

**BEYOND THE RHETORIC OF EMPOWERMENT:  
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER,  
PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, alternative approaches to development such as participation and empowerment have emerged in development discourse. In particular, “women’s empowerment” has gained currency. While the language of empowerment is pervasive, little research has been done to understand the implications for those involved in these projects. Moreover, little effort has been made to explore the specific effects of these approaches on women. Drawing upon the alternative development paradigm, the Gender and Development approach, and postmodern feminism, this thesis moves beyond abstract theorizing about participatory empowerment approaches to development in order to ground the theory in practice, and to examine how these approaches affect project beneficiaries.

This thesis first examines how participatory empowerment approaches have been understood and practice within development discourse. It explores the evolution of empowerment and participation from their emergence in the grassroots to their adoption by mainstream development agencies. The thesis then goes on to critically analyze participatory empowerment approaches, particularly their effect’s on women. Drawing upon the literature and a case study of a development project in Vietnam, this thesis examines how stated interventions to facilitate empowerment and participation are translated into practice, and how they affect those involved in these projects. Specifically, the thesis finds that current assumptions and methods of participatory empowerment approaches tend to underestimate the intricacies of community, gender relations, and power structures, and that these approaches are not inherently positive and beneficial to those involved. Finally, some lessons learned and the implications for policy and practice are discussed.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>CIDA</b>	Canadian International Development Agency
<b>CPR</b>	Centre for Poverty Reduction
<b>DAWN</b>	Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era
<b>GAD</b>	Gender and Development
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>ICP</b>	Indochinese Communist Party
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organization
<b>LPRV</b>	Localized Poverty Reduction Vietnam
<b>NCSSH</b>	National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>PAR</b>	Participatory Action Research
<b>PLA</b>	Participatory Learning and Action
<b>PRA</b>	Participatory Rural Appraisal
<b>RRA</b>	Rapid Rural Appraisal
<b>SEWA</b>	Self-Employed Women's Association
<b>SIDA</b>	Swedish International Development Authority
<b>UBC</b>	University of British Columbia
<b>UPCD</b>	University Partnerships in Cooperation and Development
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>VWU</b>	Vietnam Women's Union
<b>WID</b>	Women in Development

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

In recent years, alternative approaches to development such as community participation and empowerment have emerged in development discourse. In the face of spiralling poverty, and the failure of top-down approaches, increasing attention has been paid to the strengthening of local capacities as a means to promote “people-centred” development. In particular, the concept of “women’s empowerment” has enjoyed widespread popularity, and is frequently espoused as the most effective path to women’s development throughout the world. From grassroots organizations, to the World Bank, “empowerment” has entered the vocabulary of the development establishment.

The term empowerment, though frequently used, is rarely defined. While on the surface the concept evinces notions of participation and democracy, the usages and implications are much more ambiguous than they first appear. As Pamela Sparr cautions, “An emerging problem is the co-optation of the word ‘empowerment’. Empowering people has become the buzzword of the 1990s. Unfortunately, beneath the rhetoric lie wildly differing philosophical and political agendas which need critical dissection” (1994: 185). Though the language of empowerment has permeated the discourse, little research has been done to understand the implications for those involved in projects which attempt to “empower” people. Moreover, while it is clear that the rhetoric of empowerment is used to mask differing political agendas, little effort has been made to explore the specific



effects of this approach on women.

The rhetoric of empowerment is integrally linked to that of participation. In theory, it is through participation that people are to become empowered. Most definitions of empowerment include some reference to participation. For example, Marilee Karl defines empowerment as "... a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control, and to transformative action" (1995: 14). Empowerment cannot occur without participation, and, ultimately, participation should lead to empowerment. As Zoe Oxaal points out, however,

Empowerment is demonstrated by the quality of people's participation in the decisions and processes affecting their lives. In theory, empowerment and participation should be different sides of the same coin. In practice, much of what passes for popular participation is not in any way empowering to the poorest and most disadvantaged people in society (1997: 7).

Much like empowerment, participation is a vague term which has been rendered virtually meaningless by the myriad of actors who have adopted the language to signify very different things, in the promotion of diverging agendas. It is important, then, if we are to understand how empowerment has been used and practised, to unmask what participation means and how it is used in specific contexts.

In recent years much attention has been paid to women's participation in development projects. The beginning of the United Nations Decade for Women in 1976 drew attention to the need to integrate women into the development process. Since then an increasing number of projects have been aimed specifically at women. In addition, much effort has been made to incorporate women's components into larger projects.

Increasingly, organisations have adopted the language of women's empowerment and participation. While these projects promise much, we know little about their actual results in these areas. "Women's empowerment" projects, or components abound amongst International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and bi-lateral aid agencies. The monitoring and evaluation of these projects rarely go beyond basic, quantitative indicators that have been set to monitor achievement of targets. Donor-set targets and indicators tend to take priority, and the evaluation of the project's impact on the lives of those it touches remains marginalized. We need to know more about the way these projects affect the individuals involved. This will require more attention to both process and results. Only then will we know whether women and men are indeed benefitting from "empowerment" and "participation". While empowerment and participation are lauded as the path to true development, neither terms are clearly defined, either conceptually, or in strategy. It is vital to understand exactly what is meant by these terms, what strategies are used to implement empowerment projects, and the implications of these approaches on those involved. This requires more than theoretical enquiry. We must examine what "empowerment" means to women themselves, and whether or not project interventions have helped them to achieve these goals.

### **Methodology**

This thesis intends to move beyond abstract theorizing about participatory empowerment approaches to development in order to ground the theory in practice. My methodology will therefore be a combination of theoretical and primary research. The

theoretical research consists of an analysis of the literature of empowerment and participation in order to determine how these concepts have been used and written about in the development literature. I then go on to review a relatively new body of literature which critiques and discusses the limitations of participatory empowerment approaches. With this theoretical analysis in place, I will then explore how this approach has been implemented in practice. A case study of a project in Vietnam which claimed to be participatory and empowering will be examined. My research on this project was based on participant observation in daily project activities, semi-structured and informal interviews with local leaders, project members and collaborators, and NGO staff, and various informal interviews. Some limitations to my research in Vietnam should be acknowledged. Chiefly, as an outsider, there for a limited amount of time, it was difficult to fully understand all the complexities of culture, hierarchies, and social relations at work. Despite this, the case study provides insights and practical lessons that can be used to critically rethink the theory of empowerment.

To begin, we must first understand the various ways in which empowerment and participation have been understood and practised by development theorists and practitioners. In Chapter 2, a review of the literature on empowerment, participation, and gender in both the mainstream and alternative development literature demonstrates that although these terms permeate the literature, for the most part they are used uncritically, without contextualization or definition. Chapter 3 explores a new body of literature which has begun to problematize both empowerment and participation. These academics

and development practitioners argue that a critical analysis is necessary in order to determine what political agendas lie behind the rhetoric, and the implications for project beneficiaries. Among these more critical views, however, there are few case studies. “Empowerment” is most often discussed conceptually, rather than in relation to particular projects. I believe that it is essential to analyse the impact of “empowerment” projects on women themselves, rather than merely theorize about it. To this effect, I will do a grounded case study. Chapter 4 analyzes the case study of the “Localized Poverty Reduction” project in Vietnam, to determine how stated interventions to facilitate empowerment and participation are translated into practice. Finally, Chapter 5 will explore the implications of this analysis, particularly the gap between theory and practice and lessons learned from the field.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As my research is grounded in people’s experiences, I do not intend to forge a new theoretical framework. However, my research draws on ideas from the alternative development paradigm, the Gender and Development approach, and postmodern feminism. The following section outlines some of the ways these frameworks have shaped my research.

### **Alternative Development Theory**

To begin, I start from an alternative development framework that places people at the centre of the development process, and forms the basis of participatory empowerment approaches. From the late 1960s onward the conventional top-down approaches to

development came under increasing challenge. Economic policies had not resulted in the promised “trickle down” of growth to the poor. Development planners recognized that the conventional growth-centred model was insufficient to address the sweeping poverty in much of the world (Craig and Mayo, 1995). By the mid-1970s alternatives to the modernization paradigm of mainstream development were being sought by development scholars and practitioners. Increasingly, an “alternative development” approach which was “people-centred”, rather than focussed solely on economic growth became popular, especially among NGOs. This approach rejected the conventional top-down approaches to development, and emphasized the need for self-reliance, and the participation of the poor in the development process (Galjart, 1995). The alternative development approach assumes the need for a radical reorganization of the power structures within the development establishment, away from the professional development “experts” to the people at the local level<sup>1</sup>. Paulo Freire’s notion of dialogue with the poor has been tremendously influential in promoting the use of participatory methodologies such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) in development projects. As Jane Parpart points out, these “... techniques are sensitive to the complexity of local conditions and the need to bring the marginalized into the centre” (forthcoming: 9). Most importantly, alternative development is concerned with “transforming social systems, analyzing structural conflicts and contradictions, and

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on the role of the development expert, see Jane Parpart, “Deconstructing the Development “Expert”: Gender, Development and the “Vulnerable Groups”, in Jane Parpart and Marianne Marchand (eds.), *Feminism, Postmodernism, Development*, (London: Routledge, 1995).

creating more just and equitable systems” (Maguire, 1987: 12).

Anisur Rahman, a well-known proponent of the alternative development approach has argued that the strong emphasis on quantitative indicators in mainstream development has led to a “distorted approach to development”, and has impeded social development (1993: 203). Development planners have tended to emphasize quantitative indicators as they are easier to measure and interpret than qualitative indicators. He calls for a more rounded vision of development, and particularly close attention to those indicators which are not easily quantifiable, but which are vital to human development. In evaluating projects, one must go beyond the quantitative indicators in order to get a more holistic picture of the effects on people’s lives. Alternative development theory is integral to my research as it provides a framework within which to put people firmly in the centre of my analysis.

### **Gender and Development**

The second framework which I will draw from is the Gender and Development (GAD) approach. This approach has much to offer as it sheds light on power relations, and recognizes the multiple power relationships in women’s lives. It “... tries to reflect the totality of women’s experience and the nature of power relations with other actors in a given context” (Rathgeber, 1995: 221). This approach suggests that gender roles and relations are socially constructed and must be placed in the larger political, economic, and social context. The GAD approach is integral to this analysis as it reminds us of the grounded, contextual and historically specific nature of gender roles and relations.

“When gender analysis reveals the complex interactions of women’s productive and reproductive work, the importance of holistic development strategies becomes even more clear” (Seitz, 1994: 8). In addition, it points out that it is not sufficient to look at women in isolation, rather we must examine the roles of both men and women. At the same time, it goes beyond the individual and examines the structural and institutional aspect of power relations. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, GAD views women as agents of change, rather than simply as passive beneficiaries.

