

IS WHAT IS ESSENTIAL INVISIBLE TO THE EYE?

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This issue of *Universitas Forum* addresses two issues: participation and local development. As several authors published here have underlined, local development is increasingly seen as a means to address many of the negative aspects of a centralized and top-down approach to development and, particularly, to facilitate the active role of citizens and local communities in the development processes that affect their lives. Thus, a critical examination of the relationship between participation and local development is called for. What is meant by participation? What is meant by local development? What can be learned from successful and also, less successful experiences from many different contexts? How can these contribute conceptually and practically to building an alternative paradigm of development and to deepening democratic practice?

Ten articles are published in this issue analysing and describing experiences from India, Morocco, Egypt, Italy, Canada, Cuba and Latin America generally, which illustrate the concern, universality, and relevance of this theme.

Development becomes sustainable and participatory

The concept and meaning of development has evolved over the years and a historical overview shows that while there have been some successes; there are mostly highly visible failures. Consequently, development methods and indicators have followed trends, taking into account economic, social and environmental factors, the right to make decisions that affect our lives, our environment and even our own individual perceptions. Even though the notion of development represents an aspiration to improve humanity, and more recently, a legacy and guarantee of a better life for future generations, core issues are still being debated: What kind of development are we talking about? Who is the subject of development and who is it for? Are we talking about the same level of satisfaction for all? Who is excluded? What is the role of the state? How can everyone's aspirations and interests be integrated? How can we achieve a balance? How do we achieve genuine participation? And above all, how do we achieve development?

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A lot of effort has been devoted to these questions, from a range of conceptual points of view, in a world where the dynamics of change are exponential, to the daily efforts of people who try to improve their lives using what they have to satisfy their everyday needs, interests and aspirations.

Until the first half of the last century, at what many consider the dawn of modern society, it was thought that economic and technological factors were crucial and that they could drive all spheres of social life; so that economic growth was seen to be at the heart of development (Espino, 2006).

It was not until after the Second World War that people became aware that developmental imbalances were the sources of conflict between regions and nations. Then, with the establishment of the United Nations, development was seen as a way of making nations equal, and a more humanized view began to emerge. Development was centred on the national context and the state was its main sponsor; approaches and policies to achieve the desired level of development had to be necessarily global, sidelining territorial specificities and potential as well as the transforming power of local actors.

Unsuccessful efforts to generate development, as in Latin America in the sixties and eighties, led to growing inequality, increased poverty and marginalization, large amounts of foreign debt, technological dependence and rapid environmental degradation. Faced with increasing globalization, reduced direct involvement of governments and the gradual rise in the role of civil society, the need emerged to understand and give voice to minorities, cultural diversity, local knowledge (effective in finding solutions to everyday problems) and informal economies, which contributed to the gross domestic product of most nations. The importance of this plurality led to the consideration that citizens' active participation and commitment was a crucial factor for successful development.

In contrast with the general idea of development, people started to perceive the potential of local realities, their heritage, resources and cultural, ethnic and group individuality. The local began to appear with force.

Conscious of the environmental risks that were jeopardizing the life of the planet, human development was redefined and sustainability became an unavoidable responsibility for all of us. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) described development in its reports in the late 1990's as "Development that not only generates economic growth but distributes its benefits equitably; that regenerates the environment rather than destroys it; that empowers people rather than marginalizing them, enlarging their choices and opportunities, and provides for their participation in decisions affecting them" (J.G. Speth, UNDP Administrator, July 1993). Human development is a goal to pursue, expanding opportunities and raising the level of wellbeing; it involves both building human capacity and the effective utilization of skills acquired. We could say that, a new concept of development evolved, whose essential features (Espino, 2006), included broader aspects: it was a process full of contradictions, advances and regressions; it tried

to boost individual and collective potential for self-growth; diversity was seen as a universal resource to be maintained and maximized; sustainability was an essential requirement in the balanced use of all kinds of resources - natural, cultural, human, historical, and technological.

Development potential centres on the self-transformative capacity of social actors to generate knowledge and self-organization. Culture (embodying the way people live together in society) can also be incorporated into the concept of development as a way of both preserving tradition and generating opportunities for innovation. The concept of culture also draws attention to the territorial dimension. An understanding of the local environment has become strategic; it provides for dignified social integration, access to wellbeing and local knowledge, more generally, synergy between micro and macro scales; it shows the need to create actors at all levels of society.

