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INTRODUCTION: PARTICIPATION OF THE RURAL POOR
IN ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT

by

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Clarence J. Dias

The papers which follow in this section report the experiences of a variety of grass-roots organizations of the rural poor and portray different modes of "participating" in rural development.

Several of the papers describe what can probably be characterized as "conventional" approaches to organizing participation. One interesting example is depicted in Uphoff's account of the efforts of experts and officials in Sri Lanka to draft legislation establishing a hierarchy of water management associations in Gal Oya--each category of groups to perform, prescribed functions in the administration of the total project. Another example is Munkner's account of the attempt in Niger to establish a national system of cooperatives by legislation. In these schemes participation means the devolution, to local groups, of various functions in the administration of state-managed development programs at local levels. Sometimes, too, provision is made for consultation with these groups by decision makers at higher levels. The forms and structures for participation are prescribed, a priori, by state law (e.g., legislation governing the formation and governance of particular participatory groups, the powers which they may exercise, the processes they must follow for group decision making). These kinds of participation are encouraged where policy-makers believe community involvements will help state actors to understand problems to be addressed, or help them to enlist the energies of intended beneficiaries in various tasks, or help them to change farming practices and increase productivity, or help to promote more equitable distribution of state-managed resources. "Rights" to participate are dependent on official determination that the benefits desired can be realized by the participation prescribed.

The "alternative" approach views participation in quite different terms. It means empowering people by recognizing and facilitating the exercise of basic rights to form their own, autonomous groups. It means enabling these groups to share power in the design of programs as well as administration, and enabling them to initiate their own self-managed projects, sometimes in collaboration with state agencies (as in the case of community-managed primary health schemes described by Gish), sometimes quite independently (as in the case of Upper Volta cooperatives

described by Munkner, or "business groups" described by Ghai). Participation also means recognition of the right of people to use their organizations as vehicles to demand access to resources, to seek review of state programs and to redress grievances arising from abuses of power or failure to enforce laws designed to protect rights of tenants, debtors, women and other oppressed groups. (The Sarilakas report portrays this kind of participation.) Finally, and ultimately of crucial importance, participation means empowering combinations of local groups to carry their demands to government bodies and decision makers operating at national and international levels; and our final chapter discusses some efforts in Asia to realize these forms of participation.

The "alternative" approach values participation not simply because it will make state-managed programs more beneficial for the poor, but because it can bring about redistributions of power which are essential to realization of people-centered efforts to develop and because all of these forms of participation are essential to the development of "self-reliance" --capacities to take risks, innovate, assert power and change structures. In this view participation is an end as well as a means of development --a "basic " right, but, more accurately, a bundle of rights which are analyzed in the final chapter.

Many people, understandably, are inclined to dismiss this expansive view of participation (despite its reiteration in a growing body of international declarations) because the existing political-economies of so many third world states seem to provide such a hostile environment. Several papers in this volume suggest the range of constraints impeding efforts to initiate alternative approaches. (For example: Ghai's description of the post-colonial bureaucracy in Papua New Guinea; Anderson's depiction of pervasive patron-client relations in the Philippines; the Sarilakas account of obstacles impeding mobilization of rural workers who have long been harshly repressed; Uphoff's concluding observations setting out other constraints.) Yet the reports here also suggest that participation (in design, institutional control, administration, review and regulation) is often essential if programs intended to bring benefits to the rural poor are to do so in fact; and participation can only achieve these purposes if it is exercised through autonomous, essentially endogenous groups --if the legal structuring of these groups is itself a product of participatory action rather than state prescription. (In these respects the observations of Munkner on the potentiality of endogenous cooperatives in Africa, and of Uphoff on the logic and dynamics of collective action are instructive.) Thus, alternative approaches must be taken seriously if existing conditions of rural impoverishment and exclusion are the focus of "development."

Several reports which follow (e. g. , Munkner, Uphoff, Sarilakas) indicate some of the kinds of help people may need in order to form groups and initiate effective collective action: new knowledge and skills, the stimulus of group dialogue and reflection on shared experiences. The reports portraying the mobilization of the Sarilakas sugar workers and the Gal Oya rice growers (Uphoff) and "small farmers" development groups in Nepal (Paul and Dias) show how enlightened state agencies can provide this help through specially-recruited "organizers" and "legal facilitators" made accountable to the communities to which they are posted. On the other hand, Munkner's report on cooperatives in francophonic West Africa shows how difficult, if not impossible, that task may be if the "animators" and other personnel sent to the countryside are members of a state bureaucracy, particularly one on which the community may depend for resources. For obvious reasons, agencies furnishing organizational resources to communities should be independent of agencies furnishing essential resources such as credit, and inputs. Even where governments support alternative approaches, nongovernmental support groups will often be needed, and our concluding chapter reports on experiences of some Asian support groups.

Even where outside support is available, people in rural communities may face difficult choices determining the appropriate social unit within which to organize collective activities: should it be the village? a wider grouping of rural workers who share common needs or grievances? Obviously, the answer depends on many considerations, and ultimately people must determine for themselves the base of their groups, and the bases for inter-group collaboration. Uphoff shows how the Gal Oya farmers addressed these questions in the context of some very difficult problems. Kerr's report shows that there often exist within rural communities many kinds of traditional groups--some highly organized under customary law. Under what circumstances can these groups become vehicles for new forms of participation in development? Ghai's report suggests some of the possibilities.

As many reports show, the social unit which people may choose for organization may, indeed, be quite small, e. g. , the village. That choice is understandable, but it raises important, difficult questions if small groups are to become capable of uniting in one way or another to pursue collective activities on a broader scale, and in forums where "high level" decisions are made which may deeply affect the welfare of communities. These problems are noted in several of the papers. Our final chapter discusses the central importance of regional or national "social action groups;" and we describe some initiatives recently taken in some Asian countries to mount this kind of activity.

Cumulatively, these chapters provide a range of concrete experiences, conflicts and problems relevant to serious discussion of participation in alternative approaches to development. They underscore the importance of creating, often through struggle and conflict, appropriate legal environments for mobilization, organization and collective efforts, hence the significance of "legal resources" in these processes, a topic taken up in the final chapter. We need only add that the broader questions about law and participation, addressed in all of the chapters which follow, are novel and difficult. This is an initial attempt to examine them. Hopefully, it is a task which now, increasingly, challenges lawyers concerned with social justice for the rural poor.