In addition, GAD has informed policy and project analysis. While it is important to understand empowerment from women’s perspectives, it is also necessary to examine the policies adopted by agencies and NGOs in order to analyse the impacts on project beneficiaries. A vital part of this is the project cycle. The question of where women fit into the process is integral to understanding the way projects effect women. Women must be included at all levels of the project cycle: planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. Not only must women’s needs be considered, but the women themselves should be consulted, and play an active role at all four levels. Studies have shown that when women’s involvement is grafted on, rather than being integrated from the beginning, the project is more likely to fail, and to bring about adverse effects on the women’s lives. As Alice Carloni’s studies have shown, project planners often claim to have integrated women by including a women’s component in larger projects, however the effects of this approach are quite minimal (1990). Naila Kabeer has developed a useful framework in this regard. The first stage of the framework is to analyse the

organisation's gender policy options. Kabeer asserts that there are three alternative approaches: gender-neutral policies, gender-specific policies, and gender-redistributive (transformative). The second step is an institutional analysis of gender relations and inequality. Official ideologies often vary greatly from the reality of informal gender relations within various institutions. "Institutional rules, resources, and practices determine how authority and power are distributed among its membership" (1994: 86). It is necessary to understand the institutional contexts within which gender relations are played out in order to be able to develop gender-aware programmes which respond to the specific needs and challenges of a particular situation. Stage three of the framework is an analysis of development interventions. Kabeer argues that development projects can be viewed as a relationship between ends and means. The means, both direct and indirect must be carefully analysed in order to discover the "...gender-linked implications of their production and distributional practices" (91). In this manner, inequitable processes can be identified and corrected. This framework is useful for evaluating development projects, and their impacts on women. It is vital to examine the degrees of gender-awareness at all levels, from the village to the donor, and at all stages of the project cycle.

In addition, Caroline Moser suggests that Maxine Molyneux's model of differentiating between women's "strategic" and "practical" needs is useful in development planning. She describes strategic needs as those which result from women's subordination to men. For example, access to property, and the abolition of the sexual division of labour are strategic needs that would improve the status of women. Practical



gender needs, on the other hand, are concrete needs which arise from women's daily lives, such as access to food and water (Moser, 1989). In order to bring about fundamental change in unequal gender relations, both practical and strategic gender needs must be met. Unfortunately, however, many projects only address women's practical needs, as they do not want to challenge existing structures. As Moser points out "... the majority of planning interventions intended for women meet practical gender needs, and do not seek to challenge existing divisions of labour" (Moser, 1993: 54). This model has been criticized for implying a strict distinction between the two that does not exist (Wieringa, 1994). Numerous NGOs have used this framework, however, and it remains a useful tool with which to address women's immediate concerns while also fighting for long term change.

### **Postmodern Feminism**

The final theoretical framework which informs my approach is postmodern feminism. As the concept of empowerment is deeply embedded in notions of power, it is vital to have a clear understanding of power relations, in order to analyse the effects of empowerment projects. Depending on how one defines power, various possibilities for empowerment emerge. Although an in-depth exploration of power relations is not within the scope of this thesis, a brief over-view of some of the debates, as they relate to women's empowerment, is in order. As Mayo and Craig point out, there are various ways of conceptualizing power. The functional sociological view of power as a variable sum leads to the view that "... the 'empowerment' of the powerless could be achieved within

the existing social order without any significant effects upon the power of the powerful” (Mayo and Craig, 1995: 5). If, however, power is understood in zero-sum terms, as does Max Weber, empowerment becomes much more problematic, as power then must be seized by one group, from another. The Marxist view of political and economic power as inseparable suggests that empowerment “...has inherently limited possibilities under capitalism” (7). For the most part, the social sciences have adhered to “power over” as the dominant concept. In contrast, Stephen Lukes’ three-tiered notion of “power-over, power with and power to” has been extremely influential in grassroots conceptions of power (1974).

More recently, however, post-modernists have begun to challenge traditional conceptions of power and have drawn attention to the need to deconstruct the discourse of hegemonic power. Postmodernist concepts of power suggest that everyone possesses some degree of power and that all social relations are infused with power differentials. According to Michel Foucault, power is “permanent, repetitious, and self-reproducing. Wherever there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, in Hartsock, 1990: 168).” If power is ubiquitous, as Foucault suggests, then even the most dispossessed, marginalized of all groups can exercise that power to fight for change. This, then, is the cornerstone of empowerment. The concept of empowerment is built upon the notion that everyone possesses at least some power, no matter how limited, and can act upon that power to bring about change.

While earlier analysis tended to focus on powerlessness - the powerlessness of the poor, of women, of ethnic minorities - there has been a shift away from this locution because of its static connotations. Moreover, powerlessness suggests a total absence of power whereas in reality even those who appear to have very little power are still able to resist, to subvert and sometimes transform the conditions of their lives. The focus has therefore shifted to the more processual aspects of power - empowerment and disempowerment (Kabeer, 1994: 224).

Feminists have had differing responses to postmodern theories of power. Liberal feminists have disregarded postmodern concepts as irrelevant to their work. Marxist feminists argue that the postmodern discourse has led to the fragmentation and disregard for the overarching structures of subordination, including patriarchy and capitalism (Parpart, 1993: 441). Various other feminists have critiqued postmodernism for "...leading to political fragmentation and the dissipation of feminist consciousness and activism" (442). While many feminists reject postmodernism outright, others have called for the development of a postmodern feminism which combines "... a post-modernist incredulity toward metanarratives with the social-critical power of feminism" (Fraser et. al. in Parpart, 1993: 446). They argue that feminism has much to learn from the postmodern emphasis on difference, diversity of voices, and the multiplicity of voices and power. The Western feminist construction of Third World women as "other" has been extensively criticized by minority feminists and feminists from the South. Among them, Chandra Mohanty has called for an end to the Western feminist tendency to homogenize women throughout the world. She argues that Western feminists have created the "... 'third world women' as a singular monolithic subject", with "... 'needs' and 'problems'. but few 'choices' or freedom to act" (Mohanty, 1997: 79).

This creation of 'third world women' as powerless victims of male subordination has established the need for Western development "experts" to intervene in the lives of women in the South. Parpart argues that the WID and GAD approaches have legitimized the development establishment by "... constructing Third World women's problems as technical problems requiring a technical (usually Northern) answer" (1995: 229). The empowerment approach, on the other hand, has seemingly called into question the assumptions of knowledge and power embedded within the development discourse. Southern activists call for an alternative development which is "... grounded in the experience(s) and knowledge(s) of women in the South" (237). The empowerment approach does so by recognizing the power and agency of women in the South.

The empowerment approach questions some of the fundamental assumptions concerning the interrelationship between power and development that underlie previous approaches. It acknowledges the importance for women to increase their power. However, it seeks to identify power less in terms of domination over others, and more in terms of the capacity of women to increase their own self-reliance and internal strength (Moser, 1993: 74).

This theoretical debate has much to offer my analysis. First, it is vital to note that there are multiple theories and interpretations of empowerment, rather than a single metatheory. As well, it suggests that the concept of empowerment would benefit from a more fluid notion of power, and that we must carefully analyse the connection between language and power. Finally, a postmodern feminist approach which values diversity, and recognizes the multiple subjectivities of people will be integral to any analysis of empowerment.

## **Conclusion**

As participatory empowerment approaches have gained currency in the development discourse, it has become increasingly important to analyse how they have been implemented, and what impacts they have had. In order to undertake such an analysis, it is vital to look at both the theory and the practical implications of these approaches. Drawing upon several theoretical debates and a grounded case study, I will move beyond the abstract critiques of empowerment in order to determine how the theory and practice can learn from one another, and be mutually reinforcing. Only when this happens will participatory empowerment approaches reach their full potential to serve marginalized groups throughout the world.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Gender, Empowerment and Participation: A Literature Review**

The language of participatory empowerment has gained currency within both alternative and mainstream development organizations since its emergence from the grassroots. Clearly, however, while the language may be the same, the agendas and outcomes vary greatly. This chapter explores the various ways in which empowerment and participation have been understood and practised by development theorists and practitioners. As they are integrally linked, it is vital to examine the evolution of both concepts. It is important to note that there is no single participatory empowerment approach, and the possible definitions are countless. Rather than attempting to define or to evaluate the different usages, this chapter will merely explore how “empowerment” has been used by various actors within the development establishment.

#### **From Women in Development to Empowerment**

Before a conceptual analysis of empowerment is undertaken, we must understand where the concept of “women’s empowerment” fits into the development discourse. As Arturo Escobar suggests, “options privileged or excluded must also be seen in light of the dynamics of the discourse” (1997: 90). A brief examination of the policy approaches to women in development will illustrate the context in which the empowerment approach

emerged<sup>2</sup>.

The earliest approach concerned with women in the Third World was the “welfare approach”. This approach dominated from the 1950s to the 1970s, and was premised upon improving women’s capacities within their reproductive roles. Examples of welfare priorities include food aid, nutrition and family planning (Moser, 1993). By the early 1970s frustrations with the failure of the development process to bring about positive change in women’s lives led to the development of the Women in Development (WID) approach. Ester Boserup’s seminal work, *Women’s Role in Economic Development* (1970) concluded that women had largely been left out of the development process, and needed to be integrated into it if development efforts were to be successful. The WID approach encompassed several strategies including the “equity”, “anti-poverty”, and “efficiency” approaches. However they all remained deeply embedded within modernization theory. WID approaches were very much of the “add women and stir” variety, attempting to integrate women into the existing system, and leaving the system as a whole unchallenged. This approach caught on quickly with international development agencies such as USAID (Rathgeber, 1989).

By the early 1980s, the Gender and Development (GAD) approach emerged. As mentioned earlier, rather than focussing on women in isolation, the proponents of GAD emphasized the importance of “... the social construction of gender and the assignment of

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<sup>2</sup> It is not within the scope of this chapter to provide a detailed account of the evolution from WID to GAD. For a more complete account see Moser, 1993 and Rathgeber, 1989.

specific roles, responsibilities and expectations to women and men” (Rathgeber, 1989: 11). This approach seeks to transform unequal gender relations, and perhaps most importantly, views women as agents of change, rather than merely passive beneficiaries of development projects. While WID projects are very sectoral in nature, GAD proposes a more holistic approach (Rathgeber, 1989). In particular, “GAD looks at the issue of power as it relates to gender and at strategies for empowering women and challenging the status quo” (Parpart, 1993: 450).

It is in this context that the empowerment approach first emerged within the development discourse<sup>3</sup>. Southern feminists, development practitioners, and activists frustrated by the concentration of power in the hands of Western development planners, and the lack of positive changes in women’s lives, began to advocate that women in the South organize themselves to effect change (Kabeer, 1994). The empowerment approach emerged from the grassroots as an alternative to the dominant, top-down, modernization approach to development (Kabeer, 1994; Moser, 1989). This approach sought to address the strategic needs of women by changing the distribution of power at all levels, and emphasized the need for women’s self-reliance, rather than relying upon development planners to bring about change. This concept represented a shift away from the notion of complete powerlessness of the poor towards the idea of agency and participation (Kabeer, 1994). Most importantly, the empowerment approach “... argues for a development that is more squarely embedded in the particular experiences faced by women and men in the

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<sup>3</sup> Before it entered the development literature, empowerment had taken root in fields as diverse as education, management, social work, community psychology, and community health (Fetterman: 1996).



South” (Chowdhry, 1995: 36). According to Naila Kabeer, “empowerment from below” entails transforming consciousness, which arises out of “... newly acquired access to the intangible resources of analytical skills, social networks, organizational strength, solidarity and a sense of not being alone” (1994: 246). This can be promoted through group organization, awareness-raising, and popular education strategies. Clearly, the emphasis in this context was on group rather than individual empowerment.

