

Participation Overview

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What do we mean by Participation?

What is participation? Why does it matter? Who does it matter to? Can we do without it? Who is meant to be participating? What are the consequences if people do not participate? All of these questions - and more - are important and need careful answering if we are to understand fully the reality and the potential of citizen participation. But first we have to define what it is.

Box 1:

Picture the scene. A group of people are attending a housing co-op general meeting. They work their way through an agenda, having discussions and making decisions about a housing improvement programme. Then they discuss two members who have not paid their rent recently and are in arrears. All this is participation with an end – to discuss options, make decisions, and further the aims of the group. Then, when the formal part of the meeting is over, they open some bottles of wine, bring out some homemade cakes and have a good time. This is participation as an end in itself, for its own sake. It has a different feel to it. The time it takes is experienced differently; its purpose is merely to be in the present, rather than to look into the future. Of course, there are times when we engage in social interaction in order to get something out of it, such as to impress one's boss or to find out what is going on. But then we know that this is not participation for 'its own sake'.

According to a well-known social psychologist, Michael Argyle, it is:

acting together in a co-ordinated way at work, leisure, or in social relationships, in the pursuit of shared goals, the enjoyment of the joint activity, or simply furthering the relationship (1991, p4)

Participation is not something a person can do alone. It is *acting together*. We might sometimes seem to be doing it on our own. For instance, the treasurer of a local community organisation may work at her desk 'doing the books', or a man might go out on a Sunday morning to pick up litter from around the block of flats where he lives. What makes it participation rather than just individual action is that it is done with other people in mind. But something else is needed as well. It has to be done in a *co-ordinated way*, as part of a wider set of relationships that is recognised by all who take part, and that endures over time. In other words, it is *organised*. This does not mean it always has to be part of the work of an organisation. It is likely that the woman doing the accounts is participating in a formal organisation, because having a treasurer is one sign that a group has become formalised and has to account for the money that is spent in its name. However, the man who is picking up litter may only be part

Participation Overview

of a group of like-minded neighbours who take turns to do it. Participation varies from informal to formal, depending on how formally constituted the group is, to which we belong. But this is not quite right. We can participate informally in a formal organisation, for instance when we discuss last night's business on the street corner, or try to persuade people who are not yet members to join. You cannot participate formally in an informal group, but you can participate informally as well as formally in a formal organisation. This may seem a fine point but it is quite important, and we will be coming back to it later.

When Argyle says it takes place 'at work, leisure or in social relationships, he is identifying different *settings* for participation. The one that we are interested in – participation at the neighbourhood level – is just one of many places people can get involved. When he talks about the 'the pursuit of shared goals' and 'the enjoyment of the joint activity', he is pointing to various *reasons why* people should get involved. We will be coming back to this point later, when we present a systematic theory of what motivates people to participate. Argyle says one more thing that is really important. He says participation may be about 'simply furthering the relationship'. We can distinguish between participation that is a *means to an end* and participation that is an *end in itself* (See Box 1). This is an important distinction that will become clear later, when we discuss strategies for increasing participation.

Before we can move on to discuss the really important questions, we need to make a few more distinctions. We are interested in voluntary, unpaid participation. If people participate because they have no choice or because

they are paid by the hour, then this is something else. When a housing officer goes to a tenants' association meeting because her boss has told her to, or because she wants the overtime payment, this is not participation. More tricky is the situation where the officers of an association receive an 'honorarium' for doing the work. We have found that this is seen more as a compensation for all the hidden costs of participating than as a direct inducement to take part, and so generally we think this does not stop a person's participation being genuine.

Types and Levels of Participation

There are different *types of participation*. One is taking part in decision-making in an organisation. Another is carrying out tasks that further the group's aims, such as advertising a meeting, or caring for children while others attend, or collecting membership dues. Another type is direct action, such as picking up litter, or clearing some land for a play area. Although this is also about furthering the aims of the group it has a different feel to it, because it is about achieving something now.

