

ET15

Participatory paradigms

Key Points:

- 1** In Ethiopia there has been a proliferation of participatory approaches to natural resource management
- 2** Donors have been influential in the increased use of participatory paradigms
- 3** Government understandings of participation may be at odds with those of donors
- 4** A gap between participatory policy and practice may be explained by both historical factors and the personal positioning of individuals

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In Ethiopia, the widespread use of the language of participation glosses over a series of linked complexities. Among these, the history of hierarchical and non-participatory government is important. This *Briefing* examines the issues of interpretation associated with apparently similar participatory paradigms.

Participation in international discourse

Increased international concern with participation reflects various factors: frustration with top-down and technocratic approaches, a wish to understand and promote the interests of those marginalised by development processes, and a genuine commitment to redressing inequality. But despite the growing orthodoxy advocating participation, the political processes surrounding it are rarely analysed.

Yet there is a big difference between the ideals of participation and the proliferation of a development orthodoxy. Well-intentioned and egalitarian ideals can become no more than standardised rituals. Even if not simply ritualised, calls for participation may involve a naivety about the nature of that participation. Importantly, conflicts in interests may be glossed over rather than addressed.

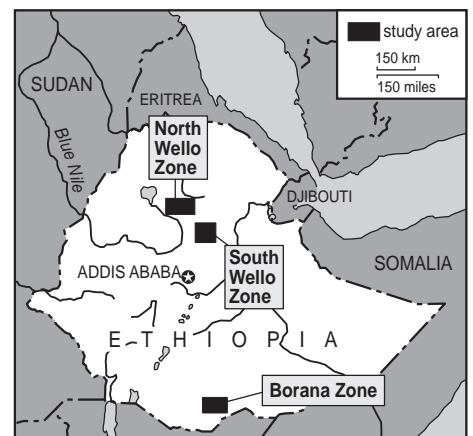
The proliferation of participatory paradigms in Ethiopia

The ubiquity of participatory approaches to development in Ethiopia is striking. The acronyms confirm this picture - PADETES, PLUPI, PAPI, LLPPA, PEP, PRA, MAP - are all approaches or methodologies currently or recently favoured by development agencies or the state. In each of them, the 'P' stands for participation.¹ The substantive differences between the various approaches are often hard to identify, although the originators of each may be particularly attached to the merits of 'their' system.

The role of donors

Some have suggested that donor agendas have been influential in this proliferation. There is little doubt that external donors have played an important part in the adoption of participatory approaches in Ethiopia. This was already taking place prior to the fall of the Derg in 1991 and its expansion has followed the popularity of participatory approaches more generally. The earliest indication of participatory approaches was the Ethiopian Highlands Reclamation Study (EHRS). Despite its generally top-down approach, this still contained recommendations for 'community participation'. The findings of the EHRS formed the basis for subsequent Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) support to the Amhara Region. In the 1980s, the World Food Programme (WFP), which had been operational in the country since 1971, began to shift its approach away from 'top down' towards 'participatory' food for work (FFW) and employment generation schemes (EGS). In 1990, it introduced LLPP (local level participatory planning) as the methodology through which food aid would be distributed and income generation schemes devised. Though officially locally-generated, the role of Rome-based advisors can be seen in documentation.

In SOS-Sahel's Meket Development Project, participation is key. The programme documentation also stresses strongly that the programme is 'owned' by those involved in it. As with WFP though, the genesis of the participatory ideas can be largely traced to the philosophy of SOS-Sahel in London.



The Ethiopian State and participation

Representatives of the Ethiopian government would argue that 'participation' has been a central pillar of policy independently of donor influence and ideas. Key manifestations of this are the concepts of *tesatfo* (mass mobilisation/participation) and *limat* (development). Under *tesatfo*, people in rural areas have been obliged to take part in work – (often concerned with NRM) for a specified number of days in a year. Accounts of the number vary, but 20 days a year seems about average. A number of informants within *wereda* councils, described this mass mobilisation as 'participation', as people were 'working together to help their community'.

Penalties for failure to participate in development activities have included fines and even the threat of the loss of land. This is not seen as being at odds with a participatory ideology. Underlying it is a very different conception of the agency and power of the individuals involved in participation to that of international donors, whom, while varying in practice, have certain commonalities in ideology. However, this government-induced 'participation' nevertheless has certain characteristics in common with donor ideals. The ideal of working for the betterment of 'the community' is one of these. In the government interpretation, this priority takes precedence over individual needs. This is less acceptable to international donors who do not have the same stance on the balance between the needs of the individual and those of the community.

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Policy interpretation in practice

The policy of decentralisation adopted by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has involved shifts in the power and responsibility of individuals. This is likely to influence the evolution of policy itself. In particular, there is significant room for individual interpretation. This is especially true when it comes to participatory NRM. For example, some of those people previously in positions of considerable influence also have strong backgrounds in more technical aspects of NRM. While paying lip-service to participation, they show impatience with the undermining of 'expertise' implied in such approaches.

Moving down the hierarchy, individual interpretation of policy becomes even more salient as it begins to influence actual practices. Thus, while participatory ideas may be articulated at workshops, their interpretation at the local level is influenced by insecurity of personnel and the need to demarcate clear boundaries. As a result flexible suggestions made at workshops may become more prescriptive in their interpretation lower down the formulation process.

The government's participatory extension methodology, PADETES, illustrates this problem. Despite participatory ideals, extensionists need to fulfil quotas of farmers taking up specific techniques and inputs. This adoption of 'packages' is the antithesis of the kind of participation espoused by donors (see *Briefing* ET07).

Concluding comments

In Ethiopia, the widespread use the language of participation, both in the natural resourcesector and elsewhere, disguises considerable discrepancies in interpretation. Donor discourses may be at odds with those of the government, as well as with practice on the ground. Close examination of the mechanics of implementation should accompany the adoption of participatory paradigms if these are to move from rhetoric to reality.

¹PADETES is participatory development training and extension system, PLUPI is participatory land use planning and implementation, PAPI is participatory action planning and implementation, LLPPA is local level participatory planning approach, PEP is participatory extension planning, PRA is participatory rural appraisal, MAP is method for active participation.

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