On Knowledge Production and Local Participation

by

Inga-Lill Aronsson

Introduction

Local participation, beneficiary participation, informed participation, or, folkligt deltagande (peoples’ participation [Swe.]), are concepts that are highly used and appreciated in development projects as well as in the field of humanitarian action. A search on Google gives millions of hits (humanitarian action and participation 1 900 000 hits; informed participation and humanitarian action 1 500 000 hits; development and participation 194 000 000 hits; indigenous knowledge and humanitarian action 970 000 hits), which is a good indicator of its popularity among all the actors in the above mentioned field of interests (e.g. locals, experts, NGOs, INGOs, development banks, agencies, consultants). It is also an indicator of the concept’s usefulness.

In the present introductory paper, I will discuss this concept and refer to it as “local participation” or only “participation” for the sake of convenience, although I am very much aware of the refinement of the concept expressed in the different forms of the word as mentioned above. I am not questioning the concept per se, and I will not dwell on the meaning of it. Instead, I am concerned with the outcomes of local participation, that is the knowledge produced and I would like to take this knowledge and merge into a universal (global) knowledge production, with the purpose of getting a way from the associated locality of the concept, which makes it both vulnerable and at the same time powerful. As every concept that has become a catch word/buzz word/ key word, local participation has

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been deconstructed, negotiated and re-negotiated - it has been chewed on and spitted out by academics, locals and practitioners a like. This paper is my contribution to the discussion.

Today local participation belongs to the group of concepts that W.B. Gallie (1956) labeled “essentially contested concepts”. This group of words seems to fit all actors’ needs regardless of political position. A word of this kind is very usable, and the users are inclined to try to hijack and appropriate it in a cannibalistic way and make it theirs by using and defining it according to their specific purposes. This has a destabilizing effect on the concept, and Gudrun Dahl argues (2000), referring to Gallie and Wittgenstein:

To Gallie the meaning of such words is by necessity informed by the political ideology of those who use them. In line with Wittgenstein (1953) what destabilizes the meaning of a word is not the “free play of signifiers”, but how it is mobilized by the voices of actors who are politically and existentially differently positioned (Dahl 2000:1).

This paper elaborates on the knowledge produced in the interaction between the people involved, mostly between “experts” and “locals”, who are working together on the ground in humanitarian and development projects with the mutual aim of improving the implementation of the project. I argue that local participation with its locally based and produced knowledge suffers from its “locality”. It is time to take the knowledge produced in local participation seriously by treating it as an equal partner to the globally produced knowledge (I will come back to this). It is time to get away from what can be conceived of as haunting local knowledge – its marginalization, stereotyping and lesson learned aspects and put it where it belongs – within the realm of the main narrative of human production of knowledge. By proposing to treat the knowledge produced in local participation as any other knowledge and put it in the main narrative of knowledge production, I make a statement. I am no longer a relativist, in the sense that my position is non-relativistic, which is quite a statement for a cultural anthropologist brought up with Franz Boas as a forefather. On the other hand, it could be argued that all knowledge is to a certain extent local, which means that also the knowledge produced by experts within any system should be treated as local. Consequently, also our knowledge that is produced within the universities, NGOs, consultant companies, development banks, humanitarian action agencies etc is local knowledge. The big difference, however, is that our knowledge to a great extent still guides
the operations and missions in humanitarian and development projects, and it stands in an 
asymmetrical power relationship to all other knowledges, not only the one that is produced 
within projects with local participation, but actually also to much of the world’s knowledge 
that is not characterized as western. Power, thus, in the Foucaultian sense, has to be 
considered in the relationship between “experts” and “locals” interacting with each other in 
humanitarian and development projects. Many humanitarian aid and development workers 
have taken this fact to their hearts, and consequently the power relations have been in focus 
in much of the post (post?)-modern discussions on local participation and local knowledge.

