Participate! A critical investigation into the relationship between participation and empowerment in design for development

Brita Fladvad Nielsen
Department of product design, NTNU
brita.nielsen@ntnu.no

Abstract

Participatory design methods are embraced by most design practitioners and academics working with design for development; design aiming for empowerment and poverty alleviation. That participatory methods lead to empowerment amongst the poor, marginalized participants and communities is left unquestioned by most of the literature, and there is little discussion among the practitioners undertaking such projects.

When comparing designers understanding of the relationship between participation and empowerment to development research on this topic, one realizes that designers can benefit from a reality-check on our assumption that participatory methods and empowerment go hand in hand. An improved understanding of the effects of words on policy and research may be needed to fully understand the relationships in this debate and how design projects and outcomes are affected by the words chosen. Sufficient and transparent research to increase knowledge on this field will lead to designers knowing when and where participatory methods are appropriate and beneficial, to better understand the limitations of their methods and hopefully how they can be adjusted for the intended purpose of long term sustainable development for the communities involved.

By taking a theoretical stand on a practical "design paradigm", this article discusses participatory design literature and projects in light of the critical discourse taking place in development theory. Further, some areas for further debate will be suggested, with the purpose to improve the quality of design for development projects as well as design for marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Key words: participation, empowerment, design for development, development studies

Introduction

Participatory methods are regarded as empowering and ethically defensible when working in development contexts and with marginalized user groups, and include processes that go hand-in hand with the overall aims of foreign funded projects aiming to reduce poverty and increase people's opportunities. Participatory methods are seen as appropriate and efficient ways to identify people's desires as a basis for development and innovation, as well as an ethically appropriate research tool. Many practitioners and researchers have, however, started to question if the link between participatory methods and empowerment are as obvious as they seem in theory; a theory developed from a 'western' perspective. This article will review the criticism made by development practitioners and discuss what relevance these issues have for designers working with design for development projects and design for marginalized groups.

Method and scope
The increased polarization between proponents and opponents of participatory assessments within development theory show a necessity to question the relationship between empowerment and participatory approaches more thoroughly also in design theory. My main argument is that designers strategies need to become more transparent and consistent on this area when faced with problem solving in a development context and when working with marginalized groups. I will review elements of criticism against participatory methods and empowerment inspired in large parts by the book "Participation-the new tyranny" and "Participatory Development in Kenya".

Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) originating from the critical pedagogy of Paolo Freire [1]and further advocated by Robert Chambers [2, 3], will represent the participatory method known to development practitioners. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP)s document on "Gender & Energy" will be used to exemplify the different usages of the 'empowerment' in the international development context and the importance of semantic coherence. IDEOs Human Centered Design (HCD) Toolkit[5] will serve as an example of a participatory toolbox developed for usage in the development context. A few analogies will be used along the way to illustrate the dilemmas.

Participation

I am standing on an island in Lake Victoria, recently graduated, together with the end-users of a prototype that we were going to design in a collaborative effort. The large white paper sheets are here; post-its and markers in different colors, and creative problem solving tools that I have gained practice in during my education in Norway and my study year at TU Delft. The sun is burning hot and adding to my sweaty frustration. I realize I cannot achieve the 'idea flow' that I had been used to from the sessions in Delft; or even conduct anything close to a brainstorm the way I want. The participants keep referring to me as "the design expert from Norway", looking at me for approval for their answers. I also discover that open-ended questions and the possibility of a question having several answers is an opinion I do not share with the participants; I even start questioning if we have the same view on the benefits of participation.

<div align="right">(Personal memoires from working with Design without Borders in Uganda, 2006)</div>

Proponents claim that the tradition of participatory development originates in seventies social movements trying to implement a different world order of bottom-up, empowering approaches into the existing international development strategies. Within research, participatory methods are today viewed as appropriate ways to avoid some of the ethical dilemmas when conducting research on marginalized groups [6, 7]. Undoubtedly, participatory development initiatives have created "'a 'political space' for donors, policy-makers, civil societies and disadvantaged communities to participate in what previously would have been considered top-down models of development"[8]. Unfortunately, "mainstream participatory development is polarized between protagonists on the one hand and critics on the other"[8], something that is less beneficial than a dialogue and transparent culture of research, application and evaluation.

