

Understanding Participation

A Distance Learning Module

**Administrative Training Institute
Government of West Bengal
FC Block, Sector - III, Salt Lake
Kolkata - 700106
www.atiwb.gov.in**

UNIT 1

Understanding Participation

Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- i) Explain the meaning forms and advantages of participation
- ii) Identity the pre-conditions of participation
- iii) Discuss participation in different phases of a project cycle including the process of bottom-up development process

Structure:

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Meaning of participation
 - 1.2.1 Conventional Meaning
 - 1.2.2 Operational Meaning
 - 1.2.3 Stakeholders
- 1.3 Forms of Participation
- 1.4 Advantages of Participation
- 1.5 Preconditions of Participation
- 1.6 Participation in Different Phases of a Project Cycle
- 1.7 Top Down to Bottom up Approach
- 1.8 Evidences of people's knowledge and skill
- 1.9 Let us Sum up
- 1.10 Check your Progress

1.1 Introduction

In the previous unit, you have been introduced to the concept of 'development'. Traditionally, development has been conceptualised in economic terms. Now it is being defined in human terms with participation of people as a crucial factor. Formerly, the emphasis was on the production of goods and services. Now the emphasis has shifted to human agency and enhancement of human capability. Development is being understood as empowerment, as the enhancement of human capability to intervene in policy and decision –making in the public sphere. Participation in developmental decision-making is being viewed both as a matter of right as well as a step towards democratisation. With the passage of the Constitution 73rd and the 74th Amendments in 1991 we in our country have also taken some major steps towards ensuring people's participation in development. It is against this background that proper clarification; understanding and internalisation of the concepts of participation and development have become so much crucial.

1.2 Meaning of Participation

1.2.1. Conventional Meaning

If you have been in the administration for a sufficiently long period of time, you must have seen that participation is usually interpreted as people

(i) Contributing cash or free labour for developmental schemes sponsored by government, or (ii) identifying would-be beneficiaries of developmental projects, or (iii) offering some suggestions in respect of some programmes.

Cash or in-kind services are recommended as ways to create a sense of ownership on the part of the poor. It is also an obvious way to cover part of the project cost. This usually takes place at the implementation stage. People do not have the right to participate either in the planning stage or in the stage of project formulation. Their participation at the implementation stage is also not real. They are not called upon to monitor, review or evaluate the scheme.

Then what is participation?

1.2.2 *Operational Meaning*

Participation can be interpreted in various ways. It may be viewed as a matter of *right*. This means all policy and decision-making in the public sphere and all expenditure incurred must have an in-built and direct system of public participation. It may also be considered as an essential part of the *process of democratisation*. This means all administrative decisions and actions must be subjected to public control and scrutiny. Participation may also be viewed as *empowerment*. In other words it means enabling the people to influence public policy and to take decisions in matters concerning them. For some, participation is the *essential feature of freedom and human development*. It is also one of the conditions. This means participation is both the *means and the end of development* because it enhances the capabilities of human beings and helps them take control of their own lives.

All these meanings are valuable to us. But we still need to define participation in more concrete terms, because as a practicing administrator you will have to put the participative principles into practice. *For our purpose, we define participation as a process through which the stakeholders in a project or activity influence and share control over decisions, which affect their lives.* If development means capacity building of the poor so that they can voice their choices and exercise their options, which are essential conditions of democracy and freedom, then participation becomes an inherent component of development. But participation is also necessary for very practical reasons. You must have noticed that much of the effort going into 'development' is not always producing the desired results. So far as distribution of resources and benefits are concerned, the record is often discouraging. Development programmes have not been able to change the living conditions of the poor in most cases. They have then favoured the rich. Why this is so? There has been a general belief that the poor illiterate villagers are incapable to think and organize themselves for their development. They have neither the required knowledge nor the capacity. So it has to be sponsored and directed from outside by experts and implemented through the government agencies. Under this system there is little scope for involvement of the rural people in the planning process. It has generally been assumed that decisions in this respect are the sole preserve of the government officials and the elected

representatives. Now it is being realized that one of the major reasons of the development activities not providing the desired results is non-involvement of people.