Thus, seen from the perspective of knowledge, the focus here is not on local knowledge or 
indigenous knowledge or black knowledge or white knowledge, or, why not, on Homer 
Simpson’s knowledge or any other demarcated knowledge. My concern is knowledge 
production\(^3\). I would like to get away from the notion of locally produced knowledge and 
treat that knowledge as any other knowledge with the right to deconstruct it, examine it and 
give a critical feedback. I expect also that other people (the locals) examine and deconstruct 
my knowledge. The aim is to develop and apply knowledge that solves the problem at stake 
regardless of whose knowledge and from where it originates. To be able to reach that goal, it is 
necessary to treat all knowledges on the same level, instead of localizing the knowledge, 
which very often means (when it comes to indigenous knowledge) either to romanticize it in 
a Rousseausen manner, or to patronize it by not taking it serious enough and use it as buzz 
words for the project façade. Both ways imply that the local knowledge is not part of the 
main production of human knowledge and both are bad for the project to be implemented. 
But the above reasoning also implies that the local knowledge has to be deconstructed and 
scrutinized in a systematic way as any other knowledge.

I believe, hence, there is something that we can refer to as the main production of human 
knowledge. The knowledge in this main production should be universal, systematic, 
transparent, and reproducible and based on a solid methodology. Edward Said has an 
important point when he states that: “Universality means taking a risk in order to go beyond

\(^3\) In this introductory paper, I will not further dwell on the many forms of knowledge available. I am aware 
of that there are many forms of knowledge, e.g. tacit knowledge, emotional knowledge, declarative 
knowledge, knowledge of the body etc. As I see it, to operationalize different forms of knowledge is partly 
a pedagogical problem.
the easy certainties provided us by our background, language, nationality, which so often
shields us from the reality of others” (Said 1994:xii). It is risky, because the knowledges that
have to be applied in humanitarian and development operations, under a tight time schedule
and in different cultural contexts, have to be valued, estimated and contextualized. Decisions
have to be made that effect peoples lives.

Before we continue, an important issue has to be clarified. It must be clarified that the basis
for this discussion is that local participation has been implemented and is practiced, and a
living dialog between “experts” and “locals” is present. With that clear let us look at the
issue. If we are interested in knowledge production, with the purpose to improve project
implementation and outcomes; to empower the local people so they can enhance their living
conditions and quality of life based on their expectations and priorities, and also to
accumulate knowledge for the benefit of everyone (all mankind) - what questions are to be
asked within the realm of local knowledge and local participation during project planning
and implementation?

My questions are: Have all knowledges equal value, in the sense of operational value? Can
we, or should we (the experts) challenge local knowledge if we, based on our understandings,
come to the conclusion, in dialog with the locals and their experts, that the suggested
knowledge if implemented would have consequences that is not in accordance with the ideas
of improvement of health and life? If the locals choose a solution against the advice of the
experts, after a long participatory dialog, and the result turns out to have negative
consequences for the local people - who is accountable? And finally, are we the experts
ready to put in question and change our own knowledges if proven wrong? Or maybe
already before it is proven wrong (because it is difficult to prove things), already when there
is a slightest chance or feeling that there is a more appropriate knowledge, than our own?
Can we handle a challenge of our own system of knowledge? Are we humble enough? Are
the systems, the project implementation plans and the policy documents flexible and open
enough? Are we really partners in the proper sense of the word as by the term partnership?
Local Participation and Knowledge Production

The concept of local participation has been around since at least the 1960s. It became established within the rural development research and its methods of “Quick and Dirty” with Robert Chambers (1983) in his book *Rural Development. Putting the Last First* (1983). Shortly thereafter, the World Bank social scientist, Michael M. Cernea published the edited volume *Putting People First* (1985) in which Chambers contribution *Shortcut and Participatory Methods for Gaining Social Information for Projects* was published that became a classic in the education of social scientists interested in development and local participation. The method that was introduced by Chambers was called *Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA)* and became stable knowledge for gathering of information on the ground. The message was clear – the people have to be involved otherwise the project will encounter problems (1985:515). It was about planning and implementing more sustainable and ethical development projects and to meet these demands local knowledge was needed in a cost-effective way. In Chambers own words:

In the first edition of *Putting People First*, reflecting the development ethos of the late-1970s and early-1980s, I wrote that ‘the challenge is to find more cost-effective ways for outsiders to learn about rural conditions’. That remains a challenge. But significantly, it was “our” knowledge – and capacity to gain knowledge – that seemed to count, not “theirs”. The sustainability of development and empowerment, which are associated with rural people’s own generation and use of knowledge, were not on the agenda (Chambers 1985:517).

