Why community participation?

A discussion of the arguments

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While community participation can be understood as referring to the entire political and economic process of a country, Alastair White here defines it as "the involvement of local populations in the decision making concerning development projects or in their implementation". From this point of view, with reference particularly to the planning and implementation of community water supply and sanitation schemes, he examines ten of the reasons which have been advanced in favour of participation, discussing both their applications and their constraints.

Community participation in local development projects

Despite the great diversity in the objectives sought through popular participation, and the different ways in which the term has been understood and interpreted, a certain consensus has begun to emerge on a working definition among some of the international organizations involved in development. Accord-

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ing to this definition, participation has three dimensions: the involvement of all those affected in decision making about what should be done and how; mass contribution to the development effort, i.e., to the implementation of the decisions; and sharing in the benefits of the programmes.[1] A fourth element is sometimes considered: namely, local participation in evaluation. However, this may be considered to be part of the decision-making process.

These ideas can be understood so broadly as to be referring to the entire political and economic process of a country: popular participation then becomes another term to designate democracy, full employment or access to the means of production, and an equitable distribution of income. There is a large gap between these general (macro-societal) goals and the kinds of activities typically carried out in the name of participation. Indeed, there appears to be a real danger that the confusion of broad goals with specific activities such as the founding of cooperatives, local community development committees, literacy or health education campaigns, or allowing people to choose the layout of roads or water-pipes in their neighbourhood,[2] will divert attention away from the broad goals or give a spurious impression that they are being achieved.

Therefore, it has to be made clear that in discussing community participation here we are not concerned directly with these broad goals of democracy, employment, or income distribution: they must be pursued separately. The only exception is where community participation projects contribute—usually in a minor way—toward these goals.

Then, of the three dimensions mentioned, the sharing of benefits is of a different order: it does not distinguish projects in which services are delivered *to* the population, from those in which the population takes an active part. Therefore, while bearing in mind that the equitable sharing of benefits is essential, we take community participation to be defined as the involvement of the local population actively in the decision

[1] *Towards a typology of popular participation*, Policy Planning and Program Review Department, The World Bank, Washington, D.C., May 1978, 16 p.

[2] *Ibid.*

making concerning development projects or in their implementation.

Finally, the involvement of the population in the physical work of implementing a project can hardly be considered as community participation unless there is at least some degree of sharing of decisions with the community. Thus, when an outside agency remains in total control of the process and merely calls upon the beneficiaries to give their labour directly, one cannot speak of community participation even though there is an element of self-help labour. As a WHO report puts it:

> In the old ideology, "involvement" was conceptualized too often as an effort on the part of individuals to assist in the implementation of plans already made and targets set vertically. This kind of involvement prescribed passive acceptance of services and provision of support in cash or in kind, in giving money for a pump, digging a well for a water supply, or laying bricks for a health centre or a school. For some, it was a means of cheap labour and was aimed mostly at rural areas. The dynamics of a changing society, however, demand much more than mere acceptance, allegiance, and unpaid labour.
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> The new type of involvement requires identification with the movement, which grows only out of involvement in thinking, planning, deciding, acting and evaluating, focussed on one purpose, namely socio-economic development, of which health is only one part—a major part nonetheless. It, indeed, is a mental process as well as a physical one.[3]

It is also necessary to make a distinction between the participation of some local individuals (beneficiaries) and the participation of the organized community as such. The word "community" denotes a social entity, organized in some fashion, however loose and informal, and with some sense of identity—not just the inhabitants of a locality.

On the other hand, it may be unrealistic to insist that "true" community participation is only achieved when the local people are in full control of the process or decide entirely for

[3] Health education with special reference to the primary health care approach, a background document of the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, *International Journal of Health Education*, Supplement to vol. XXI, no. 2, April-June 1978, p. 4.

themselves which activities should be embarked upon. It would be difficult for a sectoral agency of government, such as a water authority, to put into operation such a concept of community participation. Autonomy of this sort may be considered a special form of participation, to be achieved only under particular circumstances.

A discussion of the arguments

The case for community participation in many fields of development is now well recognized. In the field of health services, for instance, it is a central aspect of the concept of primary health care, which has been adopted by the World Health Assembly as the organizing principle around which to "bring health to all by the year 2000". The advantages which are foreseen as arising from community participation include the expectation that governments' budgetary resources can be stretched or complemented by the efforts which can be made within local communities, but they go well beyond this. Altogether, at least ten distinct reasons have been advanced in favour of participatory methods, as discussed below. All of the reasons will not be found equally valid from every point of view, while some may be thought to apply in some situations and others in different ones, but they are not in general mutually exclusive, and taken together they make a strong argument.

