbabwean resettlement communities, for example, Goebel discovered that in general village meetings, "women constantly had to be invited and reinvited for their views, while men regained control each time a woman had spoken" (1998:284). Moreover, women committee members sometimes support the status quo because it legitimates their superior position vis-a-vis other women. A Zimbabwean participatory ecology project, operating through Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE program,<sup>2</sup> for example, was initially captured by the local elites, and the presence of women did nothing to challenge their control. When the team leader disbanded the committee and set up a more representational one, the project stalled for lack of support from the more powerful members of the community (Robinson 1996).

This example raises the issue of the relationship between the PRA team and the villages/region they are working in. Lack of familiarity with the community's power structure and cultural context may lead to problems such as those described above. The CAMPFIRE example above demonstrates the complexity of even the smallest communities, and the difficulties faced by the facilitators, particularly in the early stages of a project before community divisions are understood. But even when the fault lines in a community are discovered, they may be very difficult to deal with (Robinson 1996). The specific historical experiences of communities may influence relations as well. In India, David Mosse encountered deeply entrenched suspicion about the motives of development practitioners. To his consternation, participatory methods did little to allay them (1994: 505). The informal and public nature of PRA techniques can alienate people accustomed to more formal patterns of communication. Moreover, non-directive, consultative approaches can be misconstrued, as can mapping, transect walks, and wealth measurements when they suggest all too familiar interventions by government officials. These practices, when combined with ignorance of the local and national power structures, can undermine the potential for participatory work (Mosse 1994: 506-7).

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<sup>2</sup> The CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources) program in Zimbabwe focuses on communal management of resources. It focuses on conservation through community based resource management, decentralization, and institution building, with due attention to ethnicity and gender. Originally focused on wildlife, CAMPFIRE projects now involve forestry and mining resources as well. Robinson was involved in the Sunungukai Tourism Project, in Mashonaland Central, which was designed to enhance the community's ability to use its natural resources through tourism. The project used PRA methods. It was CAMPFIRE's first attempt to develop non-consumptive tourism, with cultural interaction as a central focus.

The collection of local knowledge and the fostering of local analytical and planning skills are a rather more complicated process than anticipated by PRA methodologies as well. Knowledge is not something that just exists out there, ready to be discovered and used. It is embedded in social contexts and attached to different power positions (Scoones and Thompson 1993: 2). Control over knowledge is often an essential element of local power structures. It reinforces local hierarchies, and is often highly gendered. Participatory methods, with their stress on inclusiveness and voice, threaten this hierarchy of control over knowledge. As we have seen, in the Zimbabwean resettlement areas, women's voices were repeatedly ignored or silenced. Ironically, giving voice does not always empower the poor. Control over knowledge, even through silence, can be an essential and empowering survival strategy for marginalized people (Mahoney 1996; Suski 1997). The power associated with membership in secret societies or control over gossip and information remind us of that (Gal 1991). Self-control and careful speech are seen as a sign of honor and power among the Bedouin (Abu-Lughod 1999: 90-93). In Java, women's ability to control their speech and public behavior is equated with empowerment (Brenner 1998). The public group discussions so central to PRA methods may thus be both disempowering and threatening for the more marginalized members of a community --often women. The collection of knowledge is thus not a purely technical business; it is deeply embedded in power structures and struggles. This is particularly true in regions where development activities are well established and community leaders have learned the importance of presenting foreigners (or government bureaucrats) with the "right" kind of information. The public nature of these transactions makes it all the more plausible that certain knowledges and groups will be silenced (or forced to speak), by those leaders most able to control community discourse. The groups most apt to be silenced, or pushed into public disclosures, are the poor and women (Mosse 1994: 508-9).

Moreover, PRA activities do not always fit women's schedules or agendas. Mosse discovered that projects in India often assumed women would be available at central locations (away from fields and home) for lengthy periods of time. These requirements conflicted with women's work structures and limited women's participation in project activities. Collective activities often took place in spaces that were forbidden to women. Yet, their lack participation was often explained as "natural" and so unremarkable. Indeed, at one project, women's presence at activities caused comments, but their absence went unremarked (1994: 512). Mapping and transect walks are often seen as men's work. The emphasis on spatial mapping in a Sierra Leone project, for example, did not fit women's concerns -- they argued that "the changes we need cannot be drawn." Gender issues such as relations between men and women, violence against women, were of no interest to men, and so did not get on the agenda (Welbourn 1996). Moreover, women do not all have the same interests. Social and economic hierarchies among women can undermine cooperation. Internalized notions of femininity and propriety may inhibit open discussions as well. Many women are reluctant to discuss sensitive issues like domestic violence varies in public fora. Indeed, consensus among women is highly problematic; many issues divide them (Mayoux 1995: 242-45). Sharing thoughts and dreams will not necessarily overcome these divisions, despite the best hopes of PRA supporters