The earliest, and best known proponent of the empowerment approach within women and development debates was “Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era” (DAWN). Founded in 1984, this group brought together women researchers and activists from throughout the world. They called upon women in the South to organize themselves in order to bring about change. DAWN’s goal was articulated as: “Empowering ourselves through organization”. In *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions*, Gita Sen and Caren Grown emphasize the importance of listening to the voices of Third World women. This approach represented a dramatic break with previous top-down approaches in which power was concentrated largely in the hands of Western development planners and practitioners<sup>4</sup>. While mainstream approaches have treated women as passive beneficiaries, the empowerment approach acknowledges that women themselves do possess some power and, if mobilized, can use this power to bring about positive change. In addition, although GAD had much input from the South, this

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<sup>4</sup> The empowerment approach was not alone in its efforts to break from top-down development approaches. Similar efforts occurred in adult education, participatory research, community development, and other movements.

approach was the first which stemmed directly from women's experiences in the South, rather than from Western feminists and development planners (Moser, 1993). While previous approaches worked within the system, the empowerment approach posed fundamental questions concerning the concentration of power in the hands of Western "experts" (Parpart, 1995). In its early stages, the empowerment approach was quite radical in that it sought to challenge the existing power structures between both men and women, and the North and the South. Though DAWN has since been criticized for a lack of clearly articulated strategies, and for being utopian in nature, it was tremendously important in promoting the idea that women in the South were agents of change, and could organize themselves to take control over their lives<sup>5</sup>.

Along with DAWN, the empowerment approach was heavily influenced by the popular education and liberation theology movements (Batliwala, 1994; Craig and Mayo, 1995; Thomas, 1992; Turner and Hulme, 1997). In particular, the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian priest and adult educator had a profound impact on the empowerment approach. In the 1970s, Freire advocated a dialogical approach to problem solving with the poor called "conscientization", which he defined as "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (1970: 16). In this way the poor would be taught and encouraged to analyse the causes of oppression, and to take action (Thomas, 1992; Turner and Hulme, 1997). Participation was a means to challenge existing power structures and to give more control to the people

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<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth critique of DAWN see Hirshman, 1995.

themselves. By giving people a voice, and the opportunity to participate, they would be able to take control over, and shape their own development. Freire encouraged a dialogue with the poor in order to "... enable the oppressed to become active and reflective about their reality in order to struggle to transform this reality" (Craig and Mayo, 1995: 6). His ideology was indeed quite radical, and called for social class consciousness, which he believed would eventually lead to conflict with those in power, and potentially, to revolution (Turner and Hulme, 1997). While there was no gender analysis in his work, the notion of the poor analysing their own experiences in order to get at the root of their oppression, rather than relying on experts to fix their problems clearly had a tremendous impact on the empowerment approach. Few organizations have adopted Freire's extremely radical stance; however his belief in working in dialogue with the poor set the foundations for participatory development and empowerment.

### **Empowerment in Practice**

Influenced both by Freire and DAWN, grassroots movements and NGOs throughout the world have taken up the cause of women's empowerment. Groups such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India have promoted women's empowerment by addressing both women's practical and strategic needs (Moser, 1993). As Kabeer points out, those NGOs which have been successful have created a space and the possibility for women to identify their own needs and priorities, most often through group formation (1994). "A common thread running through such initiatives is a concern that women should be more self-reliant in the sense of being more capable of making

their own choices and gaining greater control over the resources needed to implement those choices” (Elson, 1991: 195). At the grassroots, empowerment is seen as a panacea that will successfully challenge the top-down nature of the prevailing development model. In this context, it is argued that change will come about through women articulating their own needs, joining forces, and seizing power (Batliwala, 1994).

As the empowerment approach spread among grassroots organizations and NGOs in the South, it soon caught on with the alternative development practitioners in the North. While empowerment has been equated with an “NGO approach” (Thomas, 1992), this is somewhat misleading. While some, more radical NGOs have adopted empowerment as an objective, the majority of Northern NGOs remain deeply entrenched in the conventional, modernization framework, and therefore shy away from the transformative potential of an empowerment approach. Nevertheless, there are some organizations which have adopted the empowerment of marginalized groups, particularly women, as their goal. In this section, I will highlight the way empowerment has been used by those NGOs which are part of the alternative development community, as opposed to the mainstream development establishment<sup>6</sup>. These NGOs view people as agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries, and therefore adopt participatory

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<sup>6</sup> It must be recognized that NGOs are not a homogenous group (Craig and Mayo, 1995; Rowlands, 1997; Turner and Hulme, 1997). While the distinction between “mainstream” and “alternative” development agencies is not rigid, and organizations often combine elements of both, it is necessary for analytical purposes to make a distinction between the two. By alternative development I am referring to those organizations with social transformation as their strategic orientation. “An alternative development is centred on people and their environment rather than on production and profits” (Friedmann, 1992: 31). For a more detailed discussion of the alternative development approach and NGOs see Edwards and Hulme, 1992; Korten, 1990; Korten and Klauss, 1984.

empowerment strategies in order to involve the poor and marginalized in the decision-making process (Parpart, forthcoming)<sup>7</sup>. Thomas succinctly summarizes the empowerment approach, as adopted by these NGOs as follows:

The idea of empowerment ... indicates that development should be undertaken with the direct aim of increasing the power and control of groups of intended beneficiaries over the circumstances of their own lives, so that they are in a position to become their own development agents in the future (1992: 118).

This view of empowerment most often implies political empowerment. For example, John Friedmann argues that while both social and psychological power are important, they must lead to political power for sustainable change to occur (1992). "Gains in social power must be translated into effective political power, so that the interests of households and localities can be effectively advocated, defended, and acknowledged at the macrosphere of regional, national, and even international politics" (1992: 34). Strategies adopted include awareness raising, group formation, building leadership, and training (Edwards and Hulme, 1992). This view of empowerment emphasizes the devolution of power to the project beneficiaries themselves.

As the empowerment approach gained momentum, it was soon adopted by more mainstream international development agencies and NGOs. Several authors have noted that the co-optation of the empowerment approach by mainstream development organizations coincided with the realization that free market economic strategies had failed to bring about the desired "trickle down effect" to the poor. As Craig and Mayo

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<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, it is not within the scope of this chapter to discuss these approaches in great depth. See Robert Chambers 1994, for an overview of participatory methodologies. Some of the limitations of these approaches will be discussed in the following chapter.

assert. “crucially, community participation and empowerment have been increasingly widely advocated, both in the North and in the South, in the context of increasing poverty, polarization, and social exclusion” (1995: 3). “Bottom-up” strategies such as participation and empowerment were quickly recognized as useful tools that would improve the efficiency and cost effectiveness of development projects. In this sense, empowerment was seen in an instrumentalist fashion, rather than as a desirable goal in and of itself (Rowlands, 1998). Development planners recognized that projects were much more likely to succeed if the beneficiaries were actively involved. Participation in this context has customarily been nominal in nature (White, 1996).

While the language has indeed been adopted, the original, transformative “...empowerment approach has had little influence on mainstream development agencies...” (Chowdhry, 1995: 38). Empowerment in this context means making people more efficient and effective, rather than raising awareness and capacity to participate in decision-making and engendering transformation. The empowerment approach is, in fact, in fundamental contradiction to the goals of these agencies. As Parpart points out, while the WID approach served to legitimize the need for Western development “experts”, the empowerment approach questions the need for these experts, and seeks to put that power into the hands of the people at the grassroots level (1995). For these agencies to adopt empowerment as a goal would challenge their traditionally top-down decision-making and planning processes. As Caroline Moser points out, “The potentially challenging nature of empowerment approach has meant it remains largely unsupported either by

national governments or bilateral aid agencies” (Moser, 1993: 78).

While the original transformative thrust of the approach was not adopted by these agencies, empowerment was interpreted and used by the mainstream as a way to promote efficiency within their projects. Kate Young has argued that the emphasis within mainstream international development agencies has remained on the poor “empower[ing] themselves by pulling them up by their bootstraps” (in Karl, 1995: 108). This approach is consistent with the liberal view that the poor should be integrated into the current system rather than challenging existing structures themselves (Oxaal, 1997: 30). Liberal democratic beliefs emphasize individual initiative, ingenuity, and productivity. Consequently, the focus has been on income generation and access to credit, sometimes coupled with literacy, basic needs, and family planning projects, in order to promote people’s entrepreneurial skills. While most development agencies remain committed to the WID approach, some countries, including Canada, Denmark, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden have adopted more progressive approaches (Moser, 1993: 254). For the most part, however, mainstream agencies continue to use empowerment in an instrumentalist manner.

Based upon her experience working with the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), Karin Himmelstrand has examined the potential role of aid bureaucracies in empowering women. While Sweden has been one of the most progressive donor agencies in terms of gender issues, she argues that very little has been achieved for women’s empowerment. One reason she cites is the large gap between the

sectoral foci of the agency and the needs of women in recipient countries. As she points out, empowerment is a holistic process, which cannot be achieved by focussing only on one sector. In addition, she points to the structure of these agencies themselves as an obstacle. Himmelstrand argues that gender issues have merely been added on, rather than integrated within SIDA and its programmes. Because of this, officers dealing with gender issues remain marginalized, and are relatively powerless to make changes. Himmelstrand argues, then, that international development agencies are unable (and perhaps unwilling) to bring about women's empowerment. She sees their role as merely supporting grassroots movements in the South, rather than initiating the process themselves. "Nothing seems more important for an aid organization wanting to contribute to the empowerment of women than to support these groups to gain access to and control over economic resources" (1990: 112). It is quite likely, however, that support of grassroots organizations by foreign donors would jeopardize the organization's autonomy, and ability to make independent decisions. Until international development agencies are willing to contribute to the success of grassroots organizations without trying to channel and control the agenda, their contribution will be at best limited, and at worst, detrimental to the process of empowerment.

As we have seen, the language of empowerment has been adopted by actors from the grassroots to the international arena. At the grassroots, empowerment is used as an approach to challenge the dominant structures, and to give a voice to the people. Within international agencies, however, while the official rhetoric is imbued with the language of



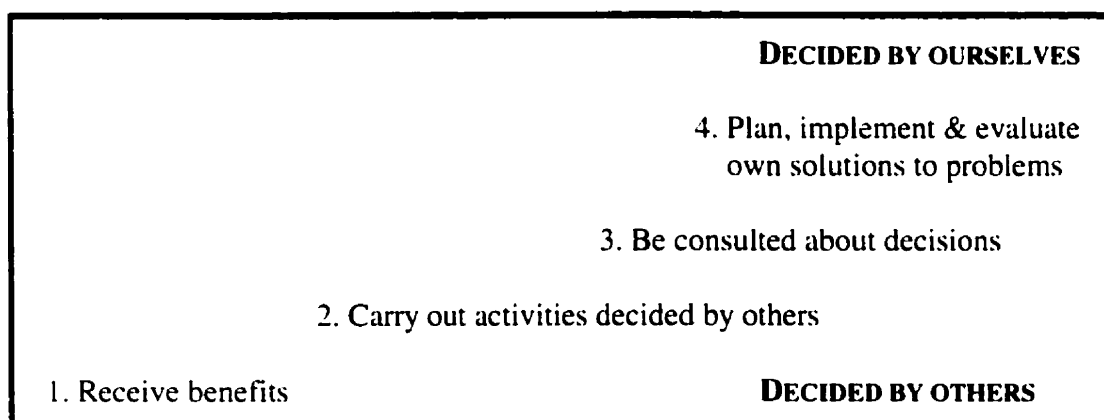
empowerment, it used in an instrumentalist fashion in order to integrate marginalized groups into existing structures (Craig and Mayo, 1995; Rowlands, 1997). Clearly, empowerment in this context has lost its transformational goals. “Unfortunately, as it has become a buzzword, the sharpness of the perspective that gave rise to it has been diluted” (Batliwala, 1994: 128).

