

# The participatory development approach under a microscope: the case of the poverty alleviation programme in Malawi

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## *ABSTRACT*

*In the wake of democratization most developing countries have had to reorient their characteristically top-down development strategies to embrace a participatory development philosophy in a bid to reinvigorate their rural development efforts. This article argues that the professed commitment to participatory local planning, as a hallmark of contemporary grassroots development intervention, is largely rhetorical. The exogenous nature of the drives to reform forces developing countries to pretend they are committed to the reforms merely to appease the West. These reforms can only be genuine and sustained if the will to do so springs from within developing countries with external stakeholders playing simply a facilitatory role. The recognition of the voices, aspirations and fears of the poor in development efforts requires a pre-existing democratic structure and policymakers who are sympathetic to the basic interests of the rural poor.*

## **Setting the context**

There is little doubt that one of the most momentous policy events within the development community at the beginning of the previous decade was the return of poverty on the international development agenda. This is very much associated with the work of many years of

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the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which, on the part of the latter, culminated into the inauguration of the Human Development Report (HDR) in 1990. In a similar spirit, the World Development Report of the same year focused almost exclusively on the state of poverty in the world. Suffice it here to note that the underlying theme for the HDR is essentially an ultimatum to all countries, regardless of their levels of development, to champion a human-oriented brand of development.

In the greater part of the developing world, the recent deepening of poverty levels cannot be understood in isolation from structural adjustment programmes. They have constituted an overarching policy framework for a vast majority of developing countries since the beginning of the early 1980s, following their persistently disappointing economic performance. However, despite the zeal and commitment on the part of the adjusting countries, their economic situation has substantially deteriorated and, in most instances, shows little or no prospects of recovery. Unemployment and the price of essential commodities have soared and expenditure on social services, especially health and education, have progressively declined (Clark 1991, Chipeta 1993, Chinsinga 1995).

The debilitating impact of structural adjustment programmes led most adjusting countries to adopt special programmes known as the social dimensions of adjustment which, spearheaded by the World Bank, intended to give structural adjustment programme policy reforms a human face. These programmes were meant to develop the institutional capacity of host governments in close partnership with civil society in an attempt to integrate meaningfully social and poverty concerns in the development process (World Bank 1990, Kaluwa et al. 1992). The cumulative experiences with SDA programmes have certainly paved the way for the subsequent adoption of poverty alleviation programmes (PAPs) as a development philosophy for most governments in developing countries.

In fact, poverty alleviation programmes have become more or less the dominant characteristic of contemporary development strategies. Examples include the Bolivia Emergency Fund in Bolivia; the Economic

Recovery Programme in Zambia; the Programme of Actions to Mitigate the Costs of Adjustment in Ghana; the Social Development Programme in Zimbabwe and the Poverty Alleviation Programme in Malawi. In practically all cases, the widely-shared view is that the possibility of success of the PAPs is critically contingent on participatory local planning. In other words, participation is deemed to be the life-blood of contemporary poverty alleviation and rural development efforts. In case of Malawi, for example, this perception is strongly echoed in one of the government's policy documents which states that "the policy framework of the Poverty Alleviation Programme of 1994 emphasises the need for a participatory process in which the government, the civil society and the private sector organize themselves to explore grassroots solutions to poverty" (GOM 2001:6). It is against this background that this article attempts to bring the participatory development philosophy under a microscopic lens, with particular reference to the Poverty Alleviation Programme in Malawi.

### **The participatory development approach—a snapshot**

In contemporary development debates participatory local planning has assumed central importance, following the recognition that decentralized government is a necessary framework for sustainable rural development efforts and good local governance. The ultimate creation of functionally-robust decentralized structures largely depends on how effectively participatory local planning is institutionalized (Clark 1991, Makumbe 1996, Osman 1997). In other words, participatory local planning is seen as an essential precondition for successfully executing plans and programmes for poverty alleviation.

