

PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION



Since the mid 1980s participation has been a key concept in the discourse of development politics. Participatory development is defined as a process which actively and substantially involves people in all decisions affecting their lives (BMZ, 1999). Today **involving the stakeholders**, the poor and disadvantaged groups – often women - in reaching and implementing decisions is regarded as a basic **prerequisite for effective development work**. That is why the phrase “development aid” has almost entirely been replaced by “development cooperation” (DC).

In the course of time people’s understanding of participation in DC has changed. Initially the main idea was to involve disadvantaged segments of the population in project work generally, with the aim that participatory processes should get stakeholders interested in and willing to accept development projects, so that such projects have more lasting effects.

As time has gone by, participation in DC has grown more “political”: today more importance is attached to participation at all levels of policymaking. Through policy- oriented participation by and empowerment of the population at large, attempts are made to alter existing power structures in favour of civil society. In the context of increasing political participation, the [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit](#) (German Society for Technical Cooperation) no longer defines issues such as

- Protecting human rights
- Strengthening civil society
- Promoting Good Governance
- Supporting democratization
- Preventing and dealing with conflicts

as determining factors for DC, but as spheres of activity in their own right.

As long ago as the 1960s and 1970s **Paulo Freire**, the Brazilian pioneer of development research, caused a sensation with his liberation movement against oppression. He distinguishes between active and passive participation:

Links

- >> [Austrian Development Agency ADA](#)
- >> [Austrian Cooperation](#)
- >> [Austrian Research Foundation for International Development \(in German\)](#)
- >> [Austrian Development Cooperation \(in German\)](#)
- >> [Working Group Development Cooperation AGEZ \(in German\)](#)
- >> [German Society for Technical Cooperation GTZ](#)
- >> [German Development Service DED](#)
- >> [Development Assistance Committee der OECD](#)
- >> [International Solidarity among Women](#)
- >> [The Hunger Project](#)



"Participatory cooperation "on the same level" – particularly across cultural boundaries – is a process that takes time and cannot be planned down to the last detail; you have to know what risks and opportunities you are letting yourself in for."

Gudrun Lettmayer, Joanneum Research

- Where a development project already exists and it is only a question of participating in it, this is a case of passive participation.
- By contrast, in the case of active participation the stakeholders take the initiative themselves. They define their own goals, which are reached in a separate process – with or without support from outside.

Participation is not only an important means of structuring projects and programs, but has become an aim of modern DC in its own right. The following links provide information about

- >> [Why participation in DC?](#)
- >> [Principles of participation in DC](#)
- >> [Gender perspective – empowering women](#)
- >> [An example from Ecuador](#)

Downloads

- >> [Development politics glossary \(in German\)](#)
- >> [Participation in Development Cooperation \(report of the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development - in German\)](#)
- >> [10 modules for the participatory design of cooperation systems \(in German\)](#)
- >> [Citizens' voices and accountability – participation in programme- based approaches](#)

Participation is grassroots empowerment.

nach Paolo Freire

WHY PARTICIPATION IN DC?

Experience since the start of DC has shown that **lack of participation**, whether in practical work or as a goal in its own right, is a principal cause of **projects failing**. DC without participation is futile – and not really possible. For instance, a World Bank study comparing more than 100 projects to supply drinking water in Asia, Africa and Latin America revealed that the most successful projects were those in which the stakeholders were actively involved in planning and implementation and were in a position to identify with the goals envisaged. Participation thus counts as an essential prerequisite for the **success** and **sustainability** of DC.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead, anthropologist



In participatory DC there are synergies between three dimensions:

- In DC, participation in **processes means** involving the stakeholders in all phases of the project, from planning via implementation right through to evaluation. Here the focus is on continual dialogue between all the agents involved.
- **Democratic (civic) participation** means enabling and encouraging disadvantaged segments of the population to play a meaningful part in political decision- making (empowerment), e.g. by way of access to and an exchange of knowledge, or establishing networks.
- **Systemic or institutionalized participation** is concerned with establishing a framework of rules, statutes, standards etc., so that political participation can be ensured long- term.

These three dimensions reflect the processes important in DC. The ideal approach combines all three dimensions; depending on the project in question, this is not always feasible or sensible.

