Participatory methods have been proposed as one way by which groups can make value judgements to operationalize the Capability Approach in their context.

Briefing Note

Participatory Methods and the Capability Approach

The capability approach deliberatively incomplete.[1] It does not specify a list of valuable capabilities nor set relative weights among them (see briefing on the capability approach). Because these are value judgements, people have to be involved in both the identification of capabilities and the setting of priorities. But how?

Participatory methods have been proposed as one way by which groups can make value judgements to operationalize the Capability Approach in their context.[2] This briefing first introduces participatory methods, then explores the strengths and limitations of using participatory methods in applying the capability approach.

Participatory Methods

Since the 1970s many different participatory approaches to research, policy making and planning have been put forward. However it has been only since the 1990s that participatory methods have entered the development mainstream. Participation became a buzzword in studies on poor people's perspective and on development

---

[1] Alkire, 2002
[2] Alkire, 2002; Clark, 2002; Crocker, 2005

projects. The best known participatory approach in the current development scene, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), was elaborated in the late 1980s in India and Kenya. According to Chambers (1997) "PRA is a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor and evaluate"[3].

Participatory methods aim at changing the role of the outsider. Instead of being a lecturer who transfers technology, the outsider is perceived as a facilitator who encourages and enables local people to express their own reality.[4]

A variety of participatory tools have been developed to teach outsiders how to facilitate this expression. These include group activities, visual diagrams and mapping. Local people take the lead – for example they might make one card for each household in the area, then sort the households between rich and poor, then explain why they classified each household that way. Through this particular exercise people convey and discuss their concepts of poverty and well-being. Although developed to be used in rural areas, PRA techniques and similar participatory methods have been applied in many different studies, practices and in a variety of contexts.[5]

---

[3] Chambers, 1997: 102
[4] Chambers, 1997
[5] Cornwall and Pratt, 2003

human development and capability association

This sounds great in theory. In practice, some recent applications of participatory approaches in the development mainstream fall short of their original intention. Participation is sometimes used merely as a tool for achieving pre-set objectives and not as a process to empower groups and individuals to take leadership, envision their futures, and improve their lives.[6]

The Capability Approach can help challenge such disappointing applications. It sees people primarily as agents – as participants – as people whose values and insights matter. And it clearly articulates the hope that participation will be a method by which participants express and reflect upon their values, and together set social and economic objectives that are mutually constructive and that expand their real freedoms.

The Similarities

Sen does not write directly on PRA or participatory methods. However other authors have elaborated on the links between the capability approach and participatory methods.[7] They argue that Sen's writings acknowledge participatory methods as the principal process by which many evaluative issues may be resolved. The comparison between the literature in participation and capability approach unfolds a series of similarities.

1. Critique an income led definition of poverty. Both literatures share a common critique of the utilitarian and income-led accounts of poverty. Chambers (1997), a leading author on participatory research methods, argues that "deprivation as poor people perceive it, has many dimensions, including not only lack of income and wealth, but also social inferiority, physical weakness, disability and sickness, vulnerability, physical and social isolation, powerlessness, and humiliation."[8] Shaffer (2002) argues that analysis of poverty through participatory approaches captures the complexities and underlying dynamics of poverty while economics is only able to measure through indicators the manifestation of poverty. Meanwhile Sen's (1999) main motivation for expanding of the concept of development has been to break away from the utilitarian and income-led definitions of poverty in order better to understand and respond to the complexities and multidimensionality of poverty.

2. View people as active agents. The Capability Approach considers people as active members in the process of change:

> The people have to be seen, in this (development as freedom) perspective, as being actively involved – given the opportunity – in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients

---

[6] Cornwall, 2000 and Cleaver, 2001
[7] See Alkire, 2002 and Crocker 2005

[8] Chambers, 1997: 45

Participatory methods can seem to be "mere tools". The capability approach complements them by providing a wider vision of the development process.

Meanwhile participatory methods contribute to the capability approach by offering a variety of thoroughly developed and researched tools and techniques.

of the fruits of cunning development programs[9].

Meanwhile Freire (1997), argues that people who are being researched have a universal right to participate in the production of knowledge. "In this process, people rupture their existing attitudes of silence, accommodation and passivity, and gain confidence and abilities to alter unjust conditions and structures. This is an authentic power for liberation that ultimately destroys a passive awaiting of fate"[10].