It must be emphasized that the brief discussions of each of these ten reasons, which follow, are aimed at presenting a brief and, to the extent possible, a balanced view of each one—not, as in much of the literature on the question, a one-sided and oversimplified argument in favour.

1. More will be accomplished

Much of the impetus for the movement toward community participation derives from the observation that conventional services have not been extended to the rural areas, or even the urban poor, at a fast enough rate. If people are to receive the

services (also increasingly seen as their right) within the foreseeable future, it is regarded as necessary that they themselves take action to provide them in as self-reliant a way as possible.

For some proponents, the implication is that the conventional service agencies are unlikely to change their approach, so that communities will have to organize themselves to meet their own needs if they are to be met at all. This pessimistic view of the potential for the reorientation of government agencies to the needs of the poor is obviously more justified in some countries than in others. It is in part a question of politics: whether the government represents or is genuinely committed to the interests of the poor majority of the population. In the second place, it is also a question of the interests and attitudes within the staff of government agencies: they are often able to exert a considerable influence.

Naturally, the pessimistic view of government is held more often, or at least more openly, by those working in voluntary agencies than by the government personnel themselves, and for many voluntary agencies within developing countries, as well as for some of the sponsoring agencies in Western Europe and North America, the principle of community participation and self-help is seen as the one viable alternative to dependence on the voluntary agency for charity. The function of the agency is consequently seen as being to foster community organization for self-reliance in such a way that it will become self-perpetuating in each community as rapidly as possible: the agency will then be able to withdraw in order, perhaps, to accomplish the same task in a new set of communities. The argument here is for voluntary agency-stimulated community action rather than simply the use of participatory methods.

The view that more will be accomplished if the energies of the people are harnessed is by no means confined to voluntary agencies, however. It is a view which now lies at the heart of much development thinking, following disillusionment with older assumptions that development would flow from capital investment in "modern" economic and social institutions. A number of countries have launched programmes to raise the productivity of the poorest and least productive, with an em-

phasis on public participation. An example is the Indian Integrated Rural Development Programme, which also stresses the need for organizations of the poor.[4] In Africa, the Tanzanian approach to self-reliance is well known; but it is not confined to that country.

Reliance on the people's energies as the primary motive force for development may be said to have originated and been carried the furthest in countries with socialist socio-economic systems. In the People's Republic of China, Mao's "mass line" was a guiding principle of that country's development, and achieved full expression in the field of water and environmental sanitation (with the "Patriotic Health Movement") as well as in simple health care (with cooperative medicine and barefoot doctors). Viet Nam in particular has followed a broadly similar policy of its own,[5] with popular participation in health closely integrated with the provision of services by the Ministry of Health. The argument in these cases is for government-stimulated community action.

In some countries, for instance in West Africa, a provision exists for district executive offices to provide materials such as cement and expert help to village communities which undertake the building of classrooms or the digging of wells. It would seem that a very strong commitment at the national political level is necessary for a policy of government-stimulated community action to achieve any large-scale success—and while the rhetoric is generally approved, the reality is one of low commitment in most countries, reflected in low budgets for the community development agencies and district executive offices charged with supporting community activities in this way.

Also, technical ministries and departments have generally shown little enthusiasm for these small-scale local improvements, preferring to concentrate on large- and medium-scale projects. Thus, while it may be true that more can be accomplished through the population undertaking self-reliant

[4] R.N. Azad, IRD: concepts, objectives and strategies, *Indian Farming*, October-November 1978.

[5] Joan McMichael (ed.), *Health in the Third World; studies from Vietnam*, Spokesman, Nottingham, 1976.

action, there is a need to establish an adequate structure to stimulate such action, and this in itself is a large undertaking and a significant departure from the administrative arrangements and habits of most Third World states.

On the other hand, when it is a question of a water agency using participatory methods, the argument that more can be accomplished must be based on a rather different premise, namely that the gain of a community contribution will outweigh the costs involved—the additional staff required in the administration of such a programme of liaison with communities, etc.