Then there is participation in the social life associated with the organisation, both in informal encounters and in organised social events. Fund-raising is another type of participation. Yet another important distinction is between participation in a group and participation at a higher level as a representative of the group, for instance in a tenants' federation, or local authority committee.

We could go on classifying different types of participation, but this would be boring and would vary between different groups and situations. The important



Participation Overview

point to learn from this kind of list is that there are *different ways to contribute*. Not everyone is good at taking minutes or speaking up in meetings.

A strategy for participation will take this into account, and provide opportunities to participate in ways that people are comfortable with. For instance, direct action provides an alternative for those who wish to express their approval for an organisation but have a low 'boredom threshold' at formal meetings. Organising social events means using skills people often already have in organising fund-raising events, day trips, entertainment for the elderly and children, and so on. It has the added advantage that it can involve those who are at the margins of the formal organisation: children, teenagers and the very elderly.

It is also important to bear in mind the *limits of participation*. This is where the distinction between participation as an end in itself and as a means to an end is helpful. Some activities are pleasurable in themselves while others are more instrumental.

Participation in meetings is usually seen as a means to an end, and the social side of the organisation as an end in itself, while volunteer activities have features of both.

It is important to keep participation-as-means down to manageable levels, because it is usually engaged in only insofar as members see a payoff for it, and it has easily calculable 'opportunity costs'; participants can weigh up the value to them of spending the time in other, perhaps more productive, ways. In contrast, participation-as-end is inherently enjoyable, and can be

expanded to include more people and more time without the participants experiencing strained loyalties. Once we have classified the types of participation, it is possible to measure *participation levels*. Within a group, individuals vary in the amount of time and effort they put in; some people participate more than others. To find out how much people participate we can ask them, but there is a tendency for people to exaggerate their involvement. More objective measures are available, such as attendance lists. One issue is whether we expect individuals to participate or just someone representing each household (see Box 2). Another is whether we want a balance of people from different areas, or a balance of characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity. We will be discussing this further in our *Participatory Stocktake* section.

Of course, knowing how much participation there is does not answer the more interesting question of how much participation there should be. To answer this we need to know what people want to get out of their participation. What are they aiming at? How much participation is needed to help them achieve their aims? When people get together in groups, they quite quickly learn to see the outcomes from participation in terms of shared goals rather than just individual needs and wants.

The group develops a *participation style*, a way of presenting itself to the world and to non-participants. Often, in relating to other groups, to public service providers, and to local government, a group develops its own *strategy* for achieving its aims. These other groups and organisations also have styles and strategies of their own, and

Participation Overview

we need to understand the interaction between them if we are to understand what we have called the *dynamics of participation*.

We will be going into this in more detail in the *Participatory Stocktake*. However, other theorists have used ladders of participation to help explain what is going on in the relationship between participatory groups and other organisations, particularly those in authority. We have to confess we do not like ladders, but we will explain why and also provide another metaphor that we think is more useful.

Ladders of Participation.

What is going on when people are encouraged to participate? Real life is messy and complicated, so people tend to use the ladder metaphor to simplify things and help them to understand the process better.

This only works well if they make sure that they are comparing like with like. The flavour of apples can usefully be compared with that of peaches but not that of golf balls, even though they are all more or less round. First, there is a range of different *forms of organisation* that can be promoted.

Box 2:

George St Tenant Management Co-op (name changed) received a lot of support from its members when it was first set up. Then the attendance at general meetings fell away, and the committee members became concerned. However, they had set the co-op up so that only one person per household could vote. This was to prevent large families from dominating the decision-making process, but it had the perverse effect of discouraging more than one person from each household to attend. Once they realised this they began to discuss changing the voting rule. This was not necessarily the only reason why participation had fallen, but it was one that could easily be put right.