### **Emergence of “Participation” in Development Discourse**

The concept of participation emerged within the alternative development literature, which saw people as “final arbiters of their lives (Wignaraja, 1995: 392), and recognized that the participation of the poor was imperative to a successful development process. This view held that people themselves “... can define what they consider to be improvements in the quality of their lives” (Korten, 1995: 179). Participation, then, was integral to the notion of people-centred development. Though it first emerged from the grassroots as a revolutionary concept, it was quickly adopted by mainstream development planners who saw the merits of a participatory approach to development.

Though it appears in the development literature and project proposals with increasing frequency, very little agreement exists about the meaning of participation. Generally speaking, participation can be seen in two ways: as a means of getting a project done, and as a goal in and of itself. According to Thomas Carroll, “... participation can be direct or indirect, it can range from simple day to day tasks to broad political processes. However, as generally understood, it means the direct face-to-face involvement of citizens, usually the disadvantaged, in decisions that affect their own welfare” (1992: 78).

The following model of participation is often used by NGOs in order to explain the different levels of participation within projects (Coady, 1990: 18). As one moves up the scale, participation and control are increased.



The level of participation will vary depending on the ideology and the goals of the agency. While there are always exceptions to the rule, grassroots organizations and NGOs are often thought more likely to promote participation at the higher end of the scale than aid agencies and national governments (Carroll, 1992: 78). It is argued that while governments and aid agencies have higher stakes in maintaining existing power structures, grassroots organizations and NGOs are more likely to address themselves to the needs of the poor<sup>8</sup>.

### **Participation at the Grassroots**

The history of the Grameen Bank illustrates several of the ways in which

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<sup>8</sup> See Gary Craig and Marjorie Mayo, 1995, and David Korten, 1990 for a discussion of the capacities of NGOs to address the needs of the poor. The role of NGOs in promoting participation will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

participation has been promoted successfully at the grassroots. By using participatory, open-ended research methodologies, Professor Muhammad Yunus challenged several misconceptions regarding the rural poor in Bangladesh. Dominant expert thinking held that the poor were primarily landless, and that inadequate access to wage labour was the primary obstacle to their economic well-being and security. After conducting participatory research with the poor, however, Professor Yunus discovered that the major constraint they faced was a lack of access to financial institutions (Kabeer, 1994). The poor were generally able to find employment; however, they were unable to receive credit from banks in Bangladesh due to a lack of collateral, and the limited number of banks in rural areas. These findings inspired the Grameen Bank. As Kabeer points out, discussions with project beneficiaries led to an understanding of the “interdependency of the categories of need” (235). In other words, people do not usually single out one area of life to change. Rather, a more holistic, intertwined view is adopted. In the case of the Grameen Bank, they offer credit services, and also promote the development of cooperative groups in such areas as health care, nutrition, sanitation, literacy and family planning (Kabeer, 1994). The Grameen Bank has often been cited as a prime example of participation and empowerment at the grassroots level, and has undoubtedly provided important services to its many members<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The empowering effects of the Grameen Bank have been written about by many authors including: Holcombe, 1995; Kabeer, 1994; Osmani, 1998. More recently, scholars have critically analysed the empowerment claims of the Grameen Bank. Fahimul Quadir argues that women have no real control over their loans, and have little influence in project design and decision making. Therefore, while the Grameen Bank has succeeded in raising the standard of living of its beneficiaries, he argues that it has not necessarily empowered the women involved (1999).

## **Participation and NGOs**

Since the early 1980s, we have seen a dramatic increase in the role of NGOs in the development process. As Mark Turner and David Hulme point out, "... they [NGOs] have now moved to centre stage in terms of both development practice and debate" (1997: 202). It is important to keep in mind, however, that NGOs are not a homogeneous grouping. Rather, they vary tremendously in their objectives, and strategies, ranging from mission-based organizations to public service contractors (Turner and Hulme, 1997). As such, NGOs do not represent one single approach to development (Craig and Mayo, 1995). Despite the differences, NGOs are seen by some analysts as being more responsive to the needs of the poor, and more able to promote participation at the local level (1995). As Craig and Mayo point out:

Progressive NGOs have been characterized as providing alternative approaches to the failures of the development industry and of paternalistic top-down state initiatives and services alternatives based upon the participation and empowerment of the poor and the poorest working from the grassroots in small-scale, innovative, committed, cost-effective and environmentally sustainable ways (1995: 7).

While some NGOs have been committed to promoting participation and empowerment of the communities they work with, others have merely promoted limited participation in order to facilitate project implementation, and encourage cost efficiency.

## **Participation in International Development Agencies**

While more radical grassroots groups were promoting participation as a goal in and of itself, mainstream development planners soon saw participation as "... a reliable asset for their own future development" (Rahnema, 1992: 120). Much like

empowerment, the emergence of participatory development within mainstream development agencies coincided with calls to roll back the state, and the increasing realization that top-down approaches had not worked. Participation provided a potential way to improve the system without challenging the power structures. It was thought that by involving local people in the development process, it would become more responsive to the needs of the people, less bureaucratic, and more bottom-up. Participation was also seen as a way to pass along some of the costs to local people, as well as increasing project efficiency (Oakley, 1991). While there would be some devolution of power, the ultimate decision-making powers would stay in the hands of the development experts. As participation was embraced by the mainstream, it lost its revolutionary overtones. Rather than serve to challenge the power structures of the development institutions, the rhetoric of participation merely served to integrate people into the existing systems. Sarah White points out that, participation, "... while it has the potential to challenge patterns of dominance, may also be the means through which existing power relations are entrenched" (1996: 14).

### **Participatory Strategies/Methodologies**

What then, are the some of participatory strategies used to promote empowerment? Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) was developed in the 1970s by Robert Chambers, often considered a pioneer of participatory methodologies. RRA was designed to enable development practitioners to quickly access local knowledge in rural communities (Chambers, 1994). Since then, several variations have emerged, most

notably Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)<sup>10</sup>. PRA, which was developed in the late 1980s, has become particularly popular among NGOs and donor agencies. This methodology emerged as a strategy to make development projects more participatory and responsive to the needs of its intended beneficiaries. PRA ostensibly places significant emphasis on listening to the poor, and allows beneficiaries to be involved at all levels of the project cycle, from planning through to implementation. Chambers defined PRA as “an approach and methods for learning about rural life and conditions from, with and by rural people” (1994: 953). It is a way to get at local knowledge in a relatively inexpensive manner, and to shed light on previously concealed needs. By talking to people in a community, different agendas emerge than would otherwise be perceived by development planners (Kabeer, 1994). Increasingly, PRA methodologies are being taken up by both mainstream and alternative development practitioners (Parpart, forthcoming).

PRA exercises are usually informal exercises conducted for two to three days with project staff and beneficiaries. Exercises are intended to be a sharing of information both ways, rather than an extractive process in which project staff merely obtain data and leave. There are a multitude of PRA tools that can be used, depending on the context, and on the information being sought. Maps, diagrams, matrices can all be conducted using local materials. Maps are drawn on the ground, and stones, leaves, and other

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that there is a great deal of over-lap between these methodologies. For more detailed information see: Chambers, 1994; Thomas-Hayter, et al, 1995. For information regarding PAR see False- Borda, 1991; Selener, 1997.

readily available materials are used. Often groups will be divided by gender, age, class, caste, in order to encourage those with less power to speak. For example, activities are frequently conducted separately with men and women's groups, so that women will feel more comfortable in participating.

PRA has spread rapidly in the 1990s, and the number of organizations that have adopted PRA has increased dramatically in the last few years (Turner and Hulme, 1997). These tools are presumably used to empower beneficiaries by allowing their voices to be heard. Participatory approaches have certainly increased the participation of the poor in development projects. Unfortunately, however, PRA is often integrated fairly late in the project cycle, and the transfer of decision-making power from the experts to the beneficiaries remains nominal at best.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen in this chapter, empowerment and participation have been adopted by actors as diverse as SEWA and the World Bank. Though they both originally emerged as a radical alternative to top-down approaches, they were quickly adopted by mainstream organizations, and their original meanings were soon lost. Clearly, then, it is not enough to merely accept the rhetoric of participatory empowerment as positive, and transformative. Rather, we must probe more carefully in order to determine what lies behind these approaches and strategies, what are some of their limitations, and how this affects the men and women involved in these projects.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Critiques of Empowerment and Participation**

As empowerment has gained popularity in development discourse, some academics and practitioners have begun to deconstruct the concept, and to critically analyse how it has been used by various players. These authors argue that we must not blindly accept participatory empowerment as a panacea, particularly as it has been adopted by such a wide range of actors. Rather, we must analyse how different organizations have used it, for what purpose, and with what results (Craig and Mayo, 1995; Mohanty, 1995; Parpart, forthcoming; Rowlands, 1997). These critiques come from a number of sources, from post-development scholars (Carmen, 1996; Rahnema, 1992), who argue that participatory empowerment approaches merely provide a moral justification for what is essentially the same top-down development establishment, to practitioners who remain committed to empowerment's original goals of transformation, and who argue that it is just a matter of developing more refined theories and practices (Crawley, 1998; Dawson, 1998; Mosse, 1994). In addition, there are those who point out that while this approach has its flaws and limitations within the mainstream, it remains a viable strategy for change at the grassroots, and potentially, for altering the power structures of mainstream organizations (Craig and Mayo, 1995; Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1997). Critiques have been advanced at both the theoretical and practical levels, and while they often contradict each other, they reflect various schools of thought and



practices.

As this chapter will show, while empowerment as a concept has been deconstructed, it has only begun to be re-built. While these critiques have much to offer at the theoretical level, they do little to bridge the gap between theory and practice. This chapter will examine some of the recent critiques of empowerment and participation, before going on to propose the need for contextual analysis rooted in women's experiences with development projects.

### **The Co-optation of Empowerment**

The most fundamental criticisms of empowerment and participation within the development discourse have been advanced by post-development scholars such as Majid Rahnema and Raff Carmen. Rahnema argues that the language of participation and empowerment have served to "provide legitimacy to an ageing institution" (1992: 121). Specifically, he argues that participation performed four functions within the field of development. In cognitive terms, it gave new life to the development discourse, by giving it new meaning and a new image. Its political function was to legitimize development by providing it with the new goal of "empowering the voiceless and the powerless" (121). It also provided new answers for the failure of traditional development strategies. Finally, it served a social function. "Participation" brought people together in the hopes that this approach might finally be the true answer to development. The participatory approach was useful to the development establishment because it helped "...to persuade its target populations that not only are economic and state authorities the

real power, but they are also within everyone's reach, provided everyone is ready to participate fully in the development design" (Rahnema, 1992: 123). The rhetoric of participation and empowerment thus thwarted people's efforts to organize autonomously to challenge existing structures. Instead, people were integrated into the development establishment, and their possibilities for action were thereby constrained.

