

Between supply and demand: the limits to participatory development in South Africa

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Abstract

Much of the focus in the literature on participatory development has been on the demand side and on the extent to which citizens succeed in pressuring the state to deliver basic services. Less attention has been focused on the supply side of participatory development, namely on how state institutions give effect to development policies. Post-Apartheid South Africa is replete with policies and legislation supporting participatory processes and yet in practice this has seldom lived up to the ideals espoused. This article examines the delivery of public housing in poor communities in three municipalities in South Africa and argues that there is a mismatch between how the formulators of policy understand participation and how it is interpreted by beneficiary communities and local officials. It concludes that considerably more attention needs to be focused on why officials fail to translate national policies into action if participatory democracy is to attain any legitimacy in the population at large.

Points for practitioners

Effective citizen engagement in decision-making processes is the key factor in participatory development programmes. Enabling legislation and policy is essential to the process but it is not sufficient to ensure participation. The design of participatory programmes will thus need to take into account the capacity of communities to organize themselves and will need to factor in the means and time to develop their ability to engage effectively. Officials managing participatory development projects need to undergo formal training so that they understand that the manner in which beneficiaries participate is as important the actual activities in which they are involved.

Introduction

The concept of participatory development, albeit propagated under different labels, has a long history stretching back to the notions of self-rule and self-reliance advanced by colonial administrations in the 1940s and 1950s (Cooke, 2003). Although there were various attempts to popularize the idea of participation in the intervening years, the concept was only brought into the mainstream of developing thinking from the 1980s onwards as part of a neo-liberalist paradigm (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). The approach which, *inter alia*, envisaged a diminution of the state and strengthening the role of civil society was seen both as a means to empower ordinary citizens, and the poor in particular, and to promote more sustainable forms of development (Jennings, 2000).

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