Take any council housing estate. Residents may be organised in a tenants' association, or an estate management committee, or an estate management board, or a management co-operative, or be in the process of buying the estate and forming an ownership co-operative.

This plethora of organisational forms can be ranged along a ladder, with the association at the bottom and the ownership co-operative at the top, signifying greater degrees of control over the estate. Sometimes, though, the amount of satisfaction that residents experience does not follow the form of organisation. Those in a tenant management co-operative, for instance, may feel cheated because the budget they negotiate with their landlord is not high enough for them to meet their needs. We need a second ladder, for *level of satisfaction*. Another ladder is needed to set out the different *types of participation process*. The lowest rung is usually information giving and receiving. Commentators differ in whether they see this as a type of participation, but agree that it is a vital precondition for it.

The next is consultation. This is the most common type of process being offered to citizens and public service users by local authorities and public service agencies. Above this come a variety of processes – self-management, negotiation, representation and so on. Here the ladder metaphor just becomes too confusing. The only way we can make it work is by imagining a circus performer standing on one ladder and holding at least three more up above him, going in different directions. This is because, above the level of consultation, community groups tend to choose one of three strategies.

There is a self-management strategy, which involves taking some control over

Participation Overview

the provision of a service. There is a negotiation strategy, which involves deliberately not taking over responsibility for a service but acting more like a trade union, using the group's collective might to force the opponent to come to terms. Then there is a representative strategy, which means sending some group members to sit on a committee where their voice can be heard and influence felt.

So there are really three ladders. The only metaphor we can think of for this is of some kind of fan-trained fruit tree, that grows up a wall with the trunk (informing and consulting) followed by three branches (self-management, negotiation and representation) all radiating upwards in different directions. In Box 3 we provide a good example of how this works in practice.

Box 3:

In the early 1990s, council tenants from several Northern English cities met to discuss their situation. They were under pressure from a Conservative government that wanted them to exercise their 'tenants choice' to choose a new landlord. Also on offer was the prospect of self-management of council estates by tenant management organisations. Their Labour-controlled councils were keen to maintain their role as a landlord, and to offer as much tenant participation as it would take to ensure the loyalty of their tenants. In the discussion, some delegates argued that they should stick together, strengthen their tenants' federations and negotiate with their landlords for a better quality of service. Others were taking the opportunity to send representatives to council sub-committees, and to get into the heart of the decision-making structure. Some were working at the estate level to develop new tenant management organisations, in order to do the job for themselves. These strategies were not mutually exclusive, as many people were pursuing two or even all three at the same time. However, they agreed that it was important to keep them distinct, because each strategy demanded different group tactics and types of participation, and required different skills from the participants.

In their relations with authorities such as local councils, civil service agencies and central government, participatory groups are often at a disadvantage. The experience of being offered the chance to participate at some level on some kind of ladder is not always a positive one. The image of a ladder implies that people are being offered different levels of control over their lives, and that they can climb the rungs confidently for as high as they like to go.

Often it seems more like a game of snakes and ladders, in which they climb up towards their goals only to slide back down again when the 'authorities' find it inconvenient to hand over genuine power. This leads us into some critical questions: Why ought people to participate? On whose terms they are being asked to participate? And who gets the most out of it?

Why Participate?

This question is not about what motivates people to participate – we will be exploring this in the *Participatory Stocktake*. It is about why people ought to participate. There are two ways of understanding this word 'ought', one relating to the idea of goodness, the other to the idea of rightness.

First, people should participate because it is good for them. What is good can be measured in terms of external, material benefits or advantages that they cannot get without participating, or in terms of internal benefits to a person's character or personality. Second, they should participate because it is their duty, or they have a right to take part. In this case, not to participate indicates a failure either on the part of the non-participant, or on the part of society.