Scholars such as Raff Carmen argue that though people are participating in conventional development structures, there have been very few fundamental changes to the system itself (1996). "The co-optation of participation- originally, like so many others, a grassroots concept - would make it possible for the planners to achieve the development revolution without serious reference to structural change" (44). Through the rhetoric of participation, people have been pulled into the system, and distracted from autonomous forms of action that might be more revolutionary. In addition, Carmen takes issue with the concept of "putting people first" that participation implies. "The expression of 'putting people first' is revealing if only for the fact that someone, or some agency, external to 'the people' is assumed to be doing the 'putting' and it is endowed with some entitlement to do so" (42). A similar argument has been made that the discourse of empowerment is often embedded in the welfare model, in which "expert opinion" is favoured over "lived experience" (Onyx and Berton, 1995: 54). As Long and Villareal point out, the concept of empowerment "... seems to carry with it the connotation of power injected from outside aimed at shifting the balance of forces towards local interests. Hence it implies the idea of empowering people through strategic

intervention by 'enlightened experts' who make use of 'people's science'" (1993: 160).

While post-development scholars argue that the discourse of participatory empowerment is merely used to support an obsolete development apparatus which should be dismantled, there are others who criticize the co-optation of empowerment and participation without being critical of the development establishment as a whole. I will explore some of these critiques in the following section.

Some critics argue that both empowerment and participation have been co-opted by mainstream development agencies and organizations. This co-option has taken two forms: rhetorical co-optation, in which the language of empowerment serves to mask pre-determined agendas, and the co-optation of previously radical movements. More and more organizations with radically different agendas have adopted the language of participatory empowerment, rendering it virtually meaningless, adrift from its radical meanings, and transformational goals. Empowerment, once a direct challenge to mainstream, top-down development practices, has become the domain of the very institutions it once sought to transform. Recognizing the political value of "empowerment", many organizations have adopted the language in an effort to signal their willingness to be more participatory and democratic, and to avoid charges of cultural imperialism (Oxaal, 1997). This has been the case, for example, with the World Bank, and the United Nations, which use the language in an instrumentalist fashion to promote goals of efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The focus of such projects remains on the individual economic empowerment of women through micro-credit and micro-enterprise

development. "Investing in women's capabilities and empowering them to exercise their choices is not only valuable in itself but is also the surest way to contribute to economic growth and development" (UN, in Oxaal, 1997: 2). These strategies, while couched in the language of empowerment, are little more than anti-poverty, WID approaches, which seek to integrate women into the existing economic system, and make no effort to transform existing structures and gender relations.

Many grassroots organizations have also been brought into the mainstream fold and incorporated into state agendas and control, at both the national and international levels. Previously radical and marginalized organizations have increasingly come under the control of international organizations and national governments. As Craig and Mayo point out, "With the growing popularity of participatory development, more radical thinking, and action toward 'empowerment' and 'liberation' of the people is becoming marginalized. Some previously radical grassroots interventions are even being co-opted by 'development' agencies" (1995: 26). For example, SEWA is often cited as an example of a grassroots organization that has been successful in empowering marginalized women in India and bringing about tremendous change. Due to its immense success, it has received increasing support from both the Indian government and international donors. Because of this, however, SEWA has lost some autonomy, and the ability to determine its own agenda (Abbott, 1996; Rose, 1992). It seems that the more successful an organization becomes, the more danger there is of co-optation.

Manoranjan Mohanty has argued that governments, while stressing economic

growth, have begun to espouse the need for the empowerment of their poor and marginalized populations. "The old formulation of 'growth with social justice' is gone; it is 'development with empowerment' now" (1995: 1434). He argues that in India, the government's goal is first and foremost economic growth, and that the adoption of empowerment has served to define and control grassroots struggles. In this way, the government has channelled grassroots movements into predetermined government programmes, thus defining and shaping the agenda, all in the name of empowerment. This strategy has also resulted in "letting the state off the hook" (Gupta, 1997: 305), as people's reliance on NGOs to deliver services has shifted the struggle away from demanding action from the state, towards NGO activity (Mohanty, 1995).

Empowerment, according to Mohanty,

... is the method of how the politics of the oppressed and the poor is restrained and channelised by dominant forces in society. Their right to struggle is circumscribed to these forms of political bargaining. And the state is assumed to be an impartial arbitrator trying to 'enable' the poor to pursue these forms of politics. Thus instead of allowing the oppressed to expand their realm of political struggle this notion of empowerment actually limits it (1435).

Thus, mainstream organizations and governments have co-opted the rhetoric of empowerment, as well as many of the grassroots struggles which emerged as alternatives to conventional development processes. While governments and development agencies throughout the world may speak of empowerment, the political will to support transformational projects is rarely there. Though these authors argue that empowerment has been co-opted by the mainstream and has therefore lost its meaning, there are also

those who continue to advocate empowerment as a worthwhile goal to be sought, albeit with some revisions and rethinking. In the following section I will explore some of the criticisms that they have advanced.

### **Empowerment: A Grassroots Approach**

Some proponents of empowerment argue that while the threat of co-optation is always present, empowerment is indeed a worthwhile goal to pursue. These advocates, however, remain sceptical of the possibilities of empowerment within the mainstream, and argue that empowerment is fundamentally a bottom-up process, and not something that can be imposed from outside, either by aid organizations or governments. Naila Kabeer has argued that empowerment must come from "power-within", and that "such power cannot be given, it has to be self-generated" (1994: 229). Empowerment is not something that can be bestowed upon a group by an external agent. Rather, it is a process which must be defined, and fought for. Oxfam has echoed this sentiment, stating that "Empowerment is a dynamic process, not a transferable commodity" (1995: 74). It is not something that can be done 'to' someone, or 'for' someone (Lather, in Ristock and Pennell, 1991: 4). Empowerment, as a process, then, must come from, and be directed from within a group. It is in this sense that Kabeer argues that empowerment must come from below, from the grassroots, rather than from international NGOs and development agencies.

If empowerment cannot be given, the possibilities for international projects to empower individuals and groups are limited. In fact, some see empowerment as

fundamentally in contradiction to project planning and the project cycle used by development agencies. As empowerment is a process to be determined by the project beneficiaries themselves, "... it cannot be defined in terms of specific activities, or end results because it involves a process whereby women can freely analyse, develop and voice their needs and interests, without them being pre-defined, or imposed from above, by planners or other social actors" (Rowlands, 1997: 4). Planning, which is top-down in nature (whether done by foreign or local experts), runs against the essence of empowerment, which implies that the local people themselves should be doing the planning and decision-making. As many authors have pointed out, empowerment is a process, that can lead to unanticipated results (Craig and Mayo, 1995; Rowlands, 1997). Projects rarely have this flexibility, however. From the project proposal stage onward, the goals and objectives are fixed, and not reaching these targets is regarded as a failure. There is generally very little flexibility to change directions once the project has begun. In addition, whereas empowerment is a long term goal, which would probably not occur in a short period of time, projects usually last a maximum of five years. Another concern is that sustainable empowerment is difficult to measure, and cannot be boiled down to the quantifiable indicators normally used to evaluate and monitor projects. Furthermore projects are usually sectoral in nature, promoting one aspect, be it economic, political, or physical, whereas true empowerment is a holistic process which takes into consideration all aspects of women's lives. As Rowlands sums up,

Talk of empowerment projects may be a contradiction in terms, since the project is generally seen as a short (usually 3 - 5 years) specific activity with

predetermined objectives and targets . With an empowerment approach women themselves need to set the agenda and manage the pace of change (1998, 28).

Obviously, the possibilities for empowerment in such a context are limited. This is not to say that empowerment is impossible, rather that it is highly constrained by the structures and policies of mainstream development organizations, and that the potential for change remains at the grassroots.

### **Limitations of Participatory Tools for Empowerment**

Despite the growing number of criticisms regarding the validity of empowerment within the mainstream, there are those who believe that development agencies and NGOs can play an important role in empowering women, and that projects can serve as catalysts for this process. Many NGOs hold firm to their belief that they can play a facilitating role by using participatory methodologies (Thomas, 1992; Turner and Hulme, 1997). In recent years, however, a significant body of literature has emerged which points out some of the limitations of participation both as an approach and as a methodology and strategy for empowerment.

One of the principal limitations of participatory methodologies is their inability to deal effectively with power relations. In its attempt to take into account "indigenous" knowledge, participatory methodologies have often neglected the power dynamics within communities (Goebel, 1998). Communities are often naively seen as harmonious, homogenous entities, without conflicting needs and interests. This, however, is never the case (Craig and Mayo, 1995; Goebel, 1998; Thomas, 1992; Parpart, forthcoming; Rowlands, 1997). Quite often the most powerful members of a community will shape the



objectives and the form that participation will take, so that it serves their own needs, rather than those of the community as a whole. "There is no one 'indigenous' or 'local' knowledge, but competing perspectives. Some dominate, while others are marginalized" (Goebel, 1998: 284). The "politics of participation" determines the objectives and the forms that participation will take (Goebel: 1998). Even if project staff become aware of hierarchies within communities, it is very difficult if not impossible to overcome these forces through participatory methodologies. PRA methods, in and of themselves, are rarely able to transcend dominant power structures (Parpart, forthcoming). As David Mosse points out, "... the dominant voices will dominate" (1994: 498). Most often, it appears, the marginalized voices are those of women, ethnic minorities, and the poor.

Indeed the impacts of participation can be detrimental to those marginalized members of a community, particularly women. Until recently, participatory approaches have not taken gender differences into account, and have sometimes exacerbated gender inequalities. Based upon research in India, Nicaragua and Kenya, with both state and NGO sponsored development programmes, Linda Mayoux argues that while some grassroots movements have been successful, most efforts to incorporate women into the participatory process have failed. She asserts that merely increasing the number of women involved in participatory projects does not alter the need for transforming unequal gender relations. Far from being a positive process, "... in many cases 'participatory development for women' will constitute little more than a further increase in the unpaid contribution of women to development programmes from which they receive little

benefit" (236). It is commonly asserted that participation is always a positive process for those involved. In fact, the benefits are often very limited for women. In particular, participation often means increased workloads with little to show for it. "It cannot therefore be assumed that increasing participation is beneficial for all activities, in all contexts, for all women" (250). Government agencies and NGOs tend to assume that once women are included in the participatory process, they will then be able to act as agents of change, and fight for their own goals. The problem, as we have seen, is that this process is rarely truly participatory, and women are for the most part included only in a limited way. Often, women's attendance at project meetings is considered "participation", whether or not they have actually shared their views. Rather than simply accepting participation as a positive process for everyone involved, we must ask who is involved, what does the participation consist of, and who is benefitting the most.

Advocates of participatory development often consider PRA and similar methodologies to be inherently empowering. "Anything participatory is assumed to be synonymous with 'good', and 'empowering'" (Guijt and Shah, 1998: 9). Obviously, this is not always the case. Participation has often merely been used to integrate women into a pre-determined process, and to extract information. As Mayoux points out, "... the concept of 'participation' appears to be truncated. It comes to mean 'a way to get people to do what we want' rather than a means to fundamentally change the project idea or construction, or a way to involve and respect local knowledge on an equal footing with foreign, particularly scientific, expertise" (1995: 240). As PRA becomes increasingly

popular, it is used more and more to refer to extractive processes of data collection, rather than a genuine sharing of knowledge (Chambers, 1994). Based upon her research in Zimbabwe, Allison Goebel clearly illustrates this point:

The growing popularity of participatory methods is thus associated with two essentially contradictory approaches. The one seeks to reveal and validate local knowledges, destabilize the notion of the outside expert as the one true 'knower', and include communities on an equal footing in planning and implementation of rural development. The second approach adopts the language and some of the methods of RRA and PRA, without adequately acknowledging the complexities of social realities, or properly absorbing or practising the intended notions of 'participation' (1998: 279).