1.2.3 Stakeholders

Stakeholders are those who are affected by the outcome – negatively or positively, or, those who can affect the outcome of a proposed scheme. You may well ask why do we use the word stakeholder in the context of participation? Let us explain. By popular participation we usually mean participation of the poor and the disadvantaged, either defined in terms of wealth, education and social status, or ethnicity and gender, or even in terms of physical incapacity. They are in most cases the intended beneficiaries. They are invariably the voiceless in the development process and in general are the major stakeholders. But all of them may not be the direct stakeholders. Take the case of any water supply project in the arid parts of Rajasthan. If you have observed the life of the poor in the villages, you must have noticed that management of water in the household family is generally a woman's job. It is the women who collect water against all kinds of odds and allocate it among alternative uses, viz. drinking, cooking, washing, cleaning, feeding the domestic animals, and so on. But everyone in the family use water. So in this particular project of water supply, women among the poor households are the primary stakeholders and others are secondary stakeholders. There are other kinds of stakeholders as well. They include individuals and parties or even institutions that are likely to be affected directly and indirectly. Stakeholders also include the community based organizations (CBO), the non-government organizations (NGO), and even the local government and representative organizations in a significant way because they are also participants in the development initiatives. (On the role of the CBOs or NGOs, see Unit 5). The government departments are also the stakeholders of a different kind.

1.3 Forms of Participation

You must have noted above that there are various modes of participation. At one extreme we have an absolutely *non-participatory* mode. Here the whole institutional arrangement is such that there is little scope for participation of the people. Here the state is the only actor and the whole process of development is driven from a state centre. Power and decision-making is centralized and the

responsibility of formulating and managing development programmes rests on the bureaucracy. There is little transparency and hardly any accountability to the people.

Next comes the *manipulative* mode. Here participation is encouraged only in a very limited manner, mostly to reduce cost through raising of resources from the people.

The third mode is called *incremental*. Here the situation is ambivalent. In some cases people are consulted in planning and implementation but not as a general matter of policy. Here the bureaucratic control is still there, but at the same time the value of participation is recognized. But this recognition does not lead to any institutional change. The type of participation that we are trying to promote however is of a very different nature. It has to be real both in forms as well as in content. Let us take an example. When you take part in the election to choose your candidate either for the Loksabha or the Vidhan Sabha or for the Panchayat you are participating in the process of government formation. But once you have selected your representative your role ends. Henceforth your representatives will take decisions on your behalf. Once the government is formed, it becomes the legitimate authority. So basically you act as an instrument of legitimation. The decision making process remains distant, removed from you and is closed. The formation of the panchayat does not materially change the situation. Because of the nature of government and the structure of administration that we have in our country, which were basically created and shaped during the colonial days, there is no direct link between the people and the panchayats on the one hand and the administration on the other at the local level. Over and above, you must have noted that the power of the panchayats is limited and they have little material and financial power. They mostly act as agents of higher levels of government and implement central or state government projects. As a result, people have become increasingly sceptical about them because they cannot relate with them. Even the local level schemes are also designed at the top without any reference to the locality in which they are to be implemented. *The type of participation that we are trying to promote on the other hand is very different from this. To distinguish it from instrumental participation we shall call it developmental participation.* In the former the people are the targets of development. In the latter however they are the real actors. The former treats the beneficiaries as passive. The latter on the other hand treats them as agents. The former dis-empowers. The latter empowers. In the latter

mode the goal is not just the successful implementation of schemes, but also the enhancement of the capability of the people in a progressive manner. As such *involving the user group or setting of beneficiary committees, although useful, still falls far short of the participative mode, which we are trying to promote. In the ideal participative mode of development there is no power differential between the donor and the receiver, between the administrator, the representatives of the people and the people themselves who can freely come forward to air their choices and preferences. It provides the means for joint learning and action.* Participation to be meaningful must lead to joint production of knowledge and strategy of action. Participation to be really effective must create a situation in which cooperative decision- making is possible.

1.4 Advantages of Participation

We have already enumerated some of the advantages of participation. In this section we will discuss them farther together with the objectives and the processes of participation. First let us take up the objectives of participation. *The major objective of participation is to involve the people in planning, project formulation, implementation, monitoring and review of local level developmental initiatives.* Once the process starts, it leads to involvement of local people, which in turn facilitates the process of social acceptance. When development projects are thrust from outside they in most cases remain non-integrated with the local social system. People do not develop a sense of ownership about them. It is because of this that we find that when a tube well goes out of order people do not come forward to mobilize their resources to repair it but wait for the concerned department to do the job. On the other hand, *when people are involved, they take direct initiative for the operation, maintenance and repair of a facility, which benefits them. Thus participation leads to the building of beneficiary capability.* Again, as we have seen above *participation means sharing of information not just about needs and deficiencies but also about possible means of solution.* This brings an additional resource of local knowledge and expertise, which leads to better planning. The advantages of the participative mode get clearer at the implementation stage. First, *it facilitates mobilization of local resources in a significant manner because of the sense of collective ownership that is generated.* These resources may be of various natures – material, human or financial. These may

also come as local level experiences and expertise, which are particularly relevant in disaster management programmes. Involving the people at the implementation stage also ensures direct and regular monitoring of the project, which ensures timely completion. Thus *the possibility of time and cost overrun is minimized*. After the project is completed people tend to take initiatives to develop ways and means for operation and maintenance of the new facility. When the people participate in the implementation stage usually the possibility of leakage is minimized in comparison to departmental or agency runs projects. As such *it ensures maintenance of quality*. *The process also tends to eliminate what is known as 'contractor raj' with all its problems*. *Last but not the least it ensures transparency and accountability*, because the project work is always under the critical gaze of the local stakeholders. *Participation makes a right balance between technical and local expertise*. It is only the local people who can finally say whether the technologies and methods being followed are sufficiently effective and efficient. They can also provide proper feedback for mid-stream corrections, if necessary.

