



International development: challenges for a world in transition

Whose Knowledge Counts

Narrator:

In some respects an even more sceptical view was expressed to me by Professor Peter Louisos. An Anthropologist who acts as a consultant to Intrack, a training and research centre specialising in development practice.

PL:

There's an implication in talking about who's knowledge counts. Who's reality counts. That we're talking about subjectivities. People's ways of relating to the world. The ways of understanding what they are as persons, as individuals. They're sense or morality. Their sense of duty and accountability. Anthropologists of course have been very interested in that. But you think there's not a place for that kind of thing within development planning.

Male:

It seems to me it's an awfully idealistic and sort of other worldly development planning that can start worrying about whole people and their views of their identity and their cosmos. I mean most development planning is surely about meeting basic human needs. I mean needs for food, water, basic literacy, basic shelter.

Male2:

Don't we think that the cultural self is something that really has to come in after the basic needs have been satisfied. And really should people in the tax paying classes and countries be spending their tax money on such luxurious issues as the development of identities. I mean surely our hard earned money ought to go on the satisfaction of basic needs. Not derived needs. That's pretty bread and butter stuff.

I don't think you need to reach into a complex theory of participatory development to do that. and I think any illiterate villager in any Indian village understands the realities of power, class, distance from power. Without any kind of education in participatory development. So I regard quite a lot of what is done in participatory workshops with rural people sitting in, as probably satisfying elite agenda's. Rather than satisfying local needs.

Narrator:

Could you give an example at what you're getting at here.

Male:

Well, I'll give you one example. I mean a British development agency, which would prefer not to be named, said in making a presentation about participatory work in Nepal. When the villagers saw us preparing to draw diagrams in the dust and do a resource map of the locality. A lot of them made themselves scarce. Because they have fairly demanding daily schedules of cooking and finding firewood and doing work in the fields. And they clearly regarded our agenda as something that would take up a lot of their time, without any very obvious material pay off. Now I think that speaks eloquently. And I think those situations are reproduced time and again. I think the problem is that participatory consultative workshops have become a kind of development specialists agenda.

Narrator:

Ramya Subramanian was also scathing about some of the participatory projects which she had seen in action.

RS: One of the most interesting examples I found of this, was in a case study of a programme in Arisa, or something in east India. Where you had these geo activists, who

were actually on the ground. And what they were really trying to do with their idea of participation, was to actually try and elicit the right answers from people. And I think you have that very much. what do you do in a context of when you're talking about participation. And what you hear is actually not what you want to hear, or what you think is right. And I think those kinds of value conflicts are not adequately addressed in that kind of old school notes of Chambers school of thought. And I think they have to be addressed, because you're finding increasingly that that makes participation into a sort of bland instrument. Where actually you're talking about people going in and saying well I don't like the answers I've heard, so that's not participation. That wasn't participatory enough. And so you're saying that until I get the right answers, I am going to saying the process isn't participatory. So I think there is an issue around values. And I think there is an issue around the sort of zealotry if you like, of sort of liberal values, versus things that are not good. Like oppression and exploitation etc. And I think until we make those agenda's explicit you're not going to have transparency in the interchange between people who are intervening and community people. And I think the example was one of the activists believe that farmers shouldn't be using fertilisers or something. And farmers saying well all we want is fertiliser. So here you are talking about participation. You're eliciting their responses. But you don't like the responses they're giving. Because you actually believe they should be saying something else. I think that's a very big problem with a lot of the participation. And it creates operational difficulties on the ground. and I think it creates a lot of tensions and dilemma's as well.