There is then, nothing inherently empowering about participatory methodologies. Rather it is up to those involved to use it as a tool to challenge oppressive power structures. PRA must be used in all stages of the project cycle, from identification and analysis, through to the project evaluation, in order to ensure that people's voices are heard throughout (Dawson, 1998). In addition the following questions must be addressed. What are the problems to be tackled? Why do these problems exist? How can we bring about change? (Crawley: 1998, 26). It is the responsibility of both the practitioners, and the beneficiaries to ensure that participatory processes address these broader questions of change. In the meantime, participatory methods and techniques must continue to be fine-tuned in order to better deal with issues of conflict, community, and power relations. While much of this can come from work in the field, there is also much to be learned from a better integration of theory with the practice (Parpart, forthcoming).

### **Micro-level Analyses**

While participatory empowerment strategies continue to be implemented and experimented with in the field, these approaches have recently been criticized for their focus on micro-level strategies, and their inability to deal with national and global structures which perpetuate inequality and power relations (Marchand, 1996; Parpart, forthcoming). Empowerment projects for the most part have focussed on the local level. Women as individuals have been targeted, with little thought given to power structures beyond the local community. While bringing about change at the local level is certainly valuable for those within the community, the possibilities for wide-scale change are inherently limited under such approach as it does not challenge the forces which bring about women's subordination. As Parpart points out, "Participatory empowerment approaches, with their emphasis on the local and their tendency to ignore larger political and economic structures, actually does little to challenge national power structures" (forthcoming: 7). As Susan Holcombe also points out, participatory empowerment at the grassroots will not be sustainable without the support of regional and national structures for the participation and empowerment of previously marginalized groups (1995: 15). In an era of increasing globalization, it is more important than ever to adopt a multi-pronged approach which deals with the local, regional, national and international structures. Jindy Pettman observes that, "Empowerment is multifaceted, a process and a goal, and a means for locating struggles for women's rights and choices within a wider political economy" (1996: 181). Academics have begun to ask how empowerment as an approach can

incorporate a macro-level analysis. In particular, Marianne Marchand calls for an empowerment approach which makes room for both micro and macro-level strategies (1996). She points out that while such a transformative strategy is not easy to accomplish, it is particularly important to attempt it now, as empowerment has taken a backseat to the feminisation of poverty in the GAD approach. Marchand criticizes the economistic focus of GAD, that has come about as a response to globalization. She notes that "... global restructuring is understood in economic terms, and solutions or alternatives are sought within the confines of economics and economic models", ignoring social, political, and cultural factors (599). In addition, this approach imposes a false dichotomy which does not fit the reality of most women's lives, and ignores issues such as women's triple role. The focus on economics has resulted in approaches which promote women's economic empowerment at the expense of other types of empowerment. Marchand argues for a more holistic approach to empowerment which takes into consideration all dimensions of life. In addition, she asserts that the processes and effects of globalization have been generalized, obscuring differences, and ignoring issues such as class, race, ethnicity, age, nationality and education. What is required is "... a conceptualization of global restructuring as involving contingent processes and practices of transformation which need to be historicized as well as contextualized" (Marchand, 1996: 597) This would allow a space for alternative strategies to be created and heard. The challenge, then, is to expand and develop both a theoretical approach which deal with both micro and macro-level change, and the tools and strategies to implement this change.

## **Re-constructing Participatory Empowerment**

As we have seen, the critiques of participatory empowerment approaches are quite diverse: from discussions of the discourse, to criticisms of the practice. These critiques, however, are quite abstract, and not rooted in the experiences of those who are most affected: the women involved in empowerment projects. Empowerment as an abstract concept provides little benefit to those “on the ground”. Rather, empowerment must be defined and contextualized in a manner which is directly relevant to the beneficiaries themselves. Jo Rowlands has argued that while it is important to theorize the concept of empowerment, it is also important to ground it in practice, through specific case studies. “Unless empowerment is given a more concrete meaning, it can be ignored, or used to obscure, confuse or divert debates” (1997: 8). She contends that it is vital to find out what empowerment means “on the ground”. She therefore asks “... how the rhetoric of empowerment is translated into reality?” (27). Consequently, Rowlands conducted field research with a women’s group in Honduras in order to determine what empowerment meant to a particular group of women, at a particular point in time. It is this understanding of empowerment from women’s points of view, and how it affects them, that is lacking in the literature. While academics and practitioners have begun to ask “what does empowerment mean?”, few have attempted to answer it from the perspective of those most affected by “empowerment” projects. They have begun the process of deconstructing the concept, but stop short of rebuilding it. Empowerment needs to be re-constructed in a very contextualized manner. An understanding of empowerment must

come from a grounded perspective, rooted in women's daily experience. Only then will projects be able to facilitate the process of women's empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

While both empowerment and participation emerged from the grassroots as a challenge to the conventional development establishment, they were quickly co-opted by the mainstream. As Rahnema warns, "... there are no clear lines of demarcation between mainstream and alternative - alternatives are co-opted and yesterday's alternatives are today's institutions" (in Nederveen Pieterse, 1998: 349). Though "empowerment" has begun to be theorized, little of this work has been grounded in the reality of women's lives. Although it is important to deconstruct the concept, there is also a need for analysis grounded in the experience of women beneficiaries of projects which claim to be empowering. How do these projects affect women? How do women define empowerment? What role can outside agencies play in facilitating a process of empowerment that is meaningful to those women involved? What lessons can we learn from projects in the field, and how can this be incorporated into theory? We must begin to address these questions in a contextualized manner if women's empowerment is to retain its transformative agenda and play a significant role in improving the lives of women throughout the world.

It is time to re-construct empowerment from the perspective of those who are most affected, both project beneficiaries and project staff. The result will not be a meta-theory which attempts to define empowerment for all people, in all places, for all time.

Rather it will be context-specific analyses of empowerment and participation, placing women at the centre, so that their needs, goals and voices are no longer marginalized.

Bearing in mind these critiques and the need for contextualization, the following chapter will provide a case study of a development project in Vietnam.



## Chapter 4

### **CASE STUDY: Localized Poverty Reduction Vietnam Program**

While the concepts of empowerment and participation have begun to be deconstructed, the analysis has remained for the most part at a theoretical level, with little grounding in practice. In order to move beyond this abstract theorizing, we must investigate the way participatory empowerment approaches are being implemented in the field. Only then will we be able to rethink and reconstruct them with a solid foundation in both theory and practice. The case study discussed below will explore the gap between the rhetoric of empowerment and participation and planning and implementation procedures in a specific international development project in Vietnam. It will highlight some of the difficulties with the implementation of these approaches. I will begin with a brief background on Vietnam, and will then outline the goals of the project, and its theoretical underpinnings. Finally, I will go on to describe some of the challenges in project implementation, as well as the various perceptions of empowerment and participation within the project.

From May to August 1999 I worked and did research on the “Localized Poverty Reduction Vietnam” (LPRV) project, at Hue University in central Vietnam<sup>11</sup>. I was responsible for doing background research regarding the communes the project was to be working in. In addition, I conducted research in the areas of gender, poverty, and micro-

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 1 for a map of Vietnam.

credit. My own research objective was to evaluate the project's progress towards its goals of empowerment and participation. In particular, I wished to examine how these concepts were understood and practised from the project team perspective, and from the perspective of the beneficiaries - particularly the women. This would determine if there was a gap between the project's perceptions of empowerment and participation, and the beneficiaries' perspective. I had hoped to accomplish this research through a combination of interviews, PRA exercises and participant observation. However, due to various constraints, I was unable to carry out substantial research with project beneficiaries. For instance, in order to travel and do research in remote communes, it was necessary to obtain authorization from several different levels of government. This was very difficult to obtain, as the government retains strict control over the activities of foreign researchers. In addition, the project staff refused to let me do any research at the village level, particularly participatory research. There was no acknowledgment that local people should be involved in the research, other than nominally. My research, then, came from participant observation in daily project activities, semi-structured and informal interviews with local leaders, project members and collaborators, and NGO staff, and various informal interviews with numerous people<sup>12</sup>. As a result, my analysis is focussed at the level of the project administration and local officials, rather than the village.

### **Background Information**

Vietnam is a country in tremendous transition. In 1986 the Vietnamese

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 2 for a list of interview and meetings.

government adopted economic and institutional reform policies known as *doi moi*<sup>13</sup>, which were designed to shift the country from central planning to a market economy within a socialist framework (Le, 1995: 44). Implementation of economic liberalization policies began in 1988 and continues today. The economy has grown rapidly, and the poverty rate has decreased significantly from a rate of 70% prior to *doi moi*, to 30% in 1998 (UN, 1995: 5)<sup>14</sup>. Real incomes and the quality of life have increased for most Vietnamese (Hainsworth, 1999: 29)<sup>15</sup>. In recent years, however, GDP growth rates have declined, from 8.5% in 1997 to 4% in 1998 (UN, 1999: 2). Poverty endures and wealth disparity is increasing, particularly between rural and urban areas<sup>16</sup>. Vietnam remains one of the poorest countries in the world, ranks 122 out of 174 countries on the Human Development Index, and has an average per capita income of \$310.00 per year (iii). Significantly, Vietnam has performed quite well on other indicators such as life expectancy (66 years), literacy (90%), infant mortality (4%), and population growth (2.2%) (Nguyen, 1998: 151). There is some indication, however, that cutbacks to social services such as education and health care are adversely affecting these indicators. *Doi*

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<sup>13</sup> *Doi moi* is translated as "renovation".

<sup>14</sup> This calculation is based upon the World Bank's "basic needs deficit line" which is determined by caloric intake, as well as education, health care, and travel expenses (UN, 1998: 6). There are many ways to define and measure poverty, and calculations will vary accordingly. Other calculations have placed the number of households below the poverty line closer to 50%.

<sup>15</sup> For more comprehensive information regarding *doi moi*, and the impact on the Vietnamese economy and society see: Hainsworth, 1999; Hy Van Luong, 1996; Litvack and Rondinelli, 1999; Norlund, 1995.

<sup>16</sup> Vietnam remains an agrarian country, with 80% of the population living in rural areas. Significantly, 90% of those classified as poor live in rural areas (UN, 1998: 3).

*doi moi* has created tremendous social and economic change in Vietnam in a relatively short period of time. While the ruling Communist Party has adopted economic liberalization policies it continues to resist social and political reforms.