Participatory instruments and methods are on hand to aid in realizing the three dimensions.

PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATION IN DC



The spectrum of participation in DC covers a wide range, from **mere information** and two- way **consultation** via **decision- sharing** all the way to **self- determination**. Whereas projects used to count as participatory if stakeholders were merely informed or consulted, the trend today is in favour of involving the population more actively; this is the only way to make projects effective long- term.

Empowerment

In the context of current development policy, empowerment plays a vital part. At issue is a process enabling people to exercise increasing influence and control over the decisions, resources, rights, policies and processes that determine their lives. At a concrete level empowerment is about helping people to lead a self- determined, independent life – maybe by means of counselling, education and training, or of legal safeguards and support in developing communal organizational structures. No sustainable success in development is possible without empowerment.

Ownership

In the sense of active participation the issue here is helping disadvantaged segments of the population to “become owners”, i.e. to develop initiative and personal responsibility. Rather than being empowered from outside, as was often the case with “helping people to help themselves” or purely charitable approaches, they should act as principals in their own stand- alone process. In this context identifying with a project plays a vital part.

Capacity Development

In DC there is a close thematic link between participation and capacity development. The concept has been defined as extending people’s/ organizations’/ societies’ capacity to put resources to work effectively and efficiently so as to achieve their own goals with permanent impact. Earlier the focus was mainly on developing technical capabilities; more recently the emphasis has shifted to promoting the organizations in the partner countries.

Questions about participation in DC

from Gudrun Lettmayer, Joanneum Research

Over the last 40 years changing development theories invariably reflected the social trends which the “developed” countries were currently subject to; and it is no different with the practice of development cooperation based on these theories. Thus it was natural that “participation”, as an instrument which it was hoped would lead to effectiveness, efficiency and high quality in projects and to the empowerment and ownership of the stakeholders, became a keystone of the modern Western understanding of DC.

Establishing a theoretical place for participation in development programs is one thing; the other side of the coin is the diversity of interpretations of the concept, as revealed by how it is applied in the reality of development processes in many different countries.

The basic questions are always: “**Who is to participate?**”, “**To what extent?**” and “**How?**” Here the differing perspectives of typical agents of development cooperation (e.g. Western sponsor, local traditional village group, Western NGO, local modern administration, etc....) can and do collide.

- “**Who is to participate?**” is connected with critical questions such as: Who needs what information, who is willing to provide what information? Who are the relevant (potential) partners in the target country, or who represents them? Whose support is necessary for a project to become feasible in the first place (power structure)?
- „**To what extent**“ and when can/ should this participation take place? As early as the stage of identifying and formulating development programs? When specific projects are being designed and planned? In project evaluation – or even at the level of financial control? Or only during project implementation? Who decides how much participation “is a good thing”?
- And „**How**“? By holding up a board with information about a school project, by putting up a wall in the school, or by deciding about school activities and how to use the school budget? Is being informed, being consulted, being entitled to evaluate, to lend a helping hand or to take decisions?

Many of these aspects are very similar to participation issues in Europe. The special feature of the participation question in North- South cooperation is that here areas of conflict open up that have much to do with cross- cultural understanding of roles, and with differences in power – financial, but also structural and to do with know- how – that per se call the idea of “equal partners” into question. One major obstacle to participation is lack of time and the pressure to produce results that development cooperation is exposed to. Participatory cooperation “on the same level” – particularly across cultural boundaries – is a process



The website on participation and sustainable development is an initiative of the Austrian Ministry of the Environment; ÖGUT is responsible for its content. >> [Contact](#)



that takes time and cannot be planned down to the last detail; you have to know what risks and opportunities you are letting yourself in for.

GENDER PERSPECTIVE - EMPOWERING WOMEN



There is no participation without considering gender.