The importance of participatory local planning in development management and implementation is widely recognized. In the continental context, for instance, the African Charter on Popular Participation was legislated in 1990 as the climax event during the United Nations Conference on Popular Participation held in Arusha, Tanzania from 12–16 February 1990. This charter realizes that nations cannot be built without the popular support and the full participation of their people and that people's involvement or participation results in the

democratization of the development process (Wunsch and Olowu 2000, Makumbe 1996). The spirit of the African Charter on Popular Participation resonates with the underlying theme of the HDR, which was coincidentally inaugurated in the very same year. Likewise, the underlying thrust of the African Charter on Popular Participation is to champion a human-oriented view of development. It recognizes that African people have been greatly marginalized in the process of their own development, as quoted in Makumbe (1996:1)

The marginalizing of the participation of the people in the formulation of public policies has been exacerbated by the persistent socio-economic crisis which Africa faced throughout the 1980s, with the consequential ever-growing concern and preoccupation by governments with short-term crisis management.

Participatory local planning basically asks development planners, practitioners and researchers to give up what they have up till now erroneously considered their fundamental prerogatives: to define problems and to solve them (Mikkelsen 1995). The need to reorient grassroots development strategy is largely based on the perception that, for a project to be sustainable, it must address those problems and aspirations which are identified by the poor themselves and it must have a management structure in which they have confidence. The appeal of participatory local planning can, therefore, be summed up as follows: “no development program, however, grand, can succeed unless the local people are willing to accept it and make an effort to participate” (Makumbe 1996:12). This involvement of the local people throughout all the important junctures of the project cycle makes it possible to utilize their knowledge about local conditions to solve local problems more efficiently and effectively. Development problems should not be defined by experts in isolation but should be based on dialogue with the affected parties (Mikkelsen 1995, Osman 1997).

Participatory local planning has two different objectives. It either takes the form of transformational or instrumental participation. The latter is a way of achieving certain specific targets. Participatory local planning thus becomes the driving force for determining people-based

development processes and enlisting the willingness of the people in undertaking sacrifices and expending their social energies on its execution. In this form participation largely serves as a means to achieve efficiency in project management. It is a management strategy through which the state attempts to mobilize local resources. The former is perceived as an objective in and of itself. It takes the stand that people have a fundamental right to participate fully and effectively in the making the decisions which affect their lives at all levels and at all times (Mikkelsen 1995, Makumbe 1996).

Taken in this light, participation entails empowerment and the promotion of social justice, equity and democracy. When participation is purely instrumental, the participation of the beneficiaries of the proposed development intervention is construed as an operational barrier. Their non-participation is viewed, therefore, as a technical, educational, administrative or financial barrier needing to be corrected. When participation is viewed as transformational, the non-participation of the beneficiaries is a structural barrier. The problem of non-participation in this case becomes a social conflict that has to be resolved through compromise on conflicting policies or removal of departicipatory social structures or political reforms

The concept of empowerment espoused in this paper follows Ugbohem (2001:291) who says that a person is empowered:

When the person grows in the subjective sense of feeling able to do things hitherto out of reach, when a person develops the ability to do things which were not previously within the person's competence, and when doors of opportunity, which were hitherto closed, swing open to allow access to information, influence and opportunity

### **Overview of the 1994 poverty alleviation programme**

A brief overview of the 1994 Poverty Alleviation Programme, sets the platform for bringing the participatory development philosophy under the microscope. This overview outlines the institutional structure, the content of the policy initiative and the management and implementation of the programme (GOM 1994).

### **Institutional structure**

The PAP institutional matrix consists of the Presidential Council, the National Steering Committee and eight task forces. The presidential council is headed by the President and includes the Vice President, some cabinet ministers, religious groups, the Chamber of Commerce, the African Business Association, the private sector, academic institutions, traditional leaders, the three regional governors of the United Democratic Front party and independent members with experience in development issues. The Council is responsible for giving policy directions and guidance as well as assisting in sensitizing the populace on government priorities. It has a final say about which poverty alleviation interventions to be implemented.

The National Steering Committee is headed by the Secretary to the President and Cabinet. It has members from the civil service, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and, where necessary, co-opted members from the donor community. The committee is responsible for co-ordinating the activities of various task forces to avoid duplication of functions and resources.

The task forces are responsible for the actual implementation of the poverty alleviation programmes. These include agriculture, health, population, the informal sector, public works, social welfare and education. In conjunction with local communities they assess the needs of the poor and assist in the planning and design of poverty alleviation sectoral programmes.