2. Services can be provided at lower cost

Perhaps this is only another way of looking at the foregoing argument: if services can be provided at lower cost to each community, they can be provided to more communities altogether. However, the reference to the comparative cheapness of a participatory approach is usually made from the perspective of government, and implies that resources are saved by a government agency which uses community contributions to help complete its projects, and are released for completing more projects or for other government purposes in general. Given that the cheapness is achieved only in part by a reduction of the total costs, it is in part a transfer of a burden in real resource terms onto the community, relative to the position that would have obtained if the service had been provided directly.

It is therefore of the greatest relevance to ask who benefits from this: it may involve a redistribution from the relatively poor to the relatively rich. In feudal societies, unpaid *corvée* labour could be called upon as a cheap way of meeting the requirements of the manor or the state, and there have been recent historical parallels in most parts of the developing world. The main difference between these practices and a labour contribution in a context of community participation is that in the latter case it is the contributing members themselves who should benefit: but in practice it cannot always be taken for granted that they will.

Cost reduction need not only be a question of not paying for labour, however, but of adopting organizational and technical solutions which are cheaper and may also be more appropriate to the local environment. Village health workers, for instance, may actually be more effective than doctors in the village, if they are well trained for the circumstances in which they will work: they understand the environment, and are typically well motivated to work within it.

3. Participation has an intrinsic value for participants

Apart from the more instrumental advantages of community participation as a means to achieve other ends, it is often argued that people simply should be able to participate actively in the processes which affect them, having a voice in the decisions that are taken, and a part in their implementation. Apart from the intrinsic satisfaction that this may bring, and the avoidance of feelings of alienation and powerlessness, we may also mention the possibility that an increase in cooperative interaction will lead to a more united community. These are, however, probably not measurable effects, and the increased activity will provide occasions for friction as well as for harmony. Even participation may have little intrinsic value if it is, in practice, on terms defined by others.

Thus, while the argument for community participation applies both to the use of participatory methods by a water agency and to "community action", in the former case it is only valid if the aim of community "involvement in thinking, planning, deciding, acting and evaluating" is taken seriously by the agency.

4. Catalyst for further development efforts

This argument is more specific than the postulate that community participation will lead to a more united community. It is thought that the organizational patterns created for one project—the committees and the arrangements for voluntary labour—as well as the enthusiasm generated by one success, will provide both the means and the stimulus for further efforts to tackle other needs. This assumes that it has been the organizational framework and the stimulus that have been lacking in the past, while other constraints are less important. Among the other constraints which should not be discounted are those stemming from social structure (such as the fear which people might reasonably have that others will gain more than themselves), or a lack of worthwhile projects which can realistically be completed by the community without outside help. Where these constraints do not exist or can be overcome—where, for instance, outside help is made available for further projects—there are certainly examples of communities which have completed further development efforts in this way.

In the stimulation of community action, two relevant questions are:

1) Does the external agency continue to offer stimulus and help? It has often proved illusory to expect a community, organized for one project under outside stimulus, to carry on with other projects when that stimulus is no longer there. (In some cases, a very active local resident may take over the role of stimulator.)

2) Are other problems as salient? It is natural that a community may cooperate to solve a most pressing problem such as its need for a water supply, but be less inclined to cooperate for other purposes which may not be recognized by all as necessary. It has been suggested in some places, particularly in Eastern Africa, that people have very reasonably become resistant to further demands for contributions to communal projects.

5. Participation leads to a sense of responsibility for the project

It is thought that when people have taken an active part in the planning and/or implementation of a project, they will collectively consider the completed project as their own, have pride in it and a sense of responsibility for it, and therefore use

it, do so responsibly and avoid damaging it, and do their best to maintain it. The argument is based in part on the familiarity which each community member will have gained with the project, but in greater part on the idea of the emotional investment he will have made in it. There is a question whether people always do feel this way: in some cases, it is suggested on the contrary, villagers feel that they have made their contribution at the construction stage and it is now more than ever the responsibility of government, the usual provider of such services, to maintain the project.[6] In any case, it is quite clear that if maintenance is to be carried out, special provision must be made for it, and the sense of responsibility which the community may feel is not enough. As in some of the other expectations held about community participation, outsiders expect the community to respond as they themselves would, *or think they would*; but communities are not individuals. To speak of a community having a commitment to a project can only be a metaphor for a range of attitudes among individual community members, none of whom may value the project particularly highly in relation to his own private affairs.