3. Contextualize poverty. Both literatures emphasize the need to contextualize the conceptualization of poverty, thus unfolding the local dynamics embedded in the social reality of each particular case of study. Sen (1999) argues for the fundamental importance of public debate, public scrutiny, and deliberate participation of the poor in the process of choosing the dimensions of poverty. Meanwhile Brock (2002) argues that participatory approaches can capture the "diverse ways of knowing poverty" and "that understanding these better can contribute to improvements both in content and process of poverty reduction policy"[11].

The Complementarities

The capability approach literature contributes to the application of

---

[9] Sen, 1999:53
[10] Freire, 1997: xi
[11] Brock, 2002:2

participatory methods by providing a evaluative framework that can overcome the limited application of participation as mere tools leaving the root causes of poverty unchallenged. As Cornwall (2000) elaborates:

> For some, the proliferation of the language 'participation' and 'empowerment' within the mainstream is heralded as the realization of a long-awaited paradigm shift in development thinking. For others, however, there is less cause for celebration (…) According to this perspective, much of what is hailed as 'participation' is mere technical fix that leaves inequitable global and local relations of power, and with it the root causes of poverty, unchallenged[12].

According to Cleaver (2001) participatory methods need to be complemented by a theory that explores the nature of people's lives and the relations between the many dimensions of well-being: "There is a need to conceptualize participatory approaches more broadly, for more complex analyses of the linkages between intervention, participation and empowerment"[13]. The capability approach contributes to the participatory literature by providing this comprehensive and flexible theory of well-being that can capture the multiple, complex and dynamic aspects of poverty.

Meanwhile participatory methods contribute to the capability approach

---

[12] Cornwall, 2000:1
[13] Cleaver, 2001:38

Limitations and Challenges:

1. Individuals or groups?

2. Only local solutions to global problems?

3. Challenging or sustaining power relations?

by offering a variety of thoroughly developed and researched tools and techniques. According to Alkire (2002) participatory processes are one of the fundamental approaches to the selection of the dimensions of well-being and the application of the capability approach. Participatory methods can adapt to different purposes of studies, unfolding dimensions not only of well-being, but also of the specific factors that constitute well-being such as housing, education, etc…; they can capture the many aspects and dynamics that influence the transformation of opportunities into achievements; and finally participatory research methods have the potential to expand capabilities by encouraging public debate and stimulating local-level action.

Alkire (2002) elaborates on the comparison between participatory methods and Sen's capability approach by arguing that they have four major issues in common:

1- They aim at obtaining outcomes that people value while empowering participants;
2- They consider the issue of 'who decides' as important as 'what is decided';
3- They recognise that the process might not identify a 'best' choice, but that discussion is an effective means of separating the 'better' from 'worse' choices;

4- And reasoned deliberation is supported as an explicit and valid method for evaluating and making policy.

Furthermore Alkire (2002) lists the potential instrumental benefits of applying the Capability Approach through participatory methods: it can lower implementation costs; it generates greater technical success due to access to local information; it supports sustainability as communities continue the improvements after the cessation of external funding; it encourages empowerment and self-determination as participants set their own objectives; and it is sensitive to local cultural values because people influence the initiatives at all stages.

The Limitations and Challenges

However, while complementing each other in a variety of ways, participatory methods and the capability approach share similar weaknesses and challenges.

1. Individuals or groups? Both literatures have not reached a consensus on the targeted participants of their analysis: are evaluations based on the perspective of individuals, groups or both? The capability approach literature has sometimes been criticised for being too individualistic[14] and other times for

---

[14] Gore, 1997; Evans, 2002; Stewart and Deneulin, 2002

placing too great a trust in democratic and participatory practices. Similarly recent applications of the participatory methods have been criticised for focusing on the 'empowerment' of individuals and moving away from their collective traditions. "As 'empowerment' has become a buzzword in development, as essential objective of projects, its radical, challenging and transformatory edge has been lost. The concept of action has become individualized, empowerment depoliticized."[15]

2. Only local solutions to global problems?
Another critique made of both approaches is that they propose local solutions to global problems, thus not tackling structural inequalities. Such issue has been addressed to the capability approach by Gore (2000), who called this process as the partial globalization of development policy. Furthermore Sen's writings have been criticised for focussing mostly on the immediate causes of poverty and neglecting the underlying social processes.[16]

Meanwhile critiques of participatory methods have argued that their localized and problem solving application captures merely the manifestation of poverty and "ignores the structural and material constraints of globalized capitalism."[17] As Cooke and Kothari (2001) highlight,

participatory methods' "emphasis on the micro level of intervention can obscure, and indeed sustain, broader macro level inequalities and injustices".[18]