### **Content of the PAP policy initiative**

The PAP was designed primarily with the intention of addressing the salient features of poverty in the country, which include household food insecurity and low productivity among smallholders, a weak institutional enterprise sector, limited access to essential social services and a shortage of management capacities for planning and implementing key poverty alleviation programmes. Its underlying objectives can, therefore, be summarized as follows:

- To increase agricultural productivity among resource-poor farmers;

- To promote employment and income opportunities in the informal sector;
- To improve the access of the poor to priority services and
- To enhance the capacities of the local communities in managing development.

The PAP policy initiative has four component programmes, each designed to address one of the four objectives raised above. These programmes are:

**Smallholder agriculture productivity programme**

The objective of this programme is to enhance household food security especially among the resource-poor farmers through the increased application of on-farm technology, the expanded coverage of extension services, the increased access to farm in-puts and labour saving technologies, better environment management and a more sustainable utilization of fisheries and forestry.

**Small enterprise development programme**

The principal objective of this programme is to create alternative non-farm income opportunities to reduce poverty by making better policies, increasing entrepreneurial and technical skills development and improving access to credit, appropriate technology and marketing.

**Social development programme**

The programme aims at strengthening the delivery of social services (basic education, primary health care, low-cost housing, rural transport and sanitation) to the poorest segments of the population. The emphasis is on the development of alternative delivery systems through increased community participation. This has to be understood in the context of the failure of traditional top-down methods of service delivery. The idea was to take advantage of administrative and political reforms to decentralize the government administrative machinery by putting in place innovative institutional frameworks which would not only be closer to the people but in which their voices would be respected.

**Management for development programme**

The programme aims at creating efficient and effective managers of economic and social development. It thus envisages the formation of competent and motivated leaders to steer and implement development

activities at local levels as of critical importance in the implementation of anti-poverty programmes.

### **Management of the programme**

The management of the PAP is entrusted to the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, which is the secretariat for the whole programme. It liaises with the Office of the President and Cabinet and the Ministry of Community Services to ensure that appropriate institutions are established and strengthened. The Ministry is further responsible for incorporating PAP projects into the National Development Programme.

### **Identification and assessment of needs**

The PAP policy initiative is being implemented through the district development committee (DDC) institutional matrix in order to afford local communities direct participation in the identification as well as implementation of programmes that affect them.

### **Forum for development**

The forum is intended to facilitate the link between DDCs and the various task forces through quarterly meetings in which DDCs present their proposals to the task forces. The forum for development serves as a basis for sectoral programmes formulated by task forces. Once the sectoral programmes are formulated, they are submitted to the National Steering Committee for approval.

### **Implementation**

The actual implementation of the approved projects is carried out by the institutions identified by the various task forces, which closely supervise and monitor the progress being made. They also keep the National Steering Committee informed through the production and submission of reports.

### **The 1994 PAP—an analytical glance at its participatory development philosophy**

In contemporary development discourse the potential success of PAPs is critically dependent on how the concept of participation is ultimately institutionalized. Because grassroots development plans have to be

based on the aspirations of the people if poverty is to be significantly reduced, the rural population must be expected to act as the subject of its own destiny through participatory local planning (Goudsmit and Blackburn 2001).

Much as the 1994 PAP policy initiative clearly flags beneficiary participation as its guiding philosophy, it is, however, totally silent on the *modus operandi* of the form of participation that drives its implementation. No attempt at all has been made to even define the concept of participation in the context of the PAP programme and yet a premium is placed on it as the driving force behind the country's development philosophy.

In the PAP's institutional implementation matrix, the mandates of some agencies, for example, the Presidential Council and the National Steering Committee, are clearly in conflict with the underlying spirit of participatory local planning. While the Council is responsible for sensitizing the populace on government priorities, the National Steering Committee retains the final say on which poverty intervention strategies have to be implemented. These mandates give the impression that the professed commitment to participation is less an effort at real empowerment of the poor than a managerial or rhetorical device. It is essentially a management strategy through which to mobilize local resources in order to implement a series of stand-alone donor-inspired development projects and not the PAP (Mutizwa-Mangwiza and Conyers 1996, Chinsinga 2000).