Designers have found familiar grounds within the participatory tradition, which for example allows for creativity and extensive use of visual tools. I would argue for the continuation of applying such methods but keeping an ear open to criticism and adapt our methods concurringly. 'Quick and dirty' participatory tools produce fast data and visual representation with few financial means, something that is often a necessity for designers who are expected to focus a large part of their energy on innovative product solutions.

Participatory Rapid Assessment (PRA) techniques advocated by Robert Chambers are used by development practitioners internationally[3], and recommend the following principles for PRA facilitators: "the reversal of learning", "learning rapidly and progressively", "offsetting biases", "optimizing tradeoffs", "triangulation", "seeking diversity", "they do it", "self-critical awareness", "personal responsibility" and "sharing". Several case studies from research on vulnerable and multi-ethnic groups, such as "Addressing Ethical and Methodological Challenges in Research with Refugee-background Young People: Reflections from the field"[9], focus on the benefits of being able to use tools that enhance oral communication, such as pictures, symbols and physical objects.

Power relations and participatory development
Critics remind us that participatory methods can be traced back to old English colonial rule; developed for the purpose of decentralized governance[10] Also, it is argued that participatory methods can be used in a manipulative way by large international development actors to decrease local resistance to foreign interventions.
Perhaps one of the most important question, however, is to more critically review to which extent our participatory development activities actually fulfill the promised objectives; in this case empowerment. "Despite the obvious political appeal […], to date, such aid interventions have generally failed because they have tended to ignore questions about inclusiveness, the role of change agents and the personal behavior of elites that overshadow, or sometimes ignore, questions of legitimacy, justice and power in pursuit of consensus"[11]. This argument is rather typical for much of the criticism in the reviewed literature, which in large part is related to the concept of power: (1) Lack of sufficient understanding power-relations in a context; (2) lack of transformative nature of power in the context/asking for more research on the conditions necessary for empowerment to take place; (3) the facilitator being an outsider that interferes with motivation and social power structures and prevents 'real' participation and insight. Current participatory methods prevent us from seeing the existing social relationship, Cooke et al. claim, by referring to well-known social psychology group theories[12] showing how decisions and motivations shift within groups and corrupt the individuals viewpoint. Seen from a meta-perspective, the language used by participatory development authors reflects certain power relations and inherited world-views. Furthermore, Pierce and Cornwall claim that poverty and inequality are in themselves obstacles to realizing any of the potential offered by participatory development[13-15]

The power of words should also be considered. "We show how words that once spoke of politics and power have come to be reconfigured in the service of today's onesize-fits-all development recipes, spun into an apoliticised form that everyone can agree with. As such, we contend, their use in development policy may offer little hope of the world free of poverty that they are used to evoke." [16] Participatory orthodoxy' is strongly neocolonialist by nature, even in its vocabulary: 'community', 'village', 'local people' are all words derived from colonial anthropology according to Stirrat[17]. Most of the words used to describe design for development projects choose language that splits in two: the disempowered (them) from the empowered (us), the western versus the developing world, villagers or rural women versus end-users or customers. Robert Chambers an example of a user of such neocolonialist language claiming that the idealistic target of RRA and PRA is "the empowerment of local people"[2, 3] offers.

Context, culture and validity

Proponents of PRA regard it as an empowering process in itself but also as a way to approach ethical challenges of research on marginalized groups[6]. Knowing that social power structures are interrupted and can even be created in participatory processes, it is relevant to refer to Bourdieu's warning that research can inflict 'symbolic violence' through the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the participants[18]. If research can be easily misinterpreted in any participatory process, how valid are our results when facilitating multi-ethnic groups in foreign languages in an cultural context far from ours? There is an increasing tendency to apply PRA in research and relief operations including disaster victims and displaced persons, contexts where the meaning of 'identity' and social power relations is extremely complex [19-21], which should add skepticism of the validity of insights and degree of misunderstandings possible from such processes. The understanding of participation is regarded as contextually dependent. "Can the Western concepts of participation and democracy inherent in many participative technologies really be translated into a different cultural environment?   "The collectivist, high power distance cultures commonly associated with the developing world would have a very different perspective of participation than the individualistic, low power distance cultures of the West. This would imply that the process of participation is not universal"[22]. Several authors also point out "the insufficient understanding about what constitutes participation and the conditions that contribute to benefits of empowerment and transformation to the disadvantaged people"[8].