3. Challenging or sustaining power relations?
The critiques of participatory methods have also analysed the many ways that power relations influence development analysis based on participation. The use of social psychology literature on the analyses of the subtle ways in which groups make decisions disclosed the less visible ways of participation being used as instruments of control and maintenance of the status quo through the production of consensus.[19] According to Mohan (2001), "the danger from a policy point of view is that the actions based on consensus may in fact further empower the powerful vested interests that manipulated the research in the first place."[20]

On the one hand these two approaches seem to complement each other by combining a theoretical framework that focus on the multiple dimensions of poverty, participation and empowerment with a comprehensive set of operational procedures that aims at unfolding local dynamics of well-being and poverty. On the other hand, the critiques to both approaches have identified similar weaknesses, such as

---

[15] Cleaver, 2001:37
[16] Pattanaik, 1998
[17] Mohan, 2001: 156

[18] Cooke and Kothari, 2001:14
[19] Cooke, 2001
[20] Mohan, 2001: 160

the lack of consensus on targeted participants; partial globalization of development policy analysis; and the lack of analysis of the impacts of power relations on participatory activities.

However the application of the capability approach through participatory methods aims at tackling explicitly the limitations described above. The discussion between individual or collective focus can be addressed as both approaches analyse well-being from a variety of perspectives. The combination of these two approaches also has the potential to capture the issues concerning the practical manifestation of poverty as well as unfold the dynamics influencing the causes of inequalities. Furthermore, Sen's perception of the poor as agents of change aims to address explicitly the existent local and structural power inequalities.

Thus, the body of literature exploring the practical application of Sen's writings can serve as an evaluative framework that safeguards the radical roots of participatory methods, encouraging critical engagement, while also assessing and challenging structures of subordination.

Alex Apsan Frediani
Brookes University Oxford

Bibliography

Alkire, S. (2002) *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brock, K. (2002) "Knowing poverty: Critical reflections on participatory research and policy" in Brock, K and McGee, R. (eds.) *Knowing Poverty*. London: Earthscan.

Chambers, R. (1997) *Whose reality counts? Putting the First Last*. London: Intermediate Technology.

Clark, D. A. (2002) *Visions of Development: A Study of Human Values*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Cleaver, F. (2001) "Institutions, Agency and the Limitations of Participatory Approaches to Development" in Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books.

Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (2001) "The case of Participation as Tyranny" in Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books.

Cooke, B. (2001) "The Social Psychology Limits of Participation" in Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books.

Cornwall, A. (2000) Beneficiary, consumer, citizen: Perspective on participation for poverty reduction. *Sida Studies*, n. 2, Stockholm, Sida.

Crocker, D.A. (2005) "Sen and Deliberative Democracy" in Kaufman, A. (ed.) *Capabilities Equality: Basic Issues and Problems*. New York: Routledge

Deneulin, S. and Stewart, F. (2002) Amartya Sen's contribution to development thinking. *Studies in Comparative International Development*. 37(2), pp. 61-70.

Drèze, J. and Sen, A. (2002) *India: Development and Participation*, 2nd Ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Evans, P. (2002) Collective Capabilities, Culture, and Amartya Sen's Development as Freedom. *Studies in Comparative International Development*. Vol. 37, N. 2, pp.54-60.

Freire, P. (1997) Forward in Smith et al (eds.) *Natured by Knowledge*. New York: The Apex Press.

Gore, C. (1997) Irreducible social goods and the informational basis of Amartya Sen's capability approach. *Journal of International Development*, 9(2) pp.235-250.

Gore, C. (2000) The Rise and Fall of the Washington Consensus as a Paradigm for Developing Countries. *World Development*. Vol. 28, n. 5, pp. 789-804.

Mohan, G. (2001) "Beyond Participation: Strategies for Deeper Empowerment" in Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (eds.) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books.

Nussbaum, M. (1988) Nature, functioning and capability: Aristotle on political distribution. *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume, pp. 145-184.

Nussbaum, M. (2000) *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Patnaik, P. (1998) Amartya Sen and the Theory of Public Action. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 33, N. 45, pp. 2855-2859

Qizilbash, M. (2002) Development, common foes and shared values. *Review of Political Economy*. 14(4) pp.463-480.

Shaffer, P. (2002) "Participatory analyses of poverty dynamics: Reflections on the Myanmar PPA" in Brock, K and McGee, R. (eds.) *Knowing Poverty*. London: Earthscan.

Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.