Today it is impossible to imagine development without the necessary economic, political, social, environmental, cultural, and technological dimensions, without incorporating the participation, contribution and commitment of individuals, institutions and governments, and without taking into account the indispensable support of the territory to make it happen.

Thus, Enrique Gallicchio states that: “Local development as a factor for democracy and sustainable development does not happen by chance, but is the result of a specific situation and is a different and *alternative* road to national, regional and territorial development, supported by national policies and local autonomy within a single institutional framework”. He adds that “local development and decentralization are at the same time development strategies and tools. They are neither a paradigm nor a panacea. Their great potential stems from the fact that they represent a different strategy for development”.

In fact, for Luciano Carrino, participatory local development is a means to combat the fragmentation, exclusion and poverty generated by the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of powerful groups that condition the global economy. But the word “local”, he suggests, contains ambiguities that mask different underlying political conceptions and that risk neutralizing the transformative potential of the local development strategy. He calls for a critical approach that invests the vision of participatory local development with a will to profoundly transform the organization of human societies.

A tool for local economic development in urban areas, Enrico Fontanari proposes what he calls “the Evolved Cultural District”. For Fontanari, “The economic development of a system and a local area involves the creative combination of five forms of capital: natural, physical, human, social and symbolic”. This forms the basis for the concept of evolved cultural districts, based on new productive activities and high added-value human capital, such as design, technological innovation and the creation of new products.

Local development requires adequate planning

“The reason for a strategic plan”, Fontanari continues, “is that it can be used to determine the best combinations for a specific local context and create the conditions that allow such a combination to arise from a synergy between the behaviours and decisions of local actors”.

Indeed, it is not possible to progress towards development without a concerted vision of the future and without proposing and agreeing on how to get there. Improvisation and emergency measures do not lead to progress. While the concept of development has evolved with numerous changes taking place, planning concepts and methods have also undergone significant variations.

In the past, planning was used by the centralized state to promote development, and technical bodies designed and recommended policies and courses of action. Participation was limited to data collection, consultations and presentations by administrative authorities, but with very little involvement of the population. Long-term plans were based on general proposals, which in most cases could not be implemented, since the government that had made them was no longer in power, or worse, the proposals had been decontextualized by external and internal changes, and so were no longer valid.

Awareness of the opportunity offered by the multiplicity of actors - individual and institutional - the different and ambivalent attitudes of governments and civil society towards planning and consultation, the common sense shown by people in the construction of their habitats, the potential of territorial resources, the need for everyone to be involved in deciding which direction to follow, and the variability imposed by change and other factors, led to the realisation that there was a need for new planning approaches and methods.

Firstly, planning became flexible, medium-term and broadly participatory: it involved not only deciding jointly on future directions and intensity of action, but also taking into account the needs of everyone to achieve their own objectives. It became more streamlined and included guidance on actions to be taken, shortening implementation time to fit government mandates and, most importantly, promoting citizen and institutional participation, selecting and deciding on what was essential, ensuring that community efforts were and would be aimed at these collegial goals. As Forbes Davidson (1996) says “good planning can boost effective, efficient and creative development”.

...and genuine participation

Why have some people been making decisions, albeit with the best of intentions, about the sort of development wanted by others? Who is development for and what is its purpose if not to create wellbeing for the people and the planet? It might seem naive, but only the answers to these questions can lead us to a concept of development and how to

achieve it in an orderly and logical fashion, through participatory planning. Participation in the process of joint decision-making is recognized as one of the cornerstones of building a democratic society and is a recognized right.

But as some of the articles illustrate, “participation” can be interpreted in many ways and is not necessarily a way to empower people normally excluded from the decision-making process. Drawing on the concept of empowered participatory governance, Marguerite Mendell discusses the concept of participation, distinguishing between citizen engagement as processes of public consultation and comprehensive community economic initiatives as sources of political and economic empowerment and institutional innovation. Both Mendell and Carrino agree that without information, appropriate spaces for concertation among institutions and social actors and the capacity to influence the use of public resources for issues of common interest, participation is not empowering: it is only “a cacophony of voices generating noise”.