The limits of 'Quick and dirty' approaches

It is especially relevant for the designer who is working with marginalized groups in developing countries to reconsider the representativeness of insights gained from so-called 'quick and dirty' approaches. During my work in developing and middle income countries, I have frequently experienced the insufficiency of such tools. Critics are questioning the problem of assuming that anyone can map people's needs in such a quick and routine-like way: "Does the routinisation of PRA[..] contradict or divert the original aim of giving more voice and control to the rural poor? Have PRA/RRA enthusiasts forgotten that social scientists long ago regularly used such projective devices as mental mapping and informant-based social ranking? […] Producing a report on the final day of a ten-day mission, with coverage of social as well as economic factors, may be the reality of the jet-set consultancy world, but forcing social scientists to work like economists and accountants is part of the problem, not part of the solution!"[23] Even Chambers, who is regarded as one of the main promoters of participatory assessments, is concerned that "PRA has become an instant fad…. That has been made to go to scale too fast'[2] As for designers, workshops are often conducted with time limits of a week or two, from which ideas are drawn for concept development. Is this sufficient when aiming for long-term sustainability and context dependent objectives such as 'empowerment'?

The outsider

A Norwegian professor regularly goes to China to conduct assessments for her university. On one of her last trips, she gathered the inhabitants of a village to find out about their housing situation. She presented herself as a researcher. The first time the focus group showed her their houses, they tried to show her the best houses, and how the constructions were solid and modern. When she came back a few days later, the same people showed her houses that were falling apart, and competed about who was poorer. Later, she found out, that the rumor when she arrived had it that she was a rich American investor looking for property. The second time, they had found out that she was from Norway, possibly with development money in her pocket.   (From conversation with professor, Trondheim, 2011)

'Participatory facilitators' are often perceived as 'outsiders' just like this surveyor, and are perceived as someone who can use their position and authority to override existing decision-making processes within the community [24]Power and status can determine the outcome of many participative processes [22]. Reflections on our role as an outsider when facilitating a group, something that is expanded when working in a different cultural context from our own, is has been an issue within ethnographic research since its beginning. A common experience among practitioners 'in the field' is that the groups constructed will have different motivations for joining, different expectations and different cultural context for understanding participation.

Empowerment

Empowerment is defined by the World Bank as "the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes." Researchers have often found it useful to distinguish between different types of empowerment. Zimmermann [25] for example describes *psychological* empowerment as a potential within the individual, while Ife[26] focuses also on top-down *conditions* for empowerment. Community developers have focused on the relevance of looking at interaction between the individual and the community, which from a foucauldian perspective can be seen as more relevant, since power "exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action" [27], and increased power is implication of the word. The purpose of empowerment should also include an understanding of how the individual empowerment can increase decision power and in which circumstances it can represent a real and not only potential change that they did not have before the outsider intervened; if not, one may even argue that our efforts are unethical and indeed neocolonialist in nature. Many case studies from community participation research on marginalized groups and several other studies also show the need for caution about the assumption that participatory assessments are necessarily perceived as 'empowering' [19].

'Empowering to' or 'empowering through'