Shortly after appeared in 1989 Mary B. Anderson’s and Peter Woodrow’s book *Rising from the ashes: development strategies in times of disaster*. This book is still a key text for actors in humanitarian action, with its analytical framework “the map” to guide a “complex real situation, to highlight the crucial factors” (…) such as the most vulnerable groups (Anderson & Woodrow 1989:9-11), and its stress on the local decision making process. In the 1980s, the first policy documents were formulated by social scientists within the development sector. For example, Michael Cernea, at the World Bank, formulated the first guidelines on *Involuntary Resettlement in Development Projects: Policy Guidelines in World Bank-Financed Projects* (1988).

Participation has been on the agenda for a long time, as was demonstrated earlier with the quick Google search, which can readily be seen e.g. in reports such as A Review of Cross-

A challenge is still thus to make use of the knowledge produced and to incorporate it in the project, but as argued in this paper, not in any uncritical way, but to make sure that the local knowledge is treated as any other knowledge, including the experts. As knowledge, it should be deconstructed and challenged and modified if necessary. We are still not there although progress has been made. The latest concepts that are associated with local participation are partnership, responsibility, accountability and local ownership in conflict transformation projects and reconciliation projects.

Local Participation and Involuntary Resettlement

The reason for the conceptual development of the word was that local participation did not meet the demands and the expectations of the experts and the locals. It became obvious that local people participated and experts thought they the used participatory methods, but the locals did not understand what they participated in, or, they did not grasp the decision making process and its consequences. The experts, on the other hand, many times thought that they had made everything according to the books, and were at project end puzzled by the accusations of the local people and the negative outcomes. It became necessary to work with an extended concept, that of informed participation, which the World Bank expert on involuntary resettlement, Scott Guggenheim, became very much aware of according to his account of one of the meetings with the locals in the Zimapán resettlement project⁴:

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⁴ Zimapán Resettlement Project was implemented in the 1990s due to the building of a hydro-electric dam in central Mexico. See Aronsson, Inga-Lill (2002).
I looked over the dark, smoky, adobe hall and wondered how I’d gotten into this situation in the first place. Our mission was supposed to complete the social and environmental appraisal of two large hydroelectric dams. Instead, we were cringing behind a large table, watching a raging argument develop between company officials and three or four hundred angry peasants. This was not the way to begin a participatory project (Scott Guggenheim Feb. 1996).

Guggenheim was quite right - this was certainly not the right way to start a participatory project. But would there have been a right way to start, plan, implement and finish a participatory project with the purpose to involuntarily displace people from their valley, houses, livelihood and economic and social and cultural securities? The answer, I think, can be found in Horowitz words:

> It is perhaps oxymoronic to speak of ‘participation’ in reservoir-driven relocation, since the move is inherently involuntary. Yet successful resettlement depends in very large part on an active participation of those forced to move (Horowitz et al 1993:242).

Zimapán was a resettlement project with funding from the World Bank, planned and implemented by the Mexican Power Board (CFE) in the 1990s. The Zimapán Dam is located in central Mexico, on the border between the states of Hidalgo and Queretaro. It was meant to be a model participatory project, to prove that it is possible to move people in a decent way, with adequate compensation and restitutions. It became one of the world’s most expensive projects. Involuntary resettlement projects are projects where local participatory methods are put to their absolute limits. Here we ask people to participate in projects that from their perspectives are involuntary. That is what Horowitz refers to in the above quotation - the contradiction between participation and involuntary resettlement.