6. Participation guarantees that a felt need is involved

This argument for participation differs from the others in that the advantage is not seen as being a consequence of the participatory effort, but as residing in a better selection of project sites. Communities demonstrate their need for the project and their willingness to support and use it once completed, by making the collective effort to organize and participate in construction, or by making a financial contribution.

A number of water agencies, for instance, like that of Lesotho, make it a condition before including a village on their programmes of construction of supplies (itself done with self-help labour) that the village should have deposited a financial contribution in advance. The collection of the contributions from individual households is a major effort for a village to

6 Richard Feachem et al., *Water, health and development, an interdisciplinary evaluation*, Tri-Med Books Ltd., London, 1978, 284 p.

organize, and it is apparently felt that to have made the effort demonstrates a strong communal commitment. Other agencies take the view that in their countries an application from a community, perhaps in writing, or made by a formal delegation, made with a promise of a community contribution, represents commitment enough.

Where communities in effect compete for limited government resources by demonstrating their readiness to make a contribution, a number of anomalies can arise. The more backward communities and regions are likely to be left even further behind, since those which are already better off and closer to centers of power will be able to organize more effectively. There is a danger that in the competition, too many villages will go ahead with collecting money or actually constructing buildings for services which the government is in no position to provide on such a large scale for several years at least (this happened in the Lesotho example); or (the case of secondary schools in Kenya) which it may never be reasonable to locate in so many small places. There is not even a guarantee that the projects are really wanted by a majority of the population, since when competition for resources comes to be a matter of the number of self-help projects begun, local politicians and dominant groups may exert considerable pressure on the population to take part. The poor may be induced to contribute to the building of, say, a secondary school to which access is theoretically open to all but which, in practice, caters primarily for the children of the better off.[7]

In general, it might be considered that if a community agrees to make a contribution to a project in collaboration with an external agency, and if the agency is satisfied that all sections of the community support this community decision, that is sufficient to establish that a felt need is involved. In other words, it is not necessary for the initiative to come from the community or for a prior contribution to be collected. The above discussion assumes the situation of the water agency using par-

7 Geoff Lamb, *Peasant politics, conflict and development in Murang'a*, Julian Friedman, London, 1974; Marcelo Grondín, *Comunidad Andina: explotación calculada*, Secretaría de Estado de Agricultura, Santo Domingo, 1978, p. 226.

ticipatory methods, or contemplating their use. It could, on the other hand, be argued that an even stronger felt need is proved where community action is undertaken without any great external agency input. However, many needed projects in many communities, particularly poorer ones, do require outside help.

7. Participation ensures things are done the right way

If the users take an active part in the planning and design of the systems they will use, then these systems will presumably be better adapted to their needs than if the technical solutions are decided by outsiders without consultation. Some observers, however, make a distinction between major technical alternatives and such questions as location (e.g., of standpipes) or the detailed design of the components of most direct interest to the user. The distinction may be useful, but there could be a danger that it will lead to the assumption that the population can have no view on the more basic design issues, whereas these may be fundamental to meeting their needs: an example is that it is essential to take pastoralists' knowledge into account in siting water-points in semi-arid pastoral areas, but they are often disregarded by more educated members of other ethnic groups.[8]

It may be that the exercise of an open-minded and imaginative approach by the professionals or experts involved is as important as the participation of the users, and is in fact a necessary complement if user involvement is to lead to improved design in most circumstances, since many users will simply assume that the experts know best and will not raise alternative possibilities themselves.

There is one potential problem which may be mentioned here: when given the opportunity to choose between different technical solutions, there is a tendency for people to choose the

[8] M.L. Parkipuny, Malambo, Masai District, in Gerhard Tschannerl and Mark R. Mujwahuzi, *Impact of rural water supply: eight self-help schemes in Arumeru, Masai and Lushoto Districts*, BRALUP Research Paper no. 37, Bureau of Resource Assessment and Land Use Planning, University of Dar-es-Salaam, Dar-es-Salaam, 1975.

solution which is more "modern", sophisticated, or expensive, for reasons connected with prestige. This is particularly true if they will not bear very much of the additional cost of a more expensive solution, or if the cheaper one requires more work which they will have to do without payment. For instance, in Ghana, where communal village latrines are common, villagers often state a preference for the type emptied by vacuum truck over the deep trench-pit latrine. The latter has to be replaced by village labour when it is full, whereas the vacuum truck operates at the expense of local government, an expense which is not charged to the particular village. Yet the pit latrine may be regarded as more appropriate to rural Ghana than the vacuum truck, which is subject to frequent breakdowns.[9]