The need for specific skills training is also rarely discussed in the PRA literature. Yet we know women, especially poor women, often need specific skills if they are going to challenge existing stereotypes about their inability to plan and monitor activities. While gender planning has become more accepted in the literature on development planning (Kabeer 1994; Moser 1993), this literature is generally aimed at Northern experts or

Southern experts trained in the North. Participatory approaches call for full participation in all phases of development projects, but they often underestimate the skills needed for such participation, especially report writing and evaluation -- skills which poor women rarely have. Participatory projects, like all development projects, must submit frequent reports and budgets. These requirements, daunting as they are for local people, have been made more difficult by the current emphasis on results based management (Wieringa 1994). This approach locks project managers into the need to obtain base line data and then to measure, frequently, the project's advance against these measurements. This process runs counter to more participatory development practices, as it requires highly skilled experts on indicators, the ability to handle figures and both numeracy and literacy. Thus, while the language of participation and empowerment spreads, some of the practices of development on the ground undermine the possibility for participatory empowerment. Poor people are left outside the discussions; measurement and evaluations are once again the purview of the development "expert" rather than local people, and women, with their lack of skills, are left outside the loop. As Redd Barna, an NGO devoted to the well-being of Ugandan children, discovered, successful interventions in participatory projects require skill building and locally designed methodologies, and the time, determination and knowledge to put them in place (Guijt, Kisadha and Mukasa 1998).

## **CONCLUSION**

This short overview of participatory empowerment approaches to development in Africa and elsewhere, especially the use of PRA, is not exhaustive. The successes of participatory empowerment approaches are undoubted, and they are important. However, the failures are also apparent and may go some way to explaining why these concepts and practices can be comfortably advocated by what appear to be conflicting perspectives on development. Mainstream development agencies have been committed to the market and reduction of the state, and any policies that shift state functions onto society without upsetting the status quo fit that mandate. Participatory empowerment approaches, with their emphasis on the local and their tendency to ignore larger political and economic structures, actually do little to challenge national power structures. Participation, as Rahnema (1990) points out, is no longer perceived as a threat.

This rather cynical assessment should not lead us to underestimate the very real importance of participatory empowerment approaches in Africa and elsewhere. Bringing the marginalized and the poor into discussions, encouraging and facilitating local knowledge and analytical skills is crucial to development both as an economic activity and as a personal and societal goal. However, the above research clearly warns that gender inequalities will not just disappear through giving voice to women or simply including them in development activities. Nor will many other inequalities. We need to think in new ways about participation and empowerment, particularly for women. This will require the use of theoretical tools, as well as field experience, to design more effective methods and techniques to enhance women's ability to fully participate in development and their capacity to transform (or at least challenge) cultural and material practices that reinforce gender inequalities.

This rather daunting task will require melding theory with praxis in ways that address fundamental impediments to participation and empowerment while maintaining the accessibility and practicality of PRA techniques and methodologies. The challenge, it

seems to me, is to develop a more nuanced and sophisticated analysis of power. This must incorporate an analysis of the way global and national power structures impact on the local, the character and resilience of local power structures, the link between knowledge/discourse and power; and the complex ways people seek to ensure their well-being in a changing world.

Participatory empowerment techniques will have to pay more attention to the way national and global power structures constrain and define the possibilities for change at the local level. Structural adjustment programs, for example, have often hampered local and national development efforts. The participatory approach needs to develop techniques for analyzing the way global and national political and economic structures and practices intersect with and affect local power structures. This will require more explicit methods for identifying these structures and their relationships with local communities. Interviews with key elites will be necessary, and these cannot always be fully participatory. However, the increasingly globalized world we live in leaves no doubt that these elements must be incorporated into our analysis (Hettne 1985; Mittelman 1997). Moreover, the gendered character of these political and economic structures requires specific attention in order to understand their differential impact on the sexes (Peterson and Runyan 1993; Staudt, 1990).