The majority of foreign aid from the West to Vietnam ceased with the invasion of Cambodia in 1978. Vietnam instead turned to the Soviet Union, which provided aid until the late 1980s (Murray, 1997: 6). In the early 1990s the embargo against Vietnam ended, and aid from Western countries resumed. International NGOs and donor agencies quickly resumed operations. While there were a small number of INGOs in the country previously, since then, they have poured in, and Vietnam has become inundated with development projects (Borton, 1994). Local NGOs have also emerged in Vietnam since *doi moi* in order to compensate for cutbacks in social services such as education and health care (Mulla, 1994). There are very few local NGOs, however, as they are not officially sanctioned by the government. This creates a significant imbalance between foreign and domestic NGO activity (1994). In 1999 Vietnam received a total of \$2.2 billion in aid.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) reinstated development assistance to Vietnam in 1990<sup>17</sup>. According to CIDA, "Vietnam is now facing many development challenges -- and it must meet these challenges while learning how to create the institutions, systems, regulations and mind-set needed to effect transition to a market economy" ([www.acdi-cida.gc.ca](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca)). Accordingly, the focus is on human resources,

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<sup>17</sup> Canadian assistance to Vietnam was reinstated after the withdrawal of its army from Cambodia, and economic reforms were underway (CIDA, 1996: 1).

institutional development, and technology transfer. Within CIDA's Partnership Branch, partnerships between organizations, institutions, associations and the private sector are fostered. These partnerships implement projects which are "mutually beneficial, and ... increase the participation of local institutions in development activities" ([www.acdi-cida.gc.ca](http://www.acdi-cida.gc.ca)). It is within this context that the LPRV programme has been taking place.

The Localized Poverty Reduction Vietnam (LPRV) project is a CIDA funded, Tier I program, of the University Partnerships in Cooperation and Development (UPCD), implemented by the University of British Columbia (UBC). Begun in 1998, it is a five year project, with a budget of \$5 million. UBC and the University of Laval are the Canadian partners; along with six Vietnamese partners: five universities throughout Vietnam, and the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities (NCSSH). NCSSH, the government agency responsible for research and policy in the social sciences, is the Vietnamese lead institution, and coordinates communications and activities between all partners<sup>18</sup>. The goal of the project, in brief, is to reduce poverty in Vietnam through capacity building. Or, as the project proposal states, "To build self-sustaining capacity in the partner institutions to develop and teach low-cost, participatory assessment and project planning methods that are effective in generating appropriate solutions to localized poverty, and suited to Vietnamese cultures and administrative conditions" (1997: 6).

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<sup>18</sup> NCSSH's primary mandate is to make policy recommendations to the government, particularly concerning poverty reduction and sustainable development (LPRV, 1997: 10).

The five main objectives of the project are as follows:

- 1) to establish Centres for Poverty Reduction (CPR) at 5 universities
- 2) to establish a network of CPRs throughout Vietnam
- 3) to reduce poverty in 15 communes through “learning-by-doing” projects
- 4) to produce knowledge regarding participatory methods
- 5) to promote links between Vietnam and Canada

The “learning-by-doing projects” form the core of the project (1). Each CPR is supposed to develop “action-learning” projects in their partner communes. These projects allow for flexibility to meet the needs of the university and the community, rather than having standardized projects throughout the entire country. In this way, the project hopes to “...focus on methods that empower persons and communities, including groups that may be inequitably treated” (10). This flexibility, in theory, allows for a greater level of participation by the local people (ie: being involved at the beginning stages - project design, needs assessment, etc). However, as will be shown, this did not occur in practice.

#### **Evaluation of Project Effectiveness:**

While on paper the project seemed firmly grounded in the three closely connected theoretical frameworks of participatory development, empowerment, and capacity building, in practice, this proved not to be the case. The ideals of the project are seemingly informed by a “people-centred” approach, which intends to build the capacity of the universities to empower people by increasing their participation in the development and implementation of poverty reduction projects. As Deborah Eade points out, “If ‘scaling-up’ was all the rage in the late 1980s, the latest fashion for maximising NGO impact is ‘capacity building’. Along with ‘empowerment’, ‘participation’ and ‘gender

equity' capacity-building is seen as an essential element if development is to be sustainable and centred in people" (1997: 1). Thus, capacity building, empowerment, participation, and poverty reduction are all closely intertwined in this project. The experience with the project to date indicates that we must carefully examine these approaches, which are often taken for granted as positive in and of themselves.

It is not my intent to criticize the project as a whole, rather to point out some of the limitations that were encountered at one partner institution, in order to learn from these lessons for the future. Discussions with other Canadian researchers in the project revealed similar challenges with other partner institutions in Vietnam as well. The following critique represents my research with one of the partner institutions, at a particular period in time. Other aspects of the project would need to be examined for a full and thorough evaluation. However, the evidence from one segment of the project sheds some light on its limitations and potential.

### **Project Design and Goals**

Many of the challenges of the project can be traced back to the project design and donor requirements. According to CIDA regulations, the majority of the funding for Tier I projects must remain in Canada. In this particular project fifty-three percent of the budget remains in Canada, while the remainder is shared between the six Vietnamese institutions, leaving a small budget to implement project activities in Vietnam (LPRV, 1997: 29). Obviously, this is not an equitable distribution of aid money, and it places serious constraints on Vietnamese institutions. In addition, and perhaps most

significantly, professors are not remunerated for their work on the project. This undermines motivation and commitment to the project on the part of the Vietnamese partners. Given their heavy workloads, and low salaries, it is not surprising that Vietnamese academics are reluctant to spend much of their time working on unpaid project activities. Professors are nominated to the project by the Dean of the University, and other than prestige and a few benefits such as trips to Canada, training, etc, there is little incentive to commit much time to the project. The result is that professors' involvement is extremely limited and sporadic at best. The project, then, is highly reliant on the personal commitment and enthusiasm of people who are already very busy and overburdened. Any project that relies so fundamentally on this kind of human resource base is seriously at risk, as personal commitment cannot always be counted upon.

Another difficulty became evident before my arrival in Vietnam. While meeting with the project team at UBC, I discovered some contradictions about project goals. While I only spent a few days there, the project members seemed unclear as to whether the primary goal is university capacity building or poverty reduction. While some professors assume the intended beneficiaries are the Vietnamese universities, others believe the poor in Vietnam should be the primary beneficiaries. These differences of opinion are based primarily upon ideological differences regarding who should benefit the most, and essentially how development should be done. Some members believe that it is acceptable for money to be directed at the university level, and that once universities build their capacity to conduct participatory research, the poor will benefit. On the other



hand, there are those who firmly believe that the Vietnamese poor should receive more direct benefits. Essentially the conflict boils down to the benefits of university capacity building versus poverty reduction.

This has led to much debate, and friction between both Canadian and Vietnamese members regarding allocation of project efforts and resources. My time in the field demonstrated that the focus and the resources of the project have largely remained on the universities. They have received all the benefits to date, including training, workshops, travel, etc, while the communes have received very few direct or indirect benefits. Though the core of the project is “learning by doing” projects in 15 communes, which will reduce poverty, no money is allocated to fund these projects. Therefore, while the CPRs are supposed to promote participatory development at the commune level in order to design projects in a participatory manner, there is no budget to implement these projects. It is obviously difficult to encourage participation of either the local officials, or the local population, when there is no money to fund projects, and people will not necessarily see any tangible improvements for their efforts. While the universities’ capacity is being built, the local people’s needs and priorities are marginalized. Clearly, the primary beneficiaries are the universities, both Vietnamese and Canadian, who are “producing knowledge regarding participatory planning and assessment” (LPRV, 1997: 8). The lack of clarity regarding project goals hinders its ability to promote empowerment and participation. At a theoretical level this may permit flexibility in defining and developing empowerment strategies. At the level of project

implementation, however, this ambiguity undermines effectiveness and can even serve to maintain existing power structures.

While the focus on the universities is not necessarily inappropriate in and of itself, certain ethical dilemmas must be addressed. For example, the implications of involving the poor in research activities which may not tangibly improve their lives must be carefully considered. Whether intended or not, the people at the commune level are being used as “guinea pigs” in order to test and improve the university’s ability to conduct participatory research. Participation in such activities is obviously not empowering, particularly when the poor are being used merely to further the research agendas of the university. In addition, the issue of informed consent is vital. During my time there, in several LPRV research activities local leaders were not fully informed about the objectives or the expected results of the research. They expected funding and projects in the near-future which would improve the commune. Ethically, the people should be informed about the limits of this collaboration to avoid creating false hopes.

### **Partnerships and Teams**

While the project is predicated on the notion of partnerships, this aspect has been quite difficult to solidify, both at the project level, and within the individual universities. The Hue University CPR steering committee is made up of nine members - eight men and one woman, from a variety of departments and colleges within the University. A number of “collaborators”, who are lecturers and students, also work with the project on specific field research activities. One of the objectives of the project is to create a dynamic, multi-

disciplinary team which learns from each other, and works together to develop action-learning projects to be implemented. Unfortunately, however, there is not a cohesive team of members and collaborators, and contact between members is limited to occasional meetings. To a large degree the steering committee members make the decisions, while the collaborators do the field work. Collaborators are not invited to project meetings, and are therefore not involved in discussions regarding the direction of the project. Several collaborators reported having very little knowledge of the project and its goals. Instead, they are merely informed about the specific field activity to be implemented, such as a survey or field visit. This undermines the quality of the research as the researchers are not fully aware of the goals of the research, or of the intended outcomes. The result is a rather piecemeal combination of various research by different people, with varying objectives.

The relationship between members is very hierarchical, reflecting the hierarchy within the university and society itself. If full participation is not promoted between all project members, how then, can participation be expected at the commune level? As Susan Holcombe's research with the Grameen Bank suggests, organizations must promote an atmosphere in which project staff feel empowered for them to perform effectively and to promote empowerment and participation among beneficiaries (1995). The hierarchy within the university system inhibits such an atmosphere. In addition, the few incentives that do exist such as training, workshops and travel, usually go to senior professors, while the junior professors perform most of the substantial field work.

At the wider project level, while the Canadian partners espouse the notion of equal partnership, relationships between Canadians and Vietnamese remain very hierarchical. Decisions are seen as coming from the Canadian partners, and NCSH, and then being handed down to the Vietnamese universities for implementation. At the same time, however, the Canadian partners do not want to impose their views, and prefer to engage in lengthy dialogue with Vietnamese partners. Given the distance, and infrequent meetings between project members from all universities, this is extremely difficult. The steering committee meets once a year, and Vietnamese partners meet every few months. While dialogue via e-mail was supposed to be a primary means of communication, this has not been realized, due to low comfort levels with the technology, lack of training, and poor access to the technology. Very little discussion takes place directly between the Vietnamese universities and the Canadian partners, rather, NCSH serves as the intermediary. In addition, the relationship between NCSH and the CPRs is quite top-down in nature, with directives coming from NCSH, to be implemented by the CPRs. The Vietnamese partners tend to feel that they must accept what the Canadian partners and NCSH say, as they control the money and the decision-making power.

During my involvement with the project, the difficulties of communication and partnership became apparent in the implementation of a survey with local commune officials. This survey was designed by NCSH, and was then passed down to the CPRs for comments, and implementation. UBC was also asked to provide feedback; however they decided that they should not get involved. At the Hue CPR, the survey was

distributed to members of the CPR, and some comments were made, but never incorporated. While a survey does not seem suitable to promote the use of participatory research methodologies, clearly the Vietnamese partners wanted above all to conduct the research as efficiently and cheaply as possible. Along with researchers at other partner institutions, I raised several concerns with both the Hue CPR and UBC teams, including the top-down nature of the surveys, the lack of gender awareness, and the traditional and non-participatory manner in which it was being implemented. We suggested that the Canadians get involved, in order to recommend improvements in the process (in other words to build capacity). Project members at UBC argued that this was a Vietnamese initiative, and that it was their prerogative to implement as they saw fit. They did, however, hope that continued dialogue between the CPR and the interns would allow for discussion of these ideas, and that maybe they would have some impact. In my case, there was very little dialogue with the CPR, and the survey went ahead, and was implemented in very top-down manner, as quickly and cheaply as possible.

