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## **JOURNAL FÜR ENTWICKLUNGSPOLITIK, XIII. Jg., Heft 3, 1997** **Austrian Journal of Development Studies**

### **Participation and institutional change: A gender perspective** **Schwerpunktredakteurinnen: Irmi Hanak und Ines Smyth**

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## **Editorial**

Participation, one of the key terms in development theory of the nineties, is presently used in a great variety of contexts and meanings. Based on a human-centered development approach that can be traced to the work of Paulo Freire, it is now found in documents and policy papers of governments, non-governmental organizations and international agencies, including those of the World Bank. Views on what is actually meant by participation and how a participative approach is realized in development work differ widely. To some it means sharing costs, to others democratic decision-making or measures to include marginalized groups.

We found it useful to adopt the following definition of participation:

*The notion of participatory development emphasizes the relevance for sustainable and equitable development of broad-based participation in the productive and decision-making processes, in access to education, health and other relevant public services and in the benefits of development.*

(DAC-Report 1989, p. 77, quoted from Nuscheler 1995, p. 195)

Raising difficult issues of development co-operation such as democratic decision-making and equitable distribution of the benefits of development, this notion of participation has the potential to challenge existing power relations between North and South, women and men in all types of institutions and organizations: from the household, to community and non-governmental organizations, to the organs of the state and supra-state bodies.

Processes of democratization, the perceived need for building the capacity of organizations of civil society, the increased importance of NGOs in development pose a number of difficult questions related to participation: what are the processes through which given social issues become defined as valid focus for development work, and through which others are ignored? Which social groups continue to be excluded (women, youth, poor communities)? What notion of participation becomes dominant within different organizations? How seriously is participative decision-making taken within organizations? Which organizations manage to benefit from the increased attention given to institution building in development?

Looking at these questions from a gender perspective provides a useful framework of analysis. Focusing on the socially and culturally constructed differences between women and men gender theory allows us to analyze relations between women and men in the context of other social categories such as wealth, class and age. In particular, this analysis allows us to characterize such differences as inequalities based on power relations, and to locate them in

the context of the institutions which create and reproduce them. Finally, this approach allows us to consider issues of participation at the different institutional levels.

The three regional focuses on Indonesia, Tanzania and Zambia mean that issues of participation and institutional development are highlighted by the authors in the context of the respective countries:

In the Tanzanian context, the articles by Nöst and Hanak focus on the organizational potential and problems of NGOs as compared to governmental institutions. While the agricultural extension service in Zanzibar has the potential to reach out to a large number of farmers, its success is limited because of bureaucratic constraints. In changing conditions of economic development, farmers shift from working in co-operatives to individual enterprise, making the work of the extension agent more difficult. Gender bias in the provision of services – extension agents at the grass-root level are almost exclusively men who are reluctant to work with women, especially individual farmers – limit the potential of the program. By analyzing the organizational set-up, Nöst illustrates why challenges of a changing environment are not met with the necessary flexibility. On a more general level, Nöst's research findings allow conclusions on the role of the state in providing essential services.

In the context of a Tanzanian NGO, Hanak uses discourse analysis to illustrate processes of organizational development and establishment of hierarchies. From a gender perspective, such developments are of particular interest. This is because while gender issues are part of most documents from project applications to policy papers, they are either absent or of secondary importance at the level of institutional development. Focussing on a meeting that brings together representatives of women, men and youth at a grass-root level as well as facilitators of the implementing organization of a rural project in North-Western Tanzania, characteristic patterns of interaction emerge. Women who had taken the decision to organize separately in order to develop their own agenda are accorded a junior position in the organizational network. Together with the youth group, they share the experience of being patronized by the established project group (which is *de facto* a men's group, but not labeled thus). While gender relations are transformed with the progress of the project, inequalities are re-established or even enhanced on another level.

The transition to a multi-party-system in an urban context in Zambia is the background of Schlyter's article on political participation of urban youth in Zambia. Interviews with youths reveal that their attitude to political change varied according to their social and educational background. However the majority of the young people showed little knowledge and a high degree of cynicism towards the recent changes and, more broadly, towards politics. The author attributes this to the fact that the period of democratization has been accompanied by impoverishment. Moreover, in the newly elected multiparty government there was no party acting at the local level and the possibilities of active participation in the community had become more remote. Women more than men missed the

presence of the chairladies of the party previously in power (UNIP) who had performed social work and helped to resolve social conflict. Schlyter's findings challenge the assumption that democratisation processes, such as the introduction of a multiparty system, necessarily lead to an increase in peoples participation at the local level.

Smyth's article looks at the ways in which the discourses and practices of major social institutions, the State – especially the law and social services – the growing numbers of non-governmental organizations active in the country and research organizations, all contribute to the denial of the existence of domestic violence. The reasons behind this are found in the dominant ideologies promoted by the State, which represent the family and wider society as mirror images of each, both regulated by harmonious and hierarchical relations. In both spheres women have the responsibility of maintaining harmony. In this context exposing personal experiences of domestic violence also exposes a woman's failure to fulfill her culturally defined duties of maintaining an harmonious household. Acknowledging conflict within the home would also imply acknowledging disorder in society, and thus lead to questioning the political order. Thus the emphasis of the paper is on how certain institutions are contributing to legitimizing, obscuring and denying, and therefore perpetuating domestic violence, rather than being the mechanisms through which this social problem is exposed and confronted.

The treatment of domestic violence by certain institutions is elaborated by Saptari and Utrecht. Their focus are the constraints and opportunities encountered by women's groups in promoting women's interests and their perspectives in Indonesia. The article analyses the activities that women's organizations undertake in three themes: the Anti-rape campaign in Jakarta, the peasant women's struggles for land rights in Northern Sumatra and the struggle of factory workers in the major cities of Java. The impact that such organizations have in these three areas of work is shown to be extremely varied, and to be less strong for the case of sexual violence. This is attributed, in the paper, to various causes including the unwillingness of other organizations to recognize this as a topic of sufficiently political significance and hence a priority. Finally, the paper assesses how women's organizations co-operate or fail to co-operate, and how this affects their ability to take maximum advantage of the opportunities offered by national and international networks.

The variety of situations and contexts, as well as the variety of interpretations of participation and institutional change presented in these articles, draws our attention to the diverse levels at which these issues can and must be considered. They also point to the interactions and unequal relations between institutions of various types, between institutions and their social and economic contexts, and between institutions and people.

*Irmi Hanak and Ines Smyth*