Participation also creates a condition of looking forward and backward. It is a process by which the participants relate an ideal future vision with the realities of today and list the key events and factors where interventions are necessary as per their priorities.

1.5 Preconditions of Participation

It is obvious that the major precondition for creating an enabling environment for participation would be to remove these obstacles. Apart from these some other steps are required to be taken.

- First and foremost among them is a proper environment. We feel, that the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendments have created this environment. But this to be really effective would need enabling legislations by the state governments in accordance with article 143G and Article 143W where two lists have been provided identifying areas where powers can be devolved to the local self governing bodies. The Constitution has also called for involving the gramsabha or people's assemblies in planning of development projects.

- Apart from the legal provision, processual and procedural reforms are necessary by which development comes out of the straitjacket and truncated developmental approach, which prevails now and which puts the departmental priorities above people's perceptions. Hierarchically arranged departmentalism makes local level integration of functions all the more difficult.

Obviously these are beyond your ambit of powers. And it would also be wrong to expect that all these changes would come out all of sudden and change the scenario within a short time. A changeover from a top-down to bottom-up approach will necessarily have to go through several obstacles and many meandering courses. But we need not be afraid of that as long as the objective is held sincerely.

On your part what is necessary, and for which you are solely responsible, is a change of attitude on your part. You will have to take a new approach in handling developmental projects. You will have to reorient your understanding of development as a process of empowering the people by enthusing and helping them to participate as active agents in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and review of the development projects. Only then as a responsible administrator you would be fulfilling your duty.

However, at the end of the day, participation would not be meaningful unless resources are transferred to the appropriate level. By resources here we mean financial and administrative resources. As you know, at present, panchayats get very little unattached funds. The funds, which they can spend, are almost without exception pre-allocated against identified projects. To really enthuse the people to plan for them, we have to place our confidence on them and as a first step unattached funds will have to be made available to them. The appropriate unit for this is the gram panchayat. It is at this level that participative planning can be really effective. But the starting point will have to be the gram sabha.

At the gram sabha level appropriate field level administrative functionaries should actively associate in the participative planning process and help the people to develop their plans. They can provide necessary information and expertise, which are vitally needed for local level planning. The different departments should collaborate with the people and with one another to help them formulate blue prints of integrated

plans and project designs. The administrators must also be willing to involve the people in the implementation and monitoring of the project. Only then participation would be meaningful. In the next unit (Unit 3), the operational aspects of participative planning and development are discussed to explain the relationship between 'development' and 'participation' in practical field situation.

1.6 Participation in Different Phases of a Project Cycle

Participation to be really effective has to be concurrent with all the different phases of the project cycle. If you analyse these phases you will be able to immediately identify the limitations of the present mode of participation. *Very broadly, a project cycle has four identifiable phases. These are (i) identification or formulation of a project, (ii) planning or preparation of the project, or project design, (iii) implementation of the project and (iv) evaluation.* It would be instructive to examine the level of participation, as it exists now in each of the phases of the project cycle. Generally, it is only at the implementation stage that people's participation is sought for cash contribution or in-kind services. Sometimes some participative steps are taken in project design. Examples are micro-watershed projects. But these are more exceptions than the rule. However identification and formulation stage is mostly beyond the participative ambit. Least participation is in the evaluation stage. There is almost no popular involvement in monitoring the progress of the project. This is because administration responsible for the project is never answerable to the people. They are answerable to the government, more specifically to the department. Moreover, you must have noted that at present there is no system of impact evaluation, particularly the long-term impact. These are mostly done by outside agencies to which the implementing agencies are not at all answerable. *In the non-participatory form of development therefore accountability is one of the major problems.* To whom would the project managers be accountable? To the department, to the government as a whole, to the funding agencies, or to the people? To you the answer should be obvious. *You must understand that participation to be really meaningful and effective should run all through the major phases of the project cycle – from identification through design and implementation to evaluation.* But often identification of projects depends on earlier policy framework or information collected mechanically. Ideally, therefore, the poor should also be consulted and

involved in the formulation of a project or in the formulation of policies regarding local development.