Participation Overview

The question 'Why participate?' also implies the question 'From whose point of view?'. We can distinguish between answers that take the *individual participant's view*, answers that take the point of view of *the group the person belongs to*, and answers that take an even broader point of view, that of *government* or of the *wider society*. These are really four distinct levels. Most writings about participation begin from the level of society, but here we start from the individual person and build up to the wider arguments. After all, it is the individual who is being asked to give up his or her time for some greater good.

From the point of view of the individual participant

It can be argued that it is *good* for people to participate, because of the beneficial effect it has on their character. It provides them with knowledge, builds their self-confidence, encourages them to exercise sound judgement, and so on. Because they interact with other people whose interests are similar, it builds their sense of community, and when they come across people whose interests are different, it should build tolerance.

People have a *right* to participate in decision-making concerning whatever touches them as stakeholders in something; as public service users for instance, or dwellers in a particular locality.

That they have a *duty* to participate is harder to argue; in Britain and other developed societies the idea of civic duty has been declining in force for many years now.

Yet if it can be shown that a lack of participation leads to bad consequences

for other people, or for future generations, then the argument from duty can be made. It relies, also, on people being convinced that their contribution matters, and that without it others will be worse off.

From the point of view of the participatory group

It can be argued that it is good for the group for members to participate, because the more people take part the stronger the group will be. This is generally true, but it depends partly on the strategy adopted in relation to the authorities.

A representative strategy is less dependent on mass participation than one based on negotiation, where the mobilisation of large numbers of people has a demonstration effect. More negatively, if enough members free ride on the participation of the others, the active members will become demoralised and will be less inclined to participate.

Another problem caused by lack of participation is oligarchy. If ordinary members do not participate, those who are in positions of authority will get used to making decisions and will be less inclined to listen to others. Eventually they will see their position as being theirs by right, and will resist attempts to have alternative candidates at elections.

Non-participation becomes an excuse for undemocratic practices. Participation has to be at a level high enough to guarantee good governance. This means that all interests are represented, that those who are elected to represent others compete for their positions and remain accountable to the members.

Participation Overview

There should be a reserve of members willing to learn how to run the organisation and eventually to take over when others get tired or the members want a change.

From the point of view of government policy

Governments are not necessarily in favour of citizen participation. Even democratic governments can see it as a threat to their power. However, for representative democracy to retain its legitimacy, it has to be supplemented to some extent with participatory democracy.

There are arguments on both sides. On the one hand, a high level of participation will ensure a healthy representative democracy. In countries where participation is low, not enough demands are made on local government, it is not called regularly to account, and complacency and corruption set in.

On the other hand, it also brings risks, of people making too many demands on government, and contesting those who are in power. The argument for participatory democracy rests more strongly on an argument about citizen rights than it does on an argument that participation is a good thing.

Below this high level argument about democracy, there is a more pragmatic argument that participation is good because it helps those who pay for and deliver public services to achieve best value. The only way to measure the quality of a service is to ask the service users, to take seriously their criticisms and suggestions, and monitor their expectations and levels of satisfaction.

This argument does not lead to a strong defence of participation, merely to one that emphasises the lower rungs of the ladder – information giving and consultation. An argument from rights and duties can be made that public service users have the right to be represented as users rather than just as citizens. Taken further, this argument leads to the view that they should be able to run their own services if they wish to, subject only to monitoring and regulation by government.

From the point of view of the wider society

Participation is a good thing for society, because it preserves and extends social capital, which is a term used to describe the level of trust people have in each other and in their institutions, and the extent to which they are willing to co-operate with each other.

Also, it is good because it sustains intermediate organisations that are between the individual and the state, and so make for a less alienated and atomised society. Participation is a right and a duty because as citizens we have expectations of each other that, if they are not met, lead to cynicism and eventually social breakdown. These arguments can be overdone.

We also, as citizens, have the right to our privacy, to be left alone and not to have to interact with others all of the time. However, we can see what happens when people do not participate by observing societies with low levels of civic participation and few civic cultural institutions. They usually end up in dictatorship, abuse of individual rights, and economic collapse.



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