How is the word actually used in a specific context? The official UNDP document "Gender & Energy – A toolkit"[28] reveals three different ways of applying 'empowerment' can be extracted. Two of them are coherently used, although their working definition has not been specified in the document. "Empowerment *through…*" uses the term with empowerment being a result of certain activities or "empowered to…." For example: *"…empowerment of women through involvement in project design and implementation activities", "world Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 have called for the empowerment of women including through increased economic opportunities and enhanced access to cleaner affordable fuels and energy technologies"* The third way of using empowerment identified in the document is to list empowerment as examples of outcomes without further reflection on its relationship to other words in the same sentence: *"qualitative outcomes such as solidarity and empowerment", "[…] can promote greater gender equity and empowerment", "women's levels of empowerment, education, literacy, nutrition, health, economic opportunities, and involvement"* When empowerment is used as in the last example, in a chain with other value laden words, it becomes less clear what the purpose of the projects described in the UN report on the relationship between gender mainstreaming and energy are. In addition, the document on one page claims that empowerment is qualitative and hard to measure, while later on uses a definition that describes a quantitative result of an empowerment process. This again reflects the concerns of the article "What do Buzzwords do for Development Policy? A critical look at

'participation', 'empowerment' and 'poverty reduction'[16]" about how the meaning of empowerment is watered down and the over excessive use of words such as 'empowerment' and 'participatory development' results in an uncritical use of the terms and uncritical relationship to their meaning.

Participatory design and empowerment

A Dutch design student went to India a few years back with the intention to redesign a spinning wheel machine in a factory, where the end users were mainly women. Using participatory design tools to identify their desires and needs, she was satisfied when the machine became more user-friendly and even possible for the women to use at home rather than at the factory. When I met her, she told me that when she later went back to visit the end-users, the women expressed to her the dissatisfaction of not getting to go to the factory anymore. At the factory they had met with other women, learned about what was happening in the community. Now that the machine had been redesigned, they stayed at home while working, also doing other shore. The student found out that this had in fact been their husband's priority, and not the women's.

Sanoff (2007) gave the following rules for participatory design: (1) design ideas arise in collaboration with participants from various backgrounds, (2) designers should spend time with users in the users' own environments rather than focus on tests in laboratories, and (3) that decisions should be made democratically with the participants rather by the designers alone[4]. These are comparable to Chambers ideology for development activities. IDEOs Human Centered Toolbox can be regarded as a similar and equally popular tool for designers as the RPA is for the World Bank or other international development bodies, to show the relevance for designers in a practice oriented way.

Trust and personal relationships

Sofia Hussain went to Cambodia to collect data for her Ph.D. thesis on design for marginalized children through participatory methods. Much of her work consisted of staying in a village, spending time with the informants to gain their confidence, and to prepare them for participatory design projects. Hussain refers to Sanoff for the benefits and "rules" of participatory design and concludes; "In the context of design, children can be empowered by gaining confidence through experiencing that adult designers are interested in knowing their opinions and being able to express thoughts and ideas. In the case study, for example, Vannak said that he found it easier to talk with other people because he had gained confidence through answering the researchers' questions and being able to complete various exercises"[29]. Based on the earlier reviewed criticism from development studies, I will raise the following questions to the experience above. Is this case study illustrating the effect of *participatory design methods* on psychological empowerment? Or is it a result of a longer term presence and inter-personal relationship between the researcher and the informant, known from ethnographic and anthropological research? 'Design for empowerment' could in some cases be replaced by 'Design for capability'[30, 31] or other terms more accurately describing the aim of our design efforts. Real empowerment means that we increase someone's power, which depends on both top-down and bottom-up approaches[26] to change while design for capabilities is focused on the individual and perhaps already assuming that the individual has the opportunity to do what they are capable of. The success of design projects and industrial development projects in general strongly depends upon a thorough understanding of the context, and any conflicts of interests may be impossible to fully understand without implementing other methods than rapid participatory assessments.

As for IDEO's HCD toolbox, one option they provide is for the designer(s) to conduct a *one week deep dive* to ensure an empathic design approach is one of the self-contradictory options provided. The criticism of participatory assessments mentioned would strongly argue against this approach and call for more inclusion either of multi-disciplinary teams or longer, more personally committed, needs assessments. The IDEO toolbox suggests that we see HCD through three lenses: desirability, feasibility and viability. Desirability is the lens that they suggest we start with. "The HCD Toolkit was designed specifically for NGOs and social enterprises that work with impoverished communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America" and an impressive effort has been done to try to solve some of the critical challenges mentioned in this paper. Still, the tools provided by IDEO are all potential victims of the pitfalls of participatory methods. IDEO can be rewarded, though, for not over-using empowerment and leaving it out of their primary goals: "IDEO, in collaboration with nonprofit groups ICRW and Heifer International, developed the HCD Toolkit to help international staff and volunteers understand a community's needs in new ways, find innovative solutions to meet those needs, and deliver solutions with financial sustainability in mind" (www.ideo.com, 10.04.2012). Again it is worth to notice that "most development projects fail to show any effect on empowerment. While sensitivity to diversity and inequalities is implied in politics and theories of participatory development, in practice no fundamental changes in the economic, social and political structures that govern disadvantaged people's lives are effected[8]" and there should be a system in place for monitoring the effects of such toolboxes on a larger scale.