Likewise, the mandate of the task forces within the PAP stands in stark contrast with the spirit of participatory planning. Their domain of responsibility is to review and prioritize poverty alleviation interventions identified by communities through the DDC institutional matrix. This makes it difficult for the PAP to steer the empowerment process of the beneficiary communities to the point when they can ultimately graduate from reliance on external forces in order to articulate their genuinely-felt priorities. Furthermore these task forces are exclusively composed of technocrats who, by virtue of being located in the driving seat of government—Capital Hill—are, arguably, divorced from prevailing social, economic, political and cultural grassroot realities. Ideally the

role of the task forces would have been limited to appraising the technical feasibility of the preferences arrived at by the DDC: instead they remove from the people their inalienable fundamental right to define their own development priorities.

Politics also presents a challenge to the possible institutionalization of participation in the PAP. The government has taken advantage of the programme to make sure that the structure of the PAP is dominated by United Democratic Front cadres. It is already feared that government cadres may make exploit the programme politically. This fear, of course, is situated in the broader context of African politics as explained by Bayart (1993). The title of his book borrows a Cameroonian local term—*Politics of the Belly*—to characterize the political and policy environment of the majority of African countries. This expression “the politics of the belly” is a loose translation of the proverb “people know that the goat eats where it is tethered and those in power intend to eat.”

With the tradition of competitive, fair and objective politics yet to take root, there is certainly little doubt that PAP resources are susceptible to abuse. Reports of graft and patronage regarding the PAP programme abound and it is likely that this corruption may alienate a large number of people from participating in the programme. As early as 1996 according to Kangwere (1998), the widely-shared perception among the people was that the visible beneficiaries of the programme tended to be the better-off and those well-placed within political circles.

The apparent dominance of political expedience in the implementation of the PAP policy could be understood as one manifestation of the failure to identify clearly the various groups of the poor in the country and their needs. Prior to the launch of the PAP no consultation with the poor had taken place to establish the actual extent of poverty in the country. What should have been established were facts such as, who are the poor? Where do they live? What do they perceive to be their problems? How do they think these could be solved?

The PAP policy interventions were largely designed on the basis of categories of the poor which were identified in the 1993 GOM/UN *Situation Analysis of Poverty*. Subsequent monitoring for poverty trends in the country, initiated under the ægis of the PAP, has revealed

that the major issue, as far as the people are concerned, is the lack of agricultural credit, yet the emphasis in PAP has been on general credit (National Economic Council (NEC) 1998, 2000). Poverty in the country is widespread and deeply entrenched. The 1998 Integrated Household Survey, for instance, projects the incidence of rural and urban poverty at 66.5 per cent and 54.9 per cent respectively. It also reports regional variations in the incidence of poverty. In the Southern Region, the prevalence of poverty is estimated at 68.1 per cent; in the Centre 62.8 per cent and 62.5 per cent in the North. The incidence of poverty, as estimated by GOM/UN in 1993 prevailed at the rate of 60 per cent and 65 per cent in urban and rural areas respectively. The problem of poverty, especially rural poverty, is, therefore, a serious one urgently requiring robust policy interventions.

### **Challenges of the concept of participatory local planning**

The implementation the PAP certainly raises several critical issues about the notion of participatory local planning as a principal feature of contemporary poverty alleviation strategies. Currently, most policymakers tend to view participation as a neutral concept. This supposes that development facilitators can extricate themselves from their world views, that is, their beliefs, convictions, attitudes and perceptions when they are engaged with the potential beneficiaries of development interventions. The same assumption is equally true for the would-be beneficiaries themselves. But this may not be the case (Clark 1991, Goudsmit and Blackburn 2001).

Participation is better seen as a negotiation process in which case there are at least two actors who confront each other and communicate, hoping to eventually arrive at satisfactory trade-offs. It is obvious in the Malawian case that the grassroots cannot count themselves among the principal protagonists of participatory local planning processes. In practice, the planning team almost always influences, animates, induces and manipulates the negotiation process. The closest we can come to authentic local participatory planning is if the negotiation process between planners and the local people is structured in such a manner that they engage in the process as equal partners.

This is particularly pertinent in the reference to the mandates of the Presidential Council, National Steering Committee and the Task Forces. The spirit of give and take necessary to participatory planning must prevail among all the stakeholders in grassroots development, which, among others, include government officials, non-governmental organizations and the intended beneficiaries of development interventions. The major stumbling block, however, is that most governments want to take politics out of the equation of the notion of participatory local planning.