But researchers like me, and others within the field of involuntary resettlement know that community responses are not homogeneous, but differentiated - some people, often the elderly and poor in the community feel it is involuntary, while others, mostly the younger and more resourceful, welcome the change and the compensation, which enable them to give their children another future. The most recent, on-going research also indicates that in a longer time perspective people are better off after than before the resettlement, as noted by Susan Tamondong (2007), the resettlement expert and former Poverty Reduction Expert at Asian Development Bank.
Involuntary resettlement projects are some of the most criticized projects in the world and they are deeply rejected by environmentalists, anthropologists, NGOs, human rights groups etc. And rightly so, because before social scientists and development anthropologists like Michael Cernea, Theodore Downing, William Partridge, Thayer Scudder, to mention a few brought this hot potato up on the world agenda and transferred the numerous ethnographies (e.g. Elizabeth Colson 1971) describing the negative consequences of involuntary resettlement into policy papers, the resettled people were absolutely chanceless against governmental and private enterprises in the dam business that involved Big Money. As a protection for the people, it was necessary to incorporate participation in the legal documents governing the projects, which now has evolved into arguments about accountability that could lead to monetary compensations if the local people are not treated correctly (Downing & Downing 2002).

Participation is necessary and when it works and is implemented, knowledge is produced, which must be analyzed, processed and made operational in a tight time schedule. The Zimapán resettlement project was far from perfect (Aronsson 2004. Unpublished), but it generated knowledge on how highly complicated participation can be, with protracting, exhausting negotiations for all involved. It gave insights into how experts and locals got engaged in all different kinds of activities and developed behavior connected to flexibility, trust, lies, frauds, distrust, corruption, confusion, and plain stupidity and stubbornness. Questionable decisions were made under the umbrella of participation and democracy, such as the selling of the restituted land, which was a compensation for the inundated land in the valley. This decision was, according to the villagers taken in a democratic order. The CFE’s social experts on the ground were against it; the World Bank had no idea about it and was informed some time later. Rumors were abundant about who gained and who did not. Each landowner was paid in cash, some spent it, others invested, which stratified the village in a new way. Some of the old landowners lost respect and became “nobody”. In rural villages of

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5 CFE. Comisión Federal de Electricidad. (Mexican Power Board), was in charge of the project.
6 The amount paid varied between 566 to 31666 US dollars. A total amount of 2 056 667 US dollars was transferred to the local authorities with the purpose to distribute the amount correctly among the landowners.
this kind, with their highly dynamic formal and informal economy, crops of all kinds are shared, although never cash⁷.

In Zimapán, on the other hand, another stratification process also started – that between the *ejidatarios* (equal with landowners in this case) and the *comuneros* (landless):

The social stratification between the groups increased. The *ejidatarios* felt that the cash compensation (estimated at around 3 million US dollars), which the ejido as a cooperative had received in compensation for land taken for roads and as rent paid by the CFE for the land their camps were build on, belonged only to those who held land rights. In the words of my friend Antonia: “The money in the bank is only for the *ejidatarios* – not for everybody no, no for the *comuneros* no” (Aronsson 2002:227).

These are examples of decisions that the locals made at their assemblies and that later their negotiation committee presented for the CFE at the negotiation table. To be able to make informed decisions, that is be aware of the consequences, the best (most appropriate) knowledge has to be available. This knowledge also has to be regarded as trustworthy, coming from a trustful person.

What could the CFE (or the World Bank if they would have known) have done? If they would have objected to the locals’ decision and refused to follow the peoples’ choice, they would have been accused of being hegemonic, disregarding local decisions. The only choice CFE had was to accept the local decision about selling the restitution land, distribute the cash and accept the local decision about keeping a large amount of money reserved for the “true” *ejidatarios*. On the other hand, it might have turned out in a different way, if the land issue had been handled with more carefulness from the beginning, but that is no more than qualified speculations. The CFE was frustrated, but accepted and said: “It is their decision, their choice, they wanted this”. And this is exactly the issue with local participation.

