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Participation as popular agency: the limitations and possibilities for transforming development in the Alexandra Renewal Project

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Abstract

Participation is often hailed as a salient component in the attainment of development. Over the past few decades a virtually universal consensus has emerged amongst conservatives, liberals and radicals alike, that development cannot occur without participation. As such, participation has become mainstreamed by development projects, governments and global institutions around the world. However, there is little agreement about what the purpose and meaning is of participation in development. This study contributes to the radical theorist's responses to the mainstreaming of participation that have tended to adopt binaries in order to settle this predicament. These scholars initially introduced an elementary framework to deal with this issue by distinguishing between participation as a means to an end (that is, participation to achieve particular development objectives) and participation as an end in itself. They continued this trend over the past decade by suggesting that participation is a way of co-opting agents into top-down development schemes that suit the interests of those in power. They went further by explaining the conditions under which participation holds the promise of achieving the emancipation of humankind from oppressive systems of power. However, these approaches are misleading even for the radical scholar because the practice, and therefore interpretations, of participation are far more eclectic. The study adopts a more nuanced interpretation by advancing beyond binary approaches to the study of participation in development.

The thesis employs this theoretical lens in order to understand the varied, multiple and contested meanings and processes of participation at the local level in the context of the Alexandra Renewal Project (ARP), a flagship, nationally funded development project undertaken by the government which seeks to incorporate participation in every aspect of development. The thesis uses primarily in-depth interviews and observation of various stakeholders in Alexandra to answer the central research question: What are the possibilities and limitations for participatory spaces to influence development? Following Cornwall, it traces the inception and evolving character of "invented" (grassroots or autonomous movements) and "invited" (those induced by the government) participatory spaces in Alexandra. Participatory spaces are political and social spaces which are determined, and altered, by power relations. As the key part of an attempt to decentralise decision-making, the dominant discourse of the ARP has been reified and constructed through an "invited" space called the Alexandra Development Forum (ADF), an umbrella organisation that claims to

represent approximately seventy community-based organisations in Alexandra and therefore to speak on behalf of the community.

Aspects of Giddens's theory of "structuration" are invoked to show how "invented" spaces affiliated to the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO), the South African Community Party (SACP), the Umpakathi Development Forum (UDF) and the Alexandra Land and Property Owners Association (ALPOA) shape, and are shaped by, dominant development discourses and practices in the ARP. These organisations were not able to alter development within the "invited" participatory spaces provided by the government, including the ADF, because it is permeated with power relations in the form of discourse and socially excludes dissent from the local government's trajectory as a result. The above organisations have thus, in some cases, influenced development practice and reshaped what is acceptable in "invited" participatory spaces by exerting their power through popular protest and the opening of court cases.

The study concludes by arguing that, while the above participatory spaces have, at times, been successful at influencing imminent development, specific interventions, they have had very limited success at engaging immanent development, development as an underlying process of social change (i.e. the development of capitalism). Because people's agency does not affect the limited resources provided by the government under its current neoliberal policies, participation in Alexandra is "zero-sum." In other words, a win by one group within Alexandra happens at the expense of another and people's lives are not improved overall as a result of participation in development. The thesis then addresses these limitations and explains how one specific participatory space discussed in the thesis distinguishes itself from the others by its sustained action which forces the government to heed to its demands. This participatory space claims state resources on its own terms, rather than on the terms that the government has prescribed, and thereby plants the seeds for a transformative approach to participation in development which is based on the principles of non-violent direct action, a theme that has been neglected by radical scholars who seek to understand the transformative potential for participation in development.