If, participation is taken as a negotiation process, then grassroots demands will be seen as flexible proposals and development plans must be capable of adjusting easily to new circumstances (Clark 1991, Goudsmit and Blackburn, 2001). When this happens the PAP will provide the state with a conceptual and methodological framework enabling it to negotiate with rural constituents on a continuous basis. This is crucial for blocking tendencies already manifest in the implementation of the PAP in which the planning process is designed to mesh with official policies at departmental and national levels.

The desired bottom-up approach is forced to adapt to a top-down reality, particularly in view of the contradictory mandates of the various agents implementing PAP. Flexible local planning is essential because the results of participatory planning exercises are never comprehensive: they change over time, with techniques used, the level of organization, the personalities of the participants, the socioeconomic situation and so on. Current PAP understand participatory local planning as being a largely truncated negotiation process.

The half-hearted commitment to participatory local planning apparent by the agencies within PAP could, in some quarters, be defended as a safety valve against excessive participation. This refers to a populism that blindly adheres to whatever the local population proposes (Makumbe 1996). Much as development facilitators must not enter communities with preconceived ideas, they should, nevertheless, have the breadth of experience to know what can and cannot work. Facilitators must be non-directive “up to a point” (Clark 1991). Excessive participation can curtail the sustainability of local development processes if planning

teams do not rigorously evaluate the technical feasibility of what is proposed.

The need to guard against excessive participation is appreciated, but the problem is such an approach is not always made in good faith. In many cases it is a simple pretext for subordinating powerful voices among the grassroots in the development processes. The degree to which local people participate in collective initiatives is affected by the extent to which they are aware of the social forces militating against their socioeconomic welfare (Makumbe 1996, Ubgomeh 2001). Without an in-depth appreciation of the causes of their suffering, underprivileged people may resist participation. The apparent lack of knowledge their own socioeconomic status is linked to the devastating impact of poverty, which forces most people to be almost entirely concerned with survival, rather than with the attainment of better living conditions.

In Malawi poverty is deep and severe. As Ubgomeh (2001:591) says, “in regions [and countries] of extreme poverty participation can become a luxury not all can afford”. Unless the livelihood of the poor can be guaranteed, it is unrealistic to expect them to mobilize themselves for self-help development (Osman 1997, Oyugi 2000). To achieve a meaningful participation of the rural masses in development, therefore, they need to be assisted in creating and developing organizations through which they can become aware of their rights and collective strength to act as a pressure group in the negotiated process of participation. This has been overlooked altogether in the PAP implementation institutional matrix.

### **Concluding remarks**

There is little doubt that participatory local planning is now the catch phrase in contemporary rural development efforts and local governance. The major challenge, however, is how to institutionalize it effectively in grassroots development programmes. The manner in which the notion of participatory local planning is currently conceived makes this a significant challenge. There is a deep-seated tendency, as evidenced in the PAP institutional implementation framework, to view participation as a neutral concept. This means that the framework for institutionalizing

participation lacks any component of a negotiation process. Significant strides in institutionalizing transformational participation can be made if, and only if, stakeholders reorient their perception of participation from being a neutral concept to being an untruncated process of negotiation. If this does not happen instrumental participation will continue to dominate real project situations and the transformational principle would not extend beyond the project plan documents (Mikkelsen 1995, Makumbe 1996).

The apparently questionable commitment of developing countries to the participatory development philosophy could perhaps be better understood in the context of the exogenous nature of the drives to reform. In Malawi, for instance, the origins of the PAP are intimately linked to the 1993 GOM/UN Poverty Situation Analysis, during which the Malawi Congress Party official position on poverty was openly challenged.

According to the officially-orchestrated slogan by the former President of Malawi, the late Ngwazi Kamuzu Banda, as long as Malawians were well fed, had adequate clothes and lived in houses which did not leak, there was no poverty in Malawi. Political reforms since 1992 have given donor agencies and other actors the unprecedented opportunity to press the government to adopt a participatory development philosophy as an indispensable dimension of good governance.

As a result, local participation has been sought without a meaningful reform of the power relations between development planners and the grassroots (ILO 1985, Osman 1997). But through the authentic process of empowerment, the process of participatory local planning could be gradually restructured into a level playing field for negotiation between local masses on one hand and development planners on the other. It is, however, important to note that the success of participatory local planning requires a pre-existing democratic structure and central policymakers who are sympathetic to the basic interests of the poor. This can only happen if the desire to reform the participatory planning local development processes is genuinely endogenous.

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