People make choices, and sometimes the wrong ones. But who should bear the responsibility? Who is accountable? In the case presented above, should it have been the implementing partner, the CFE? No, that is not the solution. If the implementing partner is the only accountable partner in a participatory project, it will never be able to meet the local

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⁷ After the resettlement people said that they could not lend friends, family or neighbors any money because everybody knew they would not get it back, because people did not have any possibility to earn money.
people on equal participatory terms in the negotiations. The institution will guard its position, simple because of its responsibility. Dialog will never occur, because the agency will not risk anything, and most probably the local people will either be reduced to passive receivers (beneficiaries), or maybe get manipulated with the latest pedagogic tricks, or become very angry people.

Let us return to the importance of viewing participation in the light of partnership. In a partnership, knowledge is distributed and shared - there is a transparency in the process and in the negotiations. There is a two way dialog. Both partners and their respective knowledges are put on the same level, and included in the main narrative of knowledge production. If we should talk about partnership, the assumed and much discussed asymmetrical power relationship between the main actors has to be eliminated. I am aware that unequal relationships exist, but on the other hand, I cannot ignore that in the Zimapán project, it would inadequate to characterize the relationship between the peasants and the CFE as solely one of unequal power. Instead the relationship was much more fluid, and changed with time and Raum. In a sense, it is a Foucaultian perspective on power and knowledge, but with the stress on its fluidity, that the power changed between the partners, also the ones that normally are regarded to be in the weaker position, that is the locals. In Zimapán, for example, the peasants’ negotiation committee’ became excellent negotiators, much better than the CFE professional staff negotiators, and they used every possible forcible means, including manipulation of their own people, to reach their goals.

Instead, if local participation is practiced, then the knowledge produced, regardless of whose, has to be analyzed, evaluated and taken seriously, and the most appropriate knowledge should be applied to solve the problem. This means, that also the sometimes almost sacred local knowledge or indigenous knowledge is deconstructed and renegotiated and lifted into the main narrative of human knowledge production. Of course, this is a rational point of departure on knowledge and mankind that goes back to the Enlightenment with a moral imperative of changing the existing societal order. Or in the words of Martha Nussbaum - “Why should we follow local ideas, rather than the best ideas we can find? (2000:49) ”. The point is that we should choose the best knowledge we have, regardless of whose knowledge
or from whom it originates. Only then, we can talk about partnership and creating new models of knowledge and tools to solve the urgent problems of today’s world.

Let me finish with one recent case of knowledge production, responsibility and confusion in the realm of local participation that have occupied me since I left my visiting scholar period at Gadjah Mada University, Yogjakarta, Indonesia in the summer of 2007. We, the NOHA master students and visiting scholars, met with the well known INGO Handicap International. They took us for a tour on the country side visiting some of their facilities. One stop was in a traditional village with the purpose to meet one of their beneficiaries, a young man who had been injured in the earthquake in May 2006. He was paralyzed from the hips and down due to an injury on the spinal cord.

**Born to be free – the man and his motorbike**

We entered his mother’s house. It was very hot and humid, all of us were sweating in abundance, and the tea offered by the mother was a treat. The young man entered the room with the help of his crutches. His helper, a young girl from International Handicap told him to introduce himself, show what he was able to do because of her training. He stood in front of us, made some movements with his arms that he stretched forward and backward several times. He used one crutch, swayed and we all thought he will fall and we let out a deep sigh... He said he had become much stronger with time and that he also had made progress with his legs. The helper explained that she now trained him also to hold his urine, as that at the moment was a problem due to his injury.

The young man and his mother explained that they were optimistic and hoped that he should recover so he might walk in the future. They were extremely thankful for the help from Handicap International. The young man said that before he was only lying in bed, and the doctors had told him he would never be able to walk again. He was depressed.