Therefore, it is clear that consultation on technical options must be approached carefully. Villages cannot be asked to plan something they do not know about, nor of course to take over the technical design, which is the legitimate responsibility of the engineer. But they can have a useful part to play in the discussion where there is a choice to be made between alternative solutions either in terms of major decisions over types of system to be adopted, or more minor questions of the design of user facilities—and useful suggestions for design improvements may emerge from open discussion. Openness is also required over the costs of different solutions and who will bear them.

8. Use of indigenous knowledge and expertise

Recent years have seen a fundamental change in the attitudes of professionals in many fields toward the value of the knowledge and skills possessed by indigenous practitioners in their fields. It is now generally accepted that indigenous practices are usually very well adapted to the circumstances in which they developed. One of the arguments for participation is that it enables progressive change to take place while making

[9] IDS Health Group, *Health needs and health services in rural Ghana*, IDS Research Report, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, vol. I, 1978, p. 218.

use of this knowledge and adapting it to new circumstances, rather than discarding it and devaluing its possessors.

There are two aspects: close attention can be given to local expertise during the process of consultation in the planning and design stage; and indigenous techniques and experts can be used in the implementation of projects. Examples of the latter include the use of the indigenous medical traditions in China, or (on a completely different scale, of course) of indigenous building methods in the water storage projects conducted by Guggenheim among the Dogon in Mali.[10] This approach involves strong respect for and understanding of the indigenous technology, but also a dynamic view which does not see it as a cultural heritage to be preserved separately and kept pure, but rather as a useful expertise to be improved upon by combination with elements of "Western" technology.

In many cases, of course, an introduced technology will be indisputably better in all respects; but sometimes indigenous techniques have advantages even when they appear less efficient or more costly: they use local labour and raw materials rather than imports; maintenance and repair will be easier for local craftsmen, and there will be less demand for scarce skilled manpower or spare parts; or the indigenous technique serves some additional purpose neglected in a superficial comparison. In the field of agricultural extension, there are many cases where farmers have been induced to adopt new practices which were not to their advantage.[11] A similar thing can happen also in the field of nutrition education.[12]

[10] Hans Guggenheim and Rosalie Fanale, Water storage through shared technology: four projects among the Dogon in Mali, *Assignment Children*, no. 45/46, UNICEF, Geneva, Spring 1979, pp. 151-166.

[11] H.D. Dias, Selective adoption as a strategy for agricultural development, lessons from adoption in S.E. Sri Lanka, in B.H. Farmer (ed.), *Green revolution?*, Macmillan, London, 1977, pp. 70-72; S.Y. Atsu, *The Focus and Concentrate Programme in the Kpandu and Ho Districts: evaluation of an agricultural extension programme*, Technical Publication Series no. 34, Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research, University of Ghana, Legon, 1974, esp. pp. 52-72.

[12] G.M. Gordon, The evaluation of a nutritional program in Northern Ghana, in *Getting the most out of food*, no. 12, Van den Berghs and Jurgens Nutrition Education Service, 1976.

It may be that the successful advocacy of latrines has, in some cases, had a similarly negative result: "The availability of simple privies, as we noted in several countries, did not add anything to the solution of the problem. Because many of these were unsanitary they proved, in fact, to have a statistically significant adverse effect."[13]

In making use of indigenous expertise there is the problem, for the water agency using participatory methods, that it has to operate on a large scale and cannot easily plan for making use of local techniques and expertise of which it may have no knowledge. It is no accident that, for instance, Guggenheim's water storage projects took place in a few villages only. In some cases, it may be possible for an imaginative approach to indigenous techniques to be adopted by a water agency, but this argument for participation generally applies more strongly to situations of "community action", whether externally stimulated or autonomous.

