



# Re-examining participatory approaches in education

DRAWING FROM THE CHALLENGES OF PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT, **ANANNYA CHAKRABORTY** DESCRIBES THE NEED FOR INNOVATIONS TO SUCCESSFULLY ENGAGE EDUCATION STAKEHOLDERS AT EVERY LEVEL.

Participatory approaches in international development are largely understood to enable community involvement and ownership. In education, the broad goal of development projects is to uplift and empower communities through education and give them opportunities for better livelihoods, social mobility, and fuller participation in democracy.

Participatory development is not a new term. One of the earliest studies by Miller in 1979 pointed out 'Participation implies a systematic local autonomy, in which communities discover the possibilities of exercising choice and thereby becoming capable of managing their own development.' Cohen and Uphoff state in their study in 1980 that 'it appears more fruitful to regard to participation as generally denoting the involvement of a significant number of persons in situations of actions which enhance their well-being'.

Robert Chamber's research on Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is widely used in the development sector now. In practice however, there remain several areas for improvement to ensure that recipient communities are fully included in decision-making for programmes that affect their lives.

### Barriers to participation

Empirical research provides evidence that highlights the formidable barriers in implementing participatory approaches. Charlick pointed out in 1980 that programmes targeting quick tangible outputs may end-up relying on local elites. For instance, Moss's study of participatory learning has shown that the *Bhils* in Western India preferred Eucalyptus as timber for housing not because they had any previous experience with it, but because the Local Forest Department favoured Eucalyptus. Instead of participatory learning meaning that professionals learnt from indigenous

knowledge, it ended up ensuring that farmers acquired and manipulated the new 'planning knowledge'.

Overs, Doezema, and Shivdas mention in their 2002 study that although both academic and NGO literature emphasise the importance of consulting women in participatory organisations, in practice women rarely get an opportunity to express their opinion. Philips mentions in his 1995 study that including a few women members as participants does not ensure the representation of all the women. Often women working in committees tend to legitimise the decisions taken by male members, further reinforcing inequalities in gender.

Stiefel and Wolfe pointed out in the early 90s that governments tend to encourage participation in fields which do not directly challenge the power of local elites and state agents. This is especially true for those areas where co-operation from the people is essential for the success of a policy – population control or environmental conservation, or activities that are 'costly', 'difficult to administer', and 'politically unattractive'.

### Participation in education

In the education sector, several questions are frequently raised. Is education only for the rich? Do poor and rich both have equal access to quality education? How should equity be ensured in the provision of education? While these questions are common headlines in our newspaper dailies, the power relations underpinning design and implementation of education policies and programmes affecting each stakeholder may seldom be covered. If we focus on development programmes from the lens of participatory approaches, how can we ensure that teachers, parents, and students have more authority and involvement in education?

Education initiatives can turn blind to

the agency of teachers in education reforms. Explaining state-led Indian education reform, Batra in her 2005 study says 'it is therefore no surprise that for the last two decades the schoolteacher, as a former centrepiece of processes of social change, is reduced to a mere object of educational reform or worse a passive agent of the prevailing ideology of the modern state.' In a developing country context, education systems have a top-down structure that often eliminates the point of view of teachers in high-level decision making. To illustrate with an example, hierarchical methods of curriculum planning have to give way to more consultative methods.

Similarly, as many school-going children in India cannot read, write, or do basic mathematics, engaging with the community, understanding home language and culture, and setting common goals should be a priority. Given our diversity, each community has a distinctive culture, language, tradition, law, and race. Class and geography are other factors that affect participation in any activity. The participation of a community is critical in promoting learning and setting learning goals. In a country with a large number of first-generation learners however, this might not be easy.

Although there is increasing recognition of the need for evidence-based decision making in education and including communities and their learning needs in policies, there is further scope of exploring and replicating practical solutions in different geographies. One example of change was provided by *IDRonline* recently in an article on schools run by the Delhi Directorate of Education that highlighted the importance of listening to parents and taking timely action to ensure that parents continue to remain involved in matters related to the school. 'The SMC *sabhas*, where parents and decision makers from around 48 concerned departments have a dialogue, is one such platform. Up to 30 percent of school-related grievances

are solved within 30 days because of these *sabhas*. Thus, a mechanism to connect parents to parents, parents to teachers and parents to the system must be a part of the change'. A greater challenge for the development sector is however, sustaining such participatory initiatives and scaling them up.

### Participation in technologically enabled societies

Over the years, the meaning of participation has changed thanks to the rise of social media and online communities. Even when individuals are not directly consulted in decisions that affect them, they can still express their views online through social media accounts and blogs. While these might be regulated in some countries or still be limited to some, undeniably technology has changed the method of participation.

This was noted by Gladwell in 2010 when he investigated the enabling role of social media in allowing the powerless to participate. He pointed out that the new tools of social media have made it easier for them to participate and give a voice to their concerns. Social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook play an important role in increasing participation. The ties formed between people may be weak but every participant is a source of new ideas and information for the other. The relationship between participants is not hierarchical in nature, thus making participation easier.

In our new technology-led society, social media offers a diversity of opinion and allows easy involvement of participants; more and more individuals and organisations may thus view this as a source of gathering information. In 2009, Skoric, Yung, and Ng examined the role of the internet in political participation in Singapore and noted that 'the convenience provided by the internet makes online political participation easier and therefore increases the likelihood of this occurring when one is encouraged'.

### Looking ahead

What could be some new ways of increasing participation in education? How can education stakeholders raise their concerns through new technological platforms about policies and programmes that affect them? And how would technology create systems that enable participation from urban and rural parts of the country? Unfortunately, there are few easy answers since the challenges of participation vary across different levels with the community and civil society at one end and donors, international organisations, and governments at another.

While it is recognised that participation of different stakeholders has a role in improving learning, development research needs to provide solutions and innovations that can make full participation a reality. With education in crisis and countries battling to make systemic improvements in learning, the role of participatory approaches to development needs to be re-examined. If real needs trickle up through innovative ways of engagement and participation, can it eventually improve policy and programme interventions? In other words, what kind of changes are required in participatory methods to ensure that educational interventions appropriately address the needs of the learners by including the viewpoints of stakeholders. **T**





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#### LINKS

<https://idronline.org/the-role-of-parents-in-improving-learning-outcomes/>

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