I asked the helper if she had any kind of medical training, or training in medical therapy that she based her exercise program on for the young man. She answered that she had none, as the rest of the crew in the organization. For example, they did not recruit medical students, but still it is unclear if they had anybody who trained the helpers in their therapeutic work. This lack of training did not seem to be regarded as a problem for none of the present staff from Handicap International. They also explained that they only worked in small, traditional villages, with local people as helpers. Their patients were mainly (only?) rural, handicapped people.

At the end of the visit, we had a nice conversation with the young man, who told us that sometimes he got so feed up with being disabled that he goes for a ride on his motorbike. I didn’t understand, and asked him to explain further. Well, he puts the motorbike against the wall, grabs the handlebars, slides up on the saddle, starts the motorbike and off it gets. He stops only when he arrives at his place of arrival, where he leans against a wall, slide off the saddle, and grabs the crutches, which he had on the baggage carrier.
The young man is only one of many hundreds, who have been diagnosed and rehabilitated according to the standards of Handicap International. Earlier that day, we had paid a visit to one of their local offices in the region and they gave us a lecture about their different activities. One of their main activities was to gather information in the rural villages on “Post Disaster Screening Form for Persons with Disabilities” (Last screening date was 2007-06-21). The information was computerized in the Handicap International Database. The screening form included several sections, but here I will only mention one section on disability. This section was divided into 10 categories, in verbatim:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Have difficulty seeing.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Have difficulty hearing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Have difficulty speaking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Have difficulty moving or walking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Have difficulty intelligence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Show strange behaviour.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Have fits or convulsion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Have difficulty learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Have any deformities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Have any missing body parts (Handicap International Screening Form Database 2007-06-21)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The helpers had gathered information on a total of 8466 adults and children in this section. I asked them to explain the categories, and how they worked in the villages. They went out in the villages and asked people, sometimes directly, sometimes they asked the neighbor or the school teacher, when it was a child, who was diagnosed with “learning difficulties”, which was ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). I was openly critical to their working methods and competences to diagnose ADHD, which is said to be difficult to diagnose. (In Sweden there is an infected discussion on this subject.) I also questioned category no 6 “strange behaviour”, and I said that I would probably have been diagnosed with strange behaviour if I would have been a village women. I tried to explain, that for the village people, a person from Handicap International is an “expert” and with that comes a huge moral responsibility. The staff of Handicap International explained that the Indonesian government had none, or small medical facilities that took care of the rural areas, so if they did not do the work, most highly nobody would do it.

I took this knowledge with me back to the University of Gadjah Mada and discussed it with some of the researchers, who became very upset and said that first of all there are
governmental, movable medical facilities in charge of the rural areas, and secondly to
diagnose people and put them in the mentioned categories was almost a criminal act. They
said that this is a general problem in Indonesia and that far too many INGOs and NGOs
worked like this and they constituted a big problem for the government. But because of the
international media covering it was difficult to act against their activities and stop it.

I find the presented case from Handicap International exceedingly difficult to deal with, not
only from the perspective of knowledge and local participation, but also from a moral and
humanistic perspective. It revives in many ways William Fischer’s (1997) call for the need for
(anthropological) studies of the NGOs work and their “often stated aim of ‘doing good’
[that] is undermined by an inadequate understanding of what NGOs do in specific
circumstances” (Fischer 1997:449).

To implement knowledge cannot be separated from the responsibility of its moral and
ethical consequences, regardless if it is a question of, as in the case of Indonesia, that a
person without medical expertise, seemingly unaware of the risk of future damages, trained a
paralyzed person. Or, as in the case of Zimapán in Mexico, that the locals took a decision
against the experts’ advise and chose cash payments for the land that most highly
impoverished the people in the future. Both cases involve knowledge production and local
participation and partnership. If we take the word partnership seriously, we end up with that
both partners carry equal accountability for the project outcomes. Consequently, all people
involved in the decision making processes and the knowledge production have to be very
much aware of the consequences of their choices of knowledge guiding their decisions. It is
not the democratization of decision making in projects that is put in question, but the
standard of knowledge produced that guides the project outcomes.

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