Robert Chambers

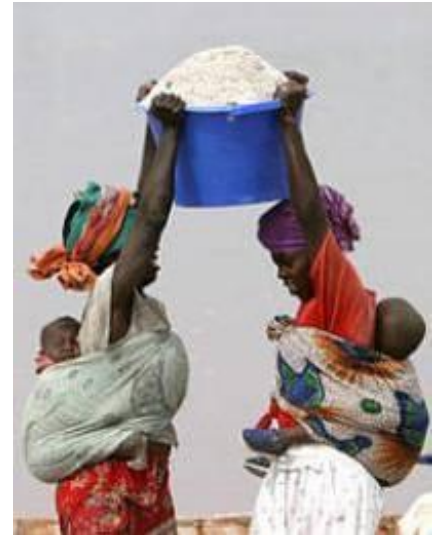
In many cases poverty is female. Even though in many countries women work hard at taking care of the family and rearing children, they are more affected than men by political, economic and social exclusion and oppression. That is why DC attaches great importance to picking out gender issues specifically and to take equalizing steps that go beyond support for women. Only according women full equality ensures genuine participation and a relationship based on partnership.

All development organizations actively promote gender equality as a key prerequisite for overcoming poverty. The work of the Austrian Development and Eastern Cooperation Department (OEZA) is focussed on:

- better education, health care and nutritional security for women and girls
- equality in law and economic and political improvements for women
- fair access to resources such as land, water, income, energy or capital
- preventing violence to women and girls

Not only tangibly improving women's conditions of life and work, but also their position in the overall social context are at issue. Women and men should have equal access to the results of development projects and be entitled to take part in these on an equal footing.

Gender is also an integral part of the [UN Millennium Development Goals](#). Among these, Goal 3 is to promote gender equality and women's participation, political, economic and social, particularly in the field of training. The UN regard the empowerment of women as an effective and essential tool for reducing poverty.



AN EXAMPLE FROM ECUADOR



"Helping people to find solutions to their problems or ways to improve their situation is one of the most exciting and delightful assignments I have."

Martin Hauszer, Facilitation

from Martin Hauszer

In the field of development cooperation participation was already an established notion and a regular ingredient of procedure at a time when in Europe only a very few specialists were even mentioning participation, and the debate about participation and sustainability had hardly begun.

This circumstance need not surprise us, given that the goal of participatory working presented itself much more immediately and directly in development cooperation than in Europe, where participation was frequently seen as an end in itself or as a supposed expression of "closeness to ordinary people". In modern development cooperation **empowering** the relevant target groups is the central issue. Where this empowerment, this sharing of power and responsibility, is done in the right way, sustainability follows on its heels almost automatically.

In the 1970s to 1990s the great educator for liberation **Paulo Freire** set a shining example of this in South America; his "**pedagogy of the oppressed**" was a deliberate attempt to empower the poor and disadvantaged segments of the population so as redistribute power between the poor and the rich. His model contained so much sociopolitical dynamite that the theology of liberation which built on it was very soon anathematized by the Roman Catholic Curia, while corresponding sociopolitical movements (the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the revolution in Grenada, ...) were combated by force of arms and suppressed by the government of the USA.

I'd like to briefly present an **impressive example** of such "grassroots empowerment" from my work in **Ecuador**. In **Esmeraldas**, a coastal town with a population of 130,000 and one of the poorest places in Ecuador, with extremely high unemployment and poverty rates, we started training so-called "Lideres" (disseminators) in 1998; their job was to organize the slum-dwellers around Esmeraldas. Their main activity was making it clear to the population in the slums, which had no mains water supply, no drains, no waste collection facilities and no



regular power supply, that there was no point in going on waiting for help from the corrupt municipal government. Their only **chance** was to **organize themselves**, set up small production projects and soup kitchens for children and join forces with other slum districts (*barríos*) so as to put real sociopolitical pressure on the municipal government.

In fact it was a **long, stony road** and it took several years, but when the population finally realized their own strength and started to take the initiative, the municipal government of Esmeraldas was forced to react. Bit by bit individual district organizations in the “*barríos*” joined forces, because they found that collectively they and their demands for waste collection facilities, drains and so on carried much more weight.

The author Martin Hauszer spent two years working in a DC project in Nicaragua and six years planning and supporting participatory projects in Ecuador. Today he is active in Austria as a facilitator of participatory processes with groups and teams in the commercial and non-profit sectors.

Source: [http:// www.partizipation.at/ partizipation_dco.html](http://www.partizipation.at/partizipation_dco.html)