1.7 Top Down to Bottom up Approach

It should be clear to you by now that *participation demands that you place yourself inside the local social system in which you are working. It means that you work in a way, which creates a willingness among the different types of stakeholders to work jointly in planning and implementing development programmes.* On your part it will need a changeover from the 'external expert' role to a 'participative role'. To be more specific, the characteristics of the participative approach demand that you as a field level functionary follow a strategy along with other government officials so that the stakeholders, particularly the primary ones, can influence and share control over all the decisions that are taken concerning them. *This approach stands in sharp contrast to the role you have been taking so far in which the administrative functionaries stand outside the local system in which they are working.* Sometimes you as an administrator do collect information and opinion from the different groups of stakeholders, using the information provided by them as inputs for reports or feedback to the higher authorities. While this, by itself, is a welcome step, this is very far from the type of participation that we are talking about. There is no doubt that consultation and listening are essential prerequisites of participation, but what is still more important is learning about the local situation from the people. Under the present system, there is a general assumption that presenting the people with a plan or a project design or information is good enough for ensuring social change. That it is not good enough unless the people are involved has been proved time and again by the family planning programme in many states in India. According to official statistics the numerical targets of various types of contraception has been achieved without any material change in the behaviour pattern of the population. Development experience has shown that when external experts alone acquire, analyse and process information social development as desired, does not usually take place. On the other hand, *participatory development generates a durable form of social learning and commitment. In the participative mode the stakeholders internalise both the purpose as well as the means of a jointly developed strategy of development planning and implementation. This leaves a long lasting and stable impact on the people and the*

social system. The social learning, which is generated through the process of participation usually, leads to a collective endeavour towards problem solving. This in its turn leads to social invention in which the participants, with the help of external actors, creatively assess and employ their own knowledge and practice for tackling their problems as identified by themselves. The stakeholders also invent the new practices and institutionalised arrangements they are willing to adopt. In the process they individually and collectively develop insight and understanding of the new behaviour required to attain the objectives determined collectively. Having all stakeholders' work, learn and invent together reduces the risk of failures. Moreover, when people willingly participate the possibilities and opportunities that come naturally to them and on which they can creatively build upon are often missed by outsiders even if they are experts. The commitment on the part of the people also increases substantially. This is so because through the participatory process people can make commitments on the basis of concrete and internalised information. If the process, which produces a project or a development plan, is participatory from the start it creates a network of support and commitment as well as a sense of ownership, which remain unattainable in any non-participatory mode.

1.8 Evidences of People's knowledge and Skill

People are not as dumb and ignorant as they are made to be. Field researchers and non-government and voluntary agencies engaged in development projects have come out with evidences of success stories showing that common people have ideas and skills as well as a rich storehouse of local knowledge which are essential components of local level planning. Even ordinary villagers have rich resources, both material and human, to contribute to the development process. They can significantly contribute to the implementation of the projects. There are also evidences of a few successfully implemented departmental schemes where the field level administrators showed initiative to directly involve the people. The joint forest management project at Arabari in West Bengal is one such evidence. The Arabari experience (See box) has greatly contributed in the realization that without people's participation development remains an empty dream. The International Funding Agencies like the World Bank, UNDP and UNICEF, as well as bi-lateral and multilateral funding agencies like DFID, are nowadays insisting on peoples' participation in development projects. In

fact the Human Development Report published by UNDP commented as early as in 1991 that, "Peoples' participation is becoming the central issue of our times". After the Constitutional 73rd and 74th Amendments, the Governments, both in the Centre and in the states, are showing interest in participative development. The Universal Primary Education programme of the Government of India is an instance to the point. Emphasis is placed on locally rooted, participatory micro development organizations with scope for involving voluntary and non-governmental organizations. In our country the micro-watershed projects have put a lot of emphasis on local level participation. Participation in these cases is seen as a socially vibrant grassroots process whereby people identify the development activities as their own.

1.9 Let us Sum up

After reading this unit you should have a clearer understanding of (a) what is meant by participation in the context of development, (b) under what circumstances participation becomes really meaningful and effective, (c) what are its advantages and (d) its preconditions. You should also have some preliminary ideas about your role in promoting participation.

1.10 Check your progress

What do we normally understand by participation? Why it is not true participation?

.....
.....
.....
.....

How many definitions of participation you get in the text? What are they?

.....
.....
.....
.....

What do we mean by stakeholders? What are the advantages of using the concept?

.....
.....
.....
.....

What is a project cycle? Why is participation important in all its phases?

.....
.....
.....
.....

What are the advantages of participation?

.....
.....
.....
.....

What are the different forms of participation? Which type of participation do we have now generally? Which type of participation we should try to promote?

.....
.....
.....
.....

What are the pre-conditions of participation?

.....
.....
.....
.....

Activity

Can you recall any situation in which people had participated in a development project? If so, analyse the nature of this participation in the light of the knowledge you have gained from the text.