9. Freedom from dependence on professionals

Largely because professional skills are scarce and can be sold in an international market-place where fees are dependent on the rates of pay in rich countries, and, some would say, because the scarcity of these skills is institutionally maintained through insistence on unnecessarily long and expensive periods of professional education not geared to urgent local needs, professionals in most developing countries enjoy a standard of living incomparably higher than that of the mass of the population. In this context, a radical approach to community participation envisages the prospect of freeing the mass of the population from dependence on a virtual monopoly of expertise controlled by professionals. In the health field, for in-

[13] *Summary report on diarrhoeal diseases in seven developing countries over a five-year period, 1960-1965*, World Health Organization, Geneva, 1966, quoted by Robert J. Saunders and Jeremy J. Warford, *Village water supply, economics and policy in the developing world*, published for The World Bank, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976, p. 212.

stance, in this view, collective self-care can replace the need for paying comparatively huge sums for treatment by a doctor.[14]

In this extreme form, the view may be said to be born of despair of the political system ensuring a fairer distribution of income or access to adequate services. One school of thought[15] contends that even state provision of services to all is an undesirable solution, since the services are still provided by professionals, people are subjected to their control, and their monopoly is preserved. Instead, people should be equipped for autonomously fulfilling their own needs, as individuals and small communities. It is difficult to imagine the socio-political structure of a society which met this condition.

However, a less extreme view sees scope for moving in the direction of disseminating more widely the knowledge and skills which have been the preserve of narrow professional elites, as in the case of the Chinese barefoot doctors. In the field of water supply, the suggestion is that a participatory programme can teach mechanical and other skills, and that every effort should be made to make this teaching as generally useful as possible. A villager trained in operation and maintenance might be enabled to open a mechanical workshop. Such training can also end a monopoly by one local craftsman.[16]

10. Conscientization

Participation in efforts to bring about communal improvements should, even (or especially) if the efforts are frustrated, help people better to understand the nature of the constraints which are hindering their escape from poverty. They may learn how to make more effective demands on

[14] David Bradford Werner, *The village health worker—lackey or liberator?*, paper prepared for the International Hospital Federation Congress, sessions on health auxiliaries and the health team, Tokyo, 22-27 May, 1977, 16 p.

[15] Ivan Illich, *Limits to medicine—medical Nemesis: the expropriation of health*, Marion Boyars, London, 1976, 296 p.

[16] Bo Westman and Fred Hedkvist, *The impact of the rural water program in Tanzania*, Research Division, SIDA, Stockholm, 1972, p. 7.

government, or acquire a new resolve to change a situation of oppression in which they find themselves.

This is, of course, precisely the reason why some governments which represent entrenched interests are suspicious of efforts to arouse community participation. Government agencies may be prevented from using participatory methods, or alternatively the form of participation may be kept under strict control, defined narrowly in terms of the completion of projects and provision of services rather than in terms of increasing local organizational capacity, and de-emphasizing all elements which might bring into question the distribution of benefits from particular projects or the distribution of wealth and power at local or national levels.

In other countries, the government's interest in improving the position of weaker sections of the population is to varying degrees frustrated by *local* power structures. Two broad approaches to the problem are possible: close targeting of programmes to benefit weaker sections, implemented through the bureaucracy and with administrative controls to ensure that the benefits reach those for whom they are intended; and, on the other hand, the encouragement of organization among the poor to claim their rights. This begins with "conscientization", the development of consciousness among the weaker sections concerning the structural causes of their situation, or at least their rights under existing laws. The two approaches are not in conflict and may be adopted together, but they seem to reflect different opinions or assessments of what is likely to be successful. In India, for instance, the two approaches are reflected respectively in the Integrated Rural Development Programme with its strategy of "decentralized micro-level block planning for full employment", which carries planning down to the level of the individual family,[17] and the National Adult Education Programme, whose objectives are explicit on the need for conscientization. The differing opinions are reflected in different views of the role of local government institutions—in terms of their existing tendency to be "dominated by the rich and the

[17] R.N. Azad, *op. cit.*

strong"[18] or in terms of their potential to serve as organizations more representative of the weaker sections.[19]

Where local government institutions are less well developed, the committee structures created by community participation programmes may take their place to some degree, as they may also in the villages too small to have their own local government councils. Then, the same question often poses itself: are they necessarily dominated by the rich and the strong, perhaps even preventing benefits from reaching the weaker sections—or do they have the potential of strengthening the hand of the poor?

[18] Government of India, Report of the Working Group on Block Level Planning (Dantwala Committee Report), Planning Commission, New Delhi, 1978, p. 12.

[19] Government of India, Mehta Committee, see Mohit Bhattacharya and S.K. Sharma, Institutional issues in India's rural development, *Community Development Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1979.