Semantic understanding and its relevance for designers
Google scholar lists 2 860 articles combining 'empowerment' with 'participatory design' in the title, something that may suggest that we as designers (or the ones funding us) fall into the trap of using so-called 'chains of equivalence'[32]; a habit of linking certain words together to give a certain meaning without furthering questioning their relationship.
 "The fine-sounding words that are used in development policies do more than provide a sense of direction: they lend the legitimacy that development actors need to justify their interventions[16]" As for participation, "politically ambivalent and definitionally vague, 'participation' has historically been used both to enable ordinary people to gain political agency and as a means of maintaining relations of rule, for neutralizing political opposition and for taxing the poorest- ends tried and tested in the colonial era well before being deployed in the service of neoliberalism[16]". How we define empowerment determines whether the outcome of our projects will be measurable or not. If we look at empowerment as something that depends on a change of social or institutional power structures, and will lead to a change in people's actual mastery of their own life, then our design outcomes should indeed be possible to measure. The increased focus on measurable results in development project, and the requirement to influence communities more sustainability on a larger time frame, argue for choosing a definition that is more action based and with clearly defined outputs, such as number of women in executive committees, improved access to affordable energy, cleaner drinking water, etc., which is in the end the only proof that such projects are successful and that people's increased decision powers actually have had an effect. For solution oriented professions such as industrial designers, it is therefore important to pick a definition that includes an understanding that bottom-up and top-down changes are relevant for our design projects.

Suggestions and final remarks

By remaining critical of our use of terminology such as 'participation' and 'empowerment' and hereby adding consistency in our design projects, design practitioners and researchers will be able to provide relevant and much needed knowledge about what constitutes empowerment in design practice and provide insight into what the actual links between participatory processes and empowerment may be. A few suggestions for a further critical investigation and exploration for an improved understanding of the links between participatory design and empowerment;

(1) For designers to be more precise about the benefits and limitations of our tools (i.e. participation) and their effect on objectives (i.e. empowerment), how they work and what they depend upon.

(2) For design researchers to reflect more extensively upon whether the current participatory design tools are sufficient to understand and achieve empowerment in design for development and marginalized groups such as disaster victims.

(3) Work towards a research based understanding of how our design projects shall contribute to empowerment based on the understanding that empowerment requires transformation.

(4) Consider other or complementary options to participatory design tools when assessing the context, in order to achieve a more thorough understanding of needs and empowerment factors relevant to the project. Ethnographic interviews or other inter-disciplinary approaches may be more suitable to "understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry."(Fontana and Frey 2005)

(5) To question and monitor what the effects of our design projects have on empowerment, also after leaving the project. This may for example depend upon:

  a. Stronger focus on the background research and creating sustainable local partnerships

  b. Defining what type of empowerment is referred to and when and how it shall be measured and when (qualitative or quantitative)

  c. Engaging in the development of variables, transparent monitoring and evaluation systems for design projects in design for development projects

References

1. Freire, P., *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans.* Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 1970.

2. Chambers, R., *Whose reality counts?: putting the first last*1997: Intermediate Technology Publications Ltd (ITP).

3. Chambers, R., *Participatory rural appraisal (PRA): analysis of experience.* World development, 1994. **22**(9): p. 1253-1268.

4. Sanoff, H., *Special issue on participatory design.* Design Studies, 2007. **28**(3): p. 213-215.

5. IDEO, *Human Centered Design Toolkit, 2nd edition*, 2009.

6. Ellis, B.H., et al., *Ethical research in refugee communities and the use of community participatory methods.* Transcultural Psychiatry, 2007. **44**(3): p. 459-481.

