



International development: challenges for a world in transition

The Importance of Democratisation

Narrator:

Ramya Subramanian shares these concerns, and also worries about the degree to which a participatory approach can reverse the tendency of many development interventions, to undermine local capacities.

RS:

You have to recognise where development interventions are in a local area. They're often replacing interventions that local people themselves have been managing. For example a health project will necessarily over-ride local arrangements around health that have existed previously, It's not like you're going in totally into an area where nothing's existed before. And in that process of replacing what already exists, there are very important power relations are very important dynamics. That will create unintended consequences for your project if you're not aware of them. So I think in that sense talking about participation, talking about power. These are very important messages and I think it's been very valuable. But I think in terms of expecting donor agencies to take these on and to be able to do them themselves, in terms of their own projects. I think that's a little optimistic.

Narrator:

And for them participation is more negotiation and discussion, rather than anything to do with handing over the stick.

RS:

Yes. I think that is part of the problem. But I think encouraging negotiation and consultation is part of handing over the stick. I don't think it's not. But I think it's insufficient. First to fall if you just look at very micro level dynamics within a village for example. And if you talk about consultation. Who do you consult? However participatory you are, there are patterns of exclusion. And I think in that sense, participation has to be seen as very long term process of democratisation.

Narrator:

Teddy Brett similarly emphasises the importance of democratisation. Not necessarily in the sense of multi party politics. But as a means of holding providers of services to account. For him, that should be the aim of projects which promote participation. Not airy fairy ideas about the potential altruism of individuals. Do you see this discussion about empowerment as being largely rhetorical?

TB:

No. I wouldn't say that. I think it's very important. It follows on a long period. When it was basically assumed that passive consumers would benefit by having expert providers. Whether foreigners or local. And the foreign local issue I think is exaggerated by Chambers. Because that's not the important thing. These expert providers who would out of the goodness of their hearts, provide local people with good services and improve their lot and all the rest of it. Clearly one needs to bend the stick in the other direction. And I think Chamber's work has been a very very important element in getting the stick bent in that direction. My question is has the stick been bent too far. Certainly I think it has my Chambers. And I think it's been bent in slightly wrong direction, by some of the major agencies.

Because the only thing that empowers people, is not being put in charge and providing their own services. They can't do that. That would be to go back to subsistence economy, in which one did everything oneself. The only thing that empowers people is being in a position

to exert direct leverage and sanctions over the people who provide you with services. And of course the whole demand for democratic transition in the third world. Where we're moving away from centralised dictatorships, and centralised bureaucracies that simply give people things out of the goodness of their heart. That whole process is part of this empowerment movement. And indeed for me development is very much about empowerment. Indeed I can't imagine a development process that doesn't involve empowerment. Because at the end of the day development is only development if it actually improves the condition of life. Not of the rich people who are providing services. But of all the poor consumers who are sitting out there depending on these services and who for so long have been neglected, deprived and often massively oppressed.