

Research Statement

Demystifying community participation and determining whether it helps sustain sanitation project benefits in India

Summary

Sustainability grew out of the interest in sustainable development that burgeoned in the 1980s. Sustainable development grew out of international development theory and practice. Since the 1980s, beneficiary participation has been cast as the remedy to “top-down” approaches to international development, and today it is virtually mandatory in development programs. Intuitively, participation seems beneficial; ethically it seems right. Researchers make diverse claims about its practical benefits, but their conclusions about the benefits of participation are contradictory. Because a significant amount of money and other resources is invested in providing for beneficiary participation in development projects, determining whether it actually improves project outcomes is important: wasting resources does not advance sustainable development.

My research will assess whether the effects attributed to participation by its proponents are supported by: (1) the body of evidence documented in international development literature, and (2) empirical evidence from recently completed sanitation projects in India. To evaluate claims about participation, I will survey international development literature to clarify the meaning of the term, claims about its benefits, and justifications for those claims. I will then conduct a meta-analysis to assess whether documented cases, taken as a whole, support claims about participation. Finally, I will conduct a comparative case study of sanitation projects in India to empirically test a popular claim about participation—that it helps sustain project benefits longer. My research findings will enhance our understanding of the role that beneficiary participation plays in the outcomes of international development projects and therefore may contribute to the design and implementation of beneficial sustainable development projects.

Significance of the project

Beneficiary participation in international development projects has been cast as a remedy to the technical, expert-driven approaches most popular during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Today, participatory approaches are virtually mandatory in development programs. As early as 1980, Cohen and Uphoff voiced concerns that participation was becoming a “panacea” for development problems. Since then, cautionary voices and outright criticisms have led to two divergent views of participatory approaches: (1) their popularity reflects the success of a new vision for international development; and (2) they legitimize the status quo, fail to change power relationships, and, therefore, fail to address the causes of poverty (Brock 2002). One of the major weaknesses in sustainable development is lack of clarity

about participation and its effects (Lélé 1991). For sustainability to endure as a field of study, researchers need to question their assumptions and test them against reality.

Research questions

1. What does “participation” in a participatory project mean?

In order to evaluate claims about participation, I need to clarify the meaning of the term. International development scholars agree that “participation” refers to beneficiaries’ involvement in development projects (Eversole 2003). However, different scholars use “participation” to refer to different kinds of involvement. For example, some scholars do not consider beneficiary contributions of money and labor to be participation (Lane 1995), whereas others do (e.g., Manikutty 1998).

2. What claims do proponents of participation make? What criticisms do skeptics make?

International development scholars have made a variety of claims about participation and its effects. The variety in claims about participation results, in part, from scholars’ diverse definitions of participation. Additionally, scholars sometimes make the same claim about participation but with different justifications. The following example is a case that combines these two situations: Some authors believe that participation helps sustain benefits after the project ends because it empowers participants to meet their own needs (Masschelein and Quaghebeur 2006). Others believe that participation helps sustain benefits because when beneficiaries contribute resources (e.g., money or labor), they become committed to the project and maintain the benefits after the project ends (Korten and Alfonso 1983). In order to evaluate scholars’ claims about participation, I need to identify claims and their justifications.

3. What factors affect outcomes of participatory projects?

In order to evaluate how participation affects project outcomes, I need to know what factors influence the participatory process itself and what factors influence outcomes but are not linked to participation. Otherwise, I will be unable to separate the effect of participation on outcomes from other factors that also influence outcomes. Two large categories of factors that affect project outcomes are the project context (e.g., government policies [Finsterbusch and Van Wicklin 1987]) and project characteristics (e.g., how tangible project benefits are [Cohen and Uphoff 1980]). A list of the most important factors in each of these categories is needed.

After answering the above research questions, I will have a comprehensive overview of the concept of “participation” in international development, its supposed impacts on project outcomes, proposed mechanisms for its impacts, and factors that need to be controlled for in an evaluation of participation’s effects on project outcomes. This comprehensive overview provides an analytic-normative framework on participatory processes in international development projects.

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