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## Participation and Empowerment in Africa

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# CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS, PUBLIC FINANCE, AND THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

## USING PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT TO CREATE A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE ON THE ENVIRONMENT IN AFRICA

Paula Donnelly Roark\*

I would like to focus on a theory of participation that is being used in Africa. This concept is also found in South East Asia, and to some extent in Latin America, although the dynamics there are quite different. Persons who are involved in development recognize this basic typology of participation, which is based on the location of control. The first is mobilization, wherein outside agents determine what the problems are, decide upon the solutions, and then mobilize communities and groups to implement those solutions. This level of participation has been used by a number of countries in areas such as family planning. However, in this model, the control remains outside the community and away from the people who are participating.

The second level is the community/institutional development level of participation. Examples of participation at this level include water projects, agricultural extension projects and similar types of development projects. The identification of the problem is usually made by outside organizations, comprised of donor organizations or ministries within the country. The organization identifies a problem, then visits the communities to ask the people to help develop a solution. Donor organizations prefer this process because it gives the affected people and community an opportunity to participate, while allowing the outside organization to retain control over the management of the process.

The third level of participation is empowerment. In this typology, empowerment stands for the ability of a community to come together

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and decide what they want to do and what they want to create. The community examines its own options and solutions, and implements the ones they decide are best. Both the rights and the responsibilities rest with the community.

In Africa today, empowerment movements and people's movements are very strong. The focus of these movements is on economic development, but not economic development as we commonly perceive it in the United States, and not the kind of economic development that is promoted by many of our donor agencies. The economic and social development that is currently practiced in Africa occurs within the ecological and finite resources of that continent. In 1990 I was invited to a Pan-African meeting of empowerment organizations in Africa, organized by the groups themselves. They invited three outsiders — one from Bangladesh, one from Thailand, and myself from North America. A primary objective of the conference was to find ways to reach a consensus regarding their development initiatives and the relationship to self-reliance. The conference also focused on the examination and recognition of inter-dependencies that exist between Africa and the Western world. This approach was seen as necessary for allowing varied perceptions on development to prevail, and for enabling the organizations to implement development strategies.

This demonstrates the concept that participation allows communities to create or recreate choices. Our Western-based economic order does not coincide with this view of participation. To participate in what the West calls development, you do not create your choices, you select your choices. I suggest that the way in which a society defines empowerment dictates its approach to the question of human rights in development.

A well known development economist has recently stated that in order to achieve adequate economic development by all nations, we in the West must scale back our own consumer development by a factor of three. In other words, empowerment and the rights of people in Africa and South East Asia to have an adequate quality of life are directly related to how we regard our rights. Here we reach the question of human rights. We must recognize that private charity does not substitute for public justice. When addressing human rights issues, we must consider the preservation of the individual rights of the first generation, but must not overwhelm the rights of the collective group. The world's resources are such that we cannot have it all, and all have it. You cannot distribute cars at the same level that we presently have in this country to all the people in Africa and South East Asia. You cannot distribute toilet paper at the same level to all people, without expecting that our forests, which are projected to be gone by 2050, will be gone

by the year 2000. So when we consider individual rights we have to consider group rights. For instance, the people in this room probably use more resources in a year than all of the people in the country of Benin, making us terrorists from the perspective of group rights. Thus, the focus on population as the primary problem in developing countries is incorrect because it ignores the fact that the top twenty percent of the world's population consumes more of the world's finite resources than the bottom forty percent.

So, what should we do here and how does that fit into the question of human rights? We must begin to ask hard questions - which are becoming more specific for me. I am currently working on a bio-diversity analysis project for Africa. Its goal is to establish a process of collaborative action that involves setting up an advisory committee of African colleagues that are knowledgeable in areas related to maintaining bio-diversity. But rather than simply asking for their advice and review, we are attempting to establish a process wherein they will do their own analysis and their own research. Thus, when negotiating with people from Western nations, they will have the space to frame the real issues from their perspective, expanding the discussion beyond the Western perspective.

When I talk to Africans about priorities and the subject of bio-diversity, their anxiety level rises precipitously. They respond that you in the West "are concerned about the environment now that you have divested your own country of 90 percent of its own natural resources, and now you tell us not to do what you have already done?" The area of human group rights and international equity must be addressed. I do not have an analytical model for this, but this process is essential. It must also be stressed that the empowerment and participation process is one that we can use in this country as well. We must match the efforts of our colleagues, friends, sisters and brothers in Africa and South East Asia as they define the kind of world they will live in, and as they develop strategies to create it. We must become cognizant, at individual and small group levels, of how our actions impact people who live in the Central American rain forest. When they cut down trees, it is not exclusively for their own survival. It may also be to pay the taxes that their governments foist on them to pay the debt that they owe us. We are all inter-related, and a process of empowerment in this country should begin to illuminate some of those relations.