

# CONFLICT IN PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS FOR EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY FROM SOUTH AFRICA

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**Keywords:** accountability, advocacy, community participation, conflict, development, empowerment, GEAR, human capital, RDP, social capital, sustainability, training, vulnerability, South Africa.

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## Summary

Against the background of increasing emphasis on the role of communities in achieving sustainable urban development, this paper focuses on local conflict in public participation, and the potential for mitigating its effects. The findings are presented from research commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council, which was carried out in South Africa in 1998 (ESRC R000237908).

Through an investigation into participatory development, the research aimed to address the failure of many community development projects to progress beyond the planning stage. Building on the considerable experience of participatory development amassed in South Africa, its objectives were to inform development policy and practice, and to contribute to academic debate on development studies and local democracy, through a comparative analysis of eighteen public-amenity projects, developed during the period 1983 to 1998. Findings were that project management, local political and institutional context, and national policy are all aspects to consider if the gains from participatory development are to be real and sustained. The relevance of the findings to northern contexts is also discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Community participation in urban renewal projects has increasingly become accepted over the last twenty years in both North and South. It is seen as a means of empowering communities, and of creating more sustainable urban and local development through contributing to the sustainability of the broader social and economic fabric. In developing countries particularly, management by expatriates and government officials has led to frequent failure of development projects to meet, or sustain, their objectives. In contrast, participation has been shown to be effective in making physical improvements more sustainable in the long run, particularly where public amenities are concerned—e.g. water and sanitation or public facilities. Despite the growing importance of participatory methods in practice and the increasing recognition accorded to them in academic and political debate, development practice continues to be plagued by failures, and results often differ from those anticipated.

The academic analysis of community participation has gradually shifted its focus. From a debate about the merits of participatory development in contrast with imposed development, the discussion moved on to an analysis of the extent, or quality, of participation. In parallel, it developed into an analysis of the fundamental purpose of adopting a participatory approach, focusing on the concept of an “ends versus means” trade-off. The argument was that projects could be differentiated according to the goal of the participatory process. Some projects (or programs) were results-oriented. Community participation was seen as a means to achieving, for example, a more appropriate brief or management structure, in effect securing higher productivity or reliability for the investment made. Others were focused primarily on social and political development within the participating community, with the project or program results seen as secondary. This is an argument about empowerment, its nature, and its long-term potential impact on a community’s ability to bring about its own development.

Still more recent debate, much of it relating to participatory development in more affluent countries, acknowledges the sometimes ambiguous intentions of the formal structures of participatory development, suggesting that project and program structures, timetables, and agendas reflect often contradictory objectives of various participating parties. Some writers on community agency and participation assume—indeed, find—cohesive communities. They focus heavily on inter-agency conflicts of interest in service delivery. A growing body of opinion, however, suggests that conflict within communities is no less important as an obstacle to the development process.

- *The first objective of this chapter is to investigate the role and sources of intra-community conflict in discouraging participation in small-scale community development projects.*

Discussion of both the ends and means of participation has increasingly focused on empowerment and sustainability of development. “Empowerment” rarely is a neutral term and its definitions vary with context and over time. The first instance of variation is over a “*unit of empowerment*”. In the north, as central government has increasingly withdrawn from direct service provision, empowerment has been seen as a

strengthening of individuals' position in the market for privatized and semi-privatized services, based on a philosophy which is both individualistic and consumerist. At the same time, echoing a well-established definition in the Dictionary of Social Work while embodying a development agency view, the World Bank Public Participation Group sees empowerment as the transfer of control over decisions and resources to a community or organization.

A second variation is to do with the *purpose* of empowerment. Unlike the Dictionary of Social Work, the World Bank's emphasis is not on empowerment as a facilitator of rights in general, but as a realization of rights to enable greater control over livelihood resources. The ultimate target is independence by the community from external agents in formulating its agenda and managing its affairs so that, ultimately, only funds need be transferred from donor to agent. The process involves capacity-building, particularly in management skills, transfers of authority from donor to recipient, and support for new initiatives by stakeholders. This is a definition which, by implication, focuses on the *management of resources*, particularly transfers between north and south, and in a context involving a broad range of political structures. The outcome is a notion of empowerment which focuses on intellectual and technical skills of individuals and on social skills of communities or organizations. It can be linked to discourses of "human capital", but also to the increasing interest in measurement of "social capital".

Empowerment, as the development of individuals, today focuses primarily on "human capital". The northern concept of social work largely assumes a free or semi-free society, in which *economic and social constraints* act as the prime barriers to realization of rights. This approach is apparent in development studies alongside the agency approach.

For the purposes of this chapter, empowerment is conceptualized at distinct organizational levels, ranging from individuals, through groups, to communities. In each case, empowerment is accepted as being an increase in influence and control, through an acquisition of knowledge and skills.

- *The second objective of this chapter is to investigate the links between participation and empowerment, particularly as they are affected by intra-community conflicts of interest.*
- *The third objective is to investigate the links between empowerment through participation on the one hand, and sustainability on the other, with particular reference to the role of intra-community conflicts of interest.*

Finally, whatever the reasons for failure in participatory development, it is likely to be triggered at particular points in the cycle, during which a project is more vulnerable.

- *The fourth objective is to identify those points in the participatory development process which are most vulnerable to conflict.*

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Michal Lyons** is an architect, planner and human geographer, who trained and practiced in Israel, England and the United States, and has worked internationally primarily in housing development. Her research has focused on the comparative spatial analysis of development trends. She is well known for her work on migration and the urban economies of England and Wales, which has been ranked “outstanding” twice. Since 1996 she has led studies of participatory development across South Africa, focusing on changing norms of governance and their influence on public participation and empowerment in local economic development. Current work includes a comparative analysis of the formation and transformation of social capital in local economic development. She directs the Urban and Peri-Urban Research Unit, with current research and consultancy projects in Kenya, Senegal, Ghana, South Africa, and Brazil.