In our experience in Latin America, participation has meant the cooperation of people who pursue goals they themselves have set; it has involved the collective work of people both in identifying objectives and defining ways to achieve them, taking part, therefore, in decision-making. Since this regards the acceptance and recognition of “others”, it is a way of building processes by integrating different perceptions in the transformation of reality. It allows needs to be prioritized and defined; it means striving to fulfil aspirations and providing accurate information on how to achieve results. It is therefore an important ingredient in almost any social process, and an optimal way to implement social policies.

Participation allows not only the needs and aspirations of each population group to be taken into account, but it is also a way of achieving compromise and finding viable and appropriate solutions to common problems. Commitment and involvement in contributing ideas and working on them help maintain what everyone has striven to create. Thus, the commitment of local actors, with their roles and resources, is a factor for sustainability and a fundamental basis for the development of participatory processes. Furthermore, this collective action in pursuit of goals, the cooperation it promotes and the intercommunication it facilitates are also important in consolidating a sense of belonging and individual and collective responsibility, as illustrated, for example, by Andrea Nobili and Federica Di Pietrantonio, in their article “The Vibo Valentia Strategic Plan: a shared experience”, who describe the strategy used involving a plurality of actors and macro and micro scale interrelations.

Facilitating the participation of citizens in any process is difficult, whether it involves planning, design, or community intervention. And the larger the scale and magnitude of the object in question, the greater the difficulty. But at the local level it is easier: above all, the process helps bring politicians closer to the realities of daily life, creating a favourable climate for exchange, credibility and cooperation.

The ability to participate, however, is an acquired skill; we are not born with it. In complex human and interpersonal relations within and outside the local environment,

participation also involves having an aptitude for learning. This is true not only for the population but also and mainly for experts and politicians. Moreover, traditional asymmetrical roles have undermined dialogue, understanding and empathy of those who usually make decisions, which makes it much harder for them to unlearn things and move toward an attitude of sharing, which, of course, involves “ceding power”. Gallicchio tells us that: “The challenges are new and involve, among other forms of action, working with complexity, governing through networks rather than hierarchies, leading through influence and not the exercise of authority, relating to people more than giving orders”, and this is also applicable to the technical field.

In describing his experience of participatory planning at local government level in West Bengal, Dilip Kumar Ghosh underlines that participation cannot be reduced to a mere bureaucratic process of formal consultation or what he considers “horizontal interventions in an essentially vertical administrative arrangement”. His experience shows that for participation to work, it is necessary to ensure trust, credibility, an adequate cultural context, sustained interest, avoiding bureaucratic intricacies and encouraging commitment through the sectors that reach out most to the population.

Elena Piffero also addresses the cultural context for participation. She critically analyses her own experience of implementing participatory urban development processes in some of the informal urban areas of Cairo (Egypt) and asks how feasible is it to promote participatory forms of development in authoritarian contexts such as post-socialist Egypt, where patronage networks permeate the whole process of socio-political negotiation. Is it possible for an international cooperation agency to overcome the anti-participatory attitude of governmental authorities and civil society organizations alike?

Ada Guzón, on the other hand, describes local development in different Cuban municipalities, where government involvement, “can raise awareness, help incorporate set strategies and articulate the management of local development, using and improving established structures and mechanisms and enhancing integration at the local level”. She goes on to say that “there is no substitute for this: the identification of the need for change and political resolve are the starting point. What we must do, then, is promote ‘innovative circuits’, where the knowledge needed to create solutions coincides with the need for solutions”.

In fact, one of the lessons learned in 22 years of practice in the urban communities of Havana is the important role played by adequately formed professionals. Rosa Oliveras stresses the importance of raising awareness of the usefulness of planning and understanding the process, participating in decision-making and maintaining motivation over time, through a technical team that advises and helps participants to organize the process. Also importantly, simultaneous actions were taken to give credibility to plans under preparation, and above all, to foster and speed up personal and community growth.

Newer experiences, such as those underway in Morocco as described by Bachir Mokrane, are building on these lessons and adopting many of the tools they have developed,

including the creation of intermediary technical structures to foster participation and increase capacities in management and community planning and, most of all, exchanging of experiences and good practices with decentralized cooperation partners from around the world.

Hopefully this issue of *Universitas Forum* can contribute to the understanding of such a broad topic. Above all, willingness and energy are what make participation in local development an essential aim that is visible to the eye.

References

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