7. MacLean, S., D. Warr, and P. Pyett, *Was it good for you too? Impediments to conducting university-based collaborative research with communities experiencing disadvantage.* Australian and New Zealand journal of public health, 2009. **33**(5): p. 407-412.

8. Mwanzia, J.S., R.C. Strathdee, and R. Strathdee, *Participatory development in Kenya*2010: Ashgate Pub Co.

9.   Elena, S. and W.T. Liu, *Methodological problems and policy implications in Vietnamese refugee research.* International Migration Review, 1986: p. 483-501.

10.   Cooke, B., *From colonial administration to development management.* Institute for Development Policy and Management Working Paper, 2001(63).

11.   Kapoor, I., *Participatory development, complicity and desire.* Third world quarterly, 2005. **26**(8): p. 1203-1220.

12.   Cooke, B. and U. Kothari, *The social psychological limits of participation?* Participation: the new tyranny?, 2001: p. 102-121.

13.   Pieterse, J.N., *Global inequality: bringing politics back in.* Third world quarterly, 2002. **23**(6):   p. 1023-1046.

14.   Cornwall, A., *Making spaces, changing places: situating participation in development*. Vol. 170. 2002: Institute of Development Studies.

15.   Cornwall, A., *Whose voices? Whose choices? Reflections on gender and participatory development.* World development, 2003. **31**(8): p. 1325-1342.

16.   Cornwall, A. and K. Brock, *What do buzzwords do for development policy? A critical look at 'participation','empowerment'and 'poverty reduction'.* Third world quarterly, 2005. **26**(7): p. 1043-1060.

17.   Stirrat, R.L., *The new orthodoxy and old truths: Participation, empowerment and other buzz words.* Assessing participation: A debate from South Asia, 1996: p. 67-92.

18.   Bourdieu, P., *Understanding.* Theory, Culture & Society, 1996. **13**(2): p. 17-37.

19.   Doná, G., *The microphysics of participation in refugee research.* Journal of Refugee Studies, 2007. **20**(2): p. 210-229.

20.   Harrell-Bond, B.E. and E. Voutira, *Anthropology and the Study of Refugees.* Anthropology today, 1992. **8**(4): p. 6-10.

21.   Voutira, E. and B. Harrell-Bond, *In search of the locus of trust: the social world of the refugee camp.* Mistrusting refugees, 1995: p. 207–224.

22.   Hailey, J., B. Cooke, and U. Kothari, *Beyond the formulaic: process and practice in South Asian NGOs.* Participation: the new tyranny?, 2001: p. 88-101.

23.   Richards, P., *Participatory rural appraisal: a quick and dirty critique.* PLA notes, 1995: p. 13-   16.

24.   Cooke, B., *From process consultation to a clinical model of development practice.* Public Administration and Development, 1997. **17**(3): p. 325-340.

25.   Zimmerman, M.A. and J. Rappaport, *Citizen participation, perceived control, and psychological empowerment.* American Journal of Community Psychology, 1988. **16**(5): p. 725-750.

26.   Ife, J., *Community development: Creating community alternatives-vision, analysis and practice*1995: Longman Melbourne.

27.   Foucault, M., *The subject and power.* Critical inquiry, 1982. **8**(4): p. 777-795.

28.   UNDP, *GENDER & ENERGY - A TOOLKIT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND RESOURCE GUIDE*, 2004, UNDP.

29.   Hussain, S., *Empowering marginalised children in developing countries through participatory design processes.* CoDesign, 2010. **6**(2): p. 99-117.

30.   Oosterlaken, I., *Design for development: A capability approach.* Design Issues, 2009. **25**(4): p.   91-102.

31.   Robeyns, I., *The capability approach: a theoretical survey.* Journal of Human Development and Capabilities, 2005. **6**(1): p. 93-117.

32.   Laclau, E., *The death and resurrection of the theory of ideology.* Journal of Political Ideologies, 1996. **1**(3): p. 201-220.