



International development: challenges for a world in transition

Does Empowerment Disempower?

Narrator:

Ramya Subramanian of the group for Development Policy and Practice at the Open University, sometimes feels rather exasperated that PRA has become so closely associated with Chambers and his colleagues. She pointed out to me that the approach has been widely used in India for a long time. Where it's potential but also it's acute limitations are well known.

RS:

For example there is a very effective education programme for women. Which works with adult women from schedule castes. From the lowest most oppressed groups in society. And they have found, and most of these interventions find, that you cannot over-ride existing elite structures. There is no way you can actually go directly to the women concerned. And the way in which you couch your intervention or the terms of reference for intervention, have to be very very carefully done. And I think in that sense you have to be very aware of the dynamics within a village. So you don't make the conditions for the women themselves much hard.

And I think that's one of the other issues about participation. Is that as interveners we can go in, but we also leave. I think for feminist interventions particularly it's been very important not to sort of go in there saying 'we're here to change the world'. And I think with participation you can have agents who are over zealous as well. In terms of thinking they're there to set the problems of the world right. Which I think is not the way to go about doing it.

Narrator:

I took up this point with Robert Chambers. Empowering some surely means disempowering others. And seems to point to a contradiction in his arguments. Choices have to be made about who to form alliances with. Who to support. And that choice in the end must in practice be based on the outsiders conceptions of social progress. Not those of local people.

RC:

In a case that I came across in Zimbabwe. The government introduced the Age of Majority Act. So young women at the age of 18 have the right to marry whoever they want to without their parents permission. And that's a direct threat to the position of older women and of their fathers. Because it means that a family won't get bride wealth payments for their daughter. I don't see how one can pursue your line or argument in that case.

Male:

There will be people who may identify themselves as being losers. And feel themselves to be losers. But I think there are some universals here. You could say that I'm just a starry eyed idealist, and I am always look at the nice side of human nature and believe that it will always come through. But it's an empirical fact of life which we all experience. That if you behave nicely to people, they tend to behave nicely back to you. And if you're hostile to people, they tend to be hostile back. There is a better side of human nature that can be appealed to. Even if these situations of conflict.

Narrator:

Who decides on what is better? Who decides on those universals? Because in a sense what you're saying, is that your value system and perhaps my value system too. Which would prefer marginalised young women to be more powerful within a population. Should if you like take precedence over the prevalent local view.

RC:

I think you see the inner participatory approach there's a sort of meta value. I mean that sounds a rather pretentious phrase. But I think there's a level of being and interacting, and of values. Which provides some sort of answer to your question. Which is a very very important one. And this is the idea of enabling other people to express their values. And of expressing your own. But in an open and non dominating dialogue. And trying together to understand one another's point of view. Now my optimistic sense is that if that is done, one's own views will change. And other people's views will also change. And will be improved through the dialogue.