Local power structures require more explicit analysis as well. One of the strengths of the participatory empowerment approach to development has been its focus on the local and its belief that even the poorest communities can understand and solve their own developmental problems. This approach is based on the assumption that divisions in society can be overcome by full and frank discussion by all parties. This rather liberal belief in democratic processes underestimates the intractable nature of many local economic and political structures. Moreover, sensitivity to existing social arrangements has often led to the uncritical acceptance of traditional inequities, especially those based on gender, which is regarded as private, and thus outside the realm of economic development and challenges to the status quo (Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Guijt and Shah 1998). The wealth and status rankings, and the time line techniques of PRA reveal the differential access to power and resources of men and women, but they offer little explanation for how these differences come about. To understand the forces at play, we need a more detailed exploration of the relationship between gender and local political and economic structures. We need to know how women and men participate in these structures, whether some women are able to use them to their advantage, while others are silenced and marginalized. The conceptual tools of materialist feminists (Hennessy 1993) and gender and development scholars such as Kabeer (1994) and Moser (1993), offer some insights for this endeavor.

However, a focus on the material elements of power is not sufficient by itself. We need to understand the way belief systems and cultural practices legitimize and reinforce material structures. The link between language/ knowledge and power is increasingly recognized as a central factor in development activities, particularly the power of development practitioners to define developmental "problems" and "solutions" (Crush 1995; Escobar 1995; Marchand and Parpart 1995). PRA techniques pick up on this critique with their rejection of top-down development practices and their desire to bring the marginalized into development discussions and plans. This is an important first step, but it is based on the assumption that giving voice to the voiceless will solve power inequities. Yet we know that the marginalized, especially women, can speak but not be heard. Moreover, speaking is not always a source of power. Speaking can disempower if it removes the ability to control the dissemination of knowledge. To

address these issues, PRA techniques need a much more sophisticated analysis of voice, and of the link between language/knowledge and power (Mahoney 1996; Suski 1997). This is particularly true in matters of gender, which are deeply embedded in the unconscious, and often presented as natural, unchanging cultural practices and symbols.

Finally, the current interest in identity politics and shifting and multiple subjectivities offers some insights into the analysis of individual behavior, and thus to empowerment (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Sawicki 1996). PRA techniques are sensitive to the complexity of local conditions and the need to bring the marginalized into the center. But they fail to theorize the subject. Individuals are generally assumed to play a particular role in the community, when in fact, they may play several, sometimes conflicting roles. These conflicts can offer entry points for otherwise unexpected alliances. For example, women from the wealthier groups in a community may align more with their class than their sex, thus having little empathy for their poorer sisters. But some women from this class may resent their treatment as women and could thus conceivably align themselves with poor women over certain gender issues. PRA techniques, with their multiple data sets, have the potential to reveal such complexities, but to do so, they must move beyond description to analysis -- something that requires attention to theory as well as technique.

These rather preliminary ruminations on PRA and participatory empowerment approaches and methodologies, as they are used in Africa and other parts of the South, are of necessity more an opening salvo for future discussions than a set of prescriptions. However, I believe PRA techniques, particularly as outlined by Robert Chambers, and much of the writing on participatory empowerment, are undertheorized, especially in relation to power. They too readily assume participation can overcome deeply embedded material and cultural practices that legitimate and maintain social inequities. Theoretical critiques by scholars such as Scoones and Thompson (1993) and others have not been sufficiently incorporated into discussions of PRA. At the same time, the goals of PRA techniques and participatory empowerment are laudable and important. They have contributed a grounded grassroots perspective on women's experiences, and have sensitized conventional accountability exercises to the gendered nature of daily life among the poor. If these techniques are going to effectively challenge established power divisions, especially along gender lines, they will have to incorporate more nuanced understandings of power, particularly the connection between power, voice/silence and gender. The challenge is to develop techniques that retain the accessibility and practicality of PRA, yet incorporate the insights of current thinking on the material and discursive nature of power. This will take time, effort and considerable experimentation. Some important efforts in this direction have been taking place (Fals Borda and Rahman 1991; Jackson 1997; Goetz 1995; Guijt and Shah 1998; Rowlands 1997). More will be needed. However, one thing is clear. If PRA and participatory empowerment approaches do succeed in melding theory and practice in ways that successfully destabilize established power structures, they will certainly no longer be the darling of all participants in the development enterprise, whether in Africa or in other parts of the world.

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