A related problem is that the people who participated in meetings and workshops to discuss methodology and implementation did not actually carry out the survey. While the steering committee members meet and make the decisions, the collaborators carry out the field work. This poses a problem in terms of passing on skills and knowledge, and generally for building capacity. This example brings up some of the contradictions involved with the promotion of capacity building from an alternative development standpoint. Capacity building implies some notion of teaching and sharing of

experience, and in this case the Canadian partners were unwilling to provide direction to their partners for fear of seeming dictatorial and non-participatory. What then, is the role of the Canadian partners?

### **Gender Issues**

The vast changes brought about due to economic reforms have had tremendous impacts on women in Vietnam. In order to understand gender roles in Vietnam today, a brief examination of women's historical roles is in order. According to Tran Thi Que, gender equality existed in traditional Vietnamese society, prior to Chinese occupation. Gender roles were profoundly altered, however, by the traditional Confucian values which became pervasive throughout centuries of Chinese rule. Confucian values were based upon social stability, duty, and hierarchy (1995: 187). A woman's life was ruled by the "three obediences": a woman was to obey first her father, then husband, and, then, if widowed, her son (Esser, 1996: 2). Women's roles were characterized by service and sacrifice to their families (Tran, 1995: 187). Women were completely dependent upon men: they had no rights to citizenship, education, or inheritance. The Confucian value system became deeply embedded and was maintained by the feudal system (188). It remained unchanged during the French colonial period, and pervades gender roles in Vietnam today.

During the socialist era from 1945 to 1986, women's emancipation became a priority and a part of the national agenda. Equality between men and women was encoded in the 1946 Constitution which states that "Women enjoy equality with men in

all spheres of activity: political, cultural, at home and in society” (Albee, 1995: 4).

Women’s political representation was quite high in both the National Assembly and the Communist Party. In addition, universal access to education and health care was ensured. Literacy rates soared to 90%, with only a marginal difference between men and women (Esser, 1996: 29). Women were considered to be equally productive members of society. In fact, women’s agricultural productivity, along with their military participation is partially credited with Vietnam’s wartime successes. As Tran remarks, “The success of Vietnam’s resistance against foreign aggression was to a large extent due to the equal contribution of men and women. Clearly, Vietnam could not have won her struggle if only men had taken part” (1995: 204).

Women’s status increased immensely during this period. Although tremendous gains were made, Andrea Lee Esser points out that “the focus during this era on women’s equality may be analyzed as a means of mobilizing women to implement state policy rather than as a means to emancipate women from an unjust system. The actual needs of women as perceived by women themselves was rarely taken into account” (1996: 4). Despite the advances made in women’s equality during the socialist era, women’s status in Vietnam remains quite low. This has been attributed to Confucian values which remain embedded in gender roles today. “Most women in rural Vietnamese households continue to hold lower status than men and this reality is deeply rooted in the long Confucian history” (Albee, 1995: 5).

Today, women’s participation in the workforce is quite high. Women represent

52.5% of total labour force, and 73% of women are considered to be economically active (Anh, 1997: 89)<sup>19</sup>. In addition, women bear the majority of the responsibility for productive labour. As in many countries, women in Vietnam carry the “double burden” of both productive and reproductive work, and work approximately four hours longer per day than men (Esser, 1996: 15). Studies have shown, however, that women have very little decision-making power within the household. Most important decisions are made by men, except among female-headed households (Tran, 1995: 191). Though women’s rights have been legislated, the impact on rural women has been limited, and “... legal pronouncements on the status of women and their equality with men are distant from the realities of women’s lives” (Albee, 1995: 5). Women’s political representation has declined substantially from 32% of the National Assembly in 1975 to 19% today (UN, 1998: 64). At the commune level, women’s representation in the People’s Committees falls to 14% (64).

Economic reforms have brought about improvements such as higher incomes, an increase in consumer goods, and more rights and freedoms, including the freedom to choose jobs and to migrate (Esser, 1996: 8). “Women themselves feel they have greater opportunity and autonomy under the new system. Women talk of having more freedom to make their own choices about their lives” (9). At the same time, however, many of the achievements from the socialist era are being eroded. As Tran remarks, “Since

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<sup>19</sup> This figure is in fact quite low given the large number of women involved in the informal sector, which is not taken into consideration in formal surveys (Esser, 1995: 7).



reunification and peace - and especially since the initiation of economic reform - there have been growing signs that the position of women is declining, particularly in rural, secluded and remote areas" (1995: 204). Women's status has been affected by the reforms in several ways. From 1989 to 1994 thousands of state-owned enterprises were closed. A 1992 report by the Vietnamese Women's Union states that 77% of retrenched workers were women. This is largely attributed to the fact that women held lower positions, and were therefore the first to be laid off. In addition, increased responsibilities have fallen on women's shoulders with cuts to social services and the introduction of user-fees for health services and education (Albee, 1995: 16). Preliminary reports suggest that the female literacy rate is falling as fees have been introduced at the secondary level, and families are less willing to pay for their daughters to continue their education (UN, 1998: 65). Finally, it is important to note that Vietnamese society is in a state of flux. The reform policies of *doi moi* have affected not only the economy, but also have brought about significant social changes (Esser, 1996: 8). Men and women alike are struggling to redefine themselves in a rapidly changing society.

The LPRV project strives to promote gender equity, and states that "... women's immediate, practical needs and strategic (empowerment) needs will both be addressed" (32). It is important, however, to go beyond what the project says it will do, and analyse what actually happens. As Naila Kabeer points out, in order to understand how gender is integrated into a project, we must first discover how it is understood by the various actors involved (1996). I will begin by outlining how gender is incorporated at the project team

level. When the project first began, there were no women at on Hue CPR team. Immediately before the project began, one woman was added to the steering committee, due to pressure from UBC and NCSSH. While according to the project proposal there is to be an equal number of men and women on the steering committee, the reality differs: there are eight men and one woman. This is in large part due to the hierarchy of the university system, and the fact that the Dean of the university refuses to appoint more women. The rationale for this is that women are overworked, both in the university and at home, do not have the time nor the interest to work on project. However my interviews with women team members revealed a strong interest in increasing their participation, but they claimed they are not taken seriously by their male counterparts. They have to constantly battle to become fully integrated in the project. There is a feeling by male members that appointing more women to the team will slow progress, as women are perceived as being unable to work independently, or “think strategically”. In addition it is thought that they cannot endure harsh conditions of research in remote areas, despite women living in these very areas. The few women who are involved are marginalized from both decision-making and field visits. The male members of the team I spoke with held very traditional views of women’s roles, and asserted that women are “happy in the kitchen”, and that the project should not get involved in this area. Clearly, women are not treated as equal partners within the team. It is unlikely, then, if the project is unwilling to adopt a gender-transformative approach at the management level, that it would do so in project activities in the communes. In project implementation, gender issues are seen as

distinct from other project activities, and not necessarily to be integrated. The gender team, made up of four women, are quite marginalized within the project, and must fight for recognition from their male counterparts.

All “gender activities” at the commune level are implemented through the Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU). The Women’s Union, supported by the state, is the primary organization through which work with women is conducted (Eisen, 1984). In 1930 the Women’s Union was established by the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) as a mass organization in order to serve as a link between the Communist Party, and the people (De Valler, 1996). The VWU was, and continues to be responsible for the mobilization, education, and representation of Vietnamese women (Tetreault, 1996: 40). In addition, the Women’s Union is tasked with providing policy recommendations to the government. It has been argued by some that the VWU has not been terribly effective in this regard. According to Esser, “There is some indication that anything beyond a token show of participation from the VWU would not be readily accepted by the policy-making bodies as the traditional Confucian values still sideline women in political arenas, even when they are present at meetings (1996: 38).

The focus of the VWU has changed dramatically from the mobilization of women for war efforts, to a focus on women’s rights as individuals (Tran, 1997: 52). It has more than eleven million members, consisting predominantly of rural women (Esser, 1996: 37). Since 1992 the Women’s Union has functioned essentially as an NGO, receiving money from both the national government and international donors in order to conduct grassroots

activities (Tran, 1997: 52). Its resources, however, are extremely limited due to government cutbacks. It is important to note that the VWU receives funding from the government, and represents official Communist Party policy. The VWU is quite conservative, and embedded in the welfare model, generally promoting women's reproductive roles and strengthening their roles within the family (De Valler, 1996; UN 1996). Activities tend to focus on practical gender needs such as income generation, credit, family planning and social welfare (Mulla, 1994: 37). As Arlene Eisen points out, "Understandably, priorities are determined by the requirements of the nation's survival: to develop an economy capable of meeting the basic needs of people and to defend the nation against foreign aggression" (1984: 282). Women's priorities, then, are often marginalized to national priorities of economic development.

How then, is "gender" understood within the Women's Union? An interview with a representative from the Provincial Women's Union revealed that "gender" as a concept has only emerged in the past two years at the provincial level. It remains a very new concept which they are attempting to incorporate into their work and ideology. Unfortunately, however, there is little money for training of their staff, and the ideas have not been extensively disseminated at the grassroots. At the provincial level, women's empowerment is recognized as important, and efforts are made to incorporate awareness activities with projects that address women's practical needs.

At the commune level, there is little acknowledgement of the importance of gender analysis. This is partially due to the lack of training of local Women's Union

representatives. The socialist rhetoric of equality is continuously advanced. I was told repeatedly that men and women are completely equal in all social, political and economic activities. Although I stressed that different responsibilities did not necessarily imply inequality, the reply was always the same "Men and women are completely equal".

Questions regarding decision making were responded to in a similar manner: according to my informants, all decisions in all aspects of life: finances, education, health, agriculture, are made together by both the husband and wife. While in theory men and women may be completely equal, the membership of the People's Committee demonstrates a clear lack of gender equality, with twenty-four men, and only one woman. Such discussion, however, was not welcomed, and it was difficult to get open, candid responses. Although the official ideology is one of complete equality, clearly this varies greatly from informal gender relations. This experience points to the role of socialist rhetoric in obscuring gender analyses and thereby hindering gender equality.

The lack of attention to, and understanding of, gender issues has led to their marginalization in LPRV project activities and research to date. As experience has shown again and again, if gender is not integrated in the beginning of a project, the project is more likely to fail, or to bring about adverse effects on women's lives (Carloni, 1990). The Hue CPR has adopted a "gender-blind" policy, in which male professors receive the bulk of the benefits, while women are marginalized<sup>20</sup>. As Kabeer points out,

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<sup>20</sup> Naila Kabeer defines gender-blind policies as "those which are implicitly premised on the notion of a male development actor, and which, while couched in apparently gender-neutral language, are implicitly male-biased in that they privilege male needs, interests and priorities in the distribution of opportunities and resources" (1996: 5).

“Institutional rules, resources, and practices determine how authority and power are distributed among its membership (1993: 86). At the university level, while the official ideology is one of gender equality, clearly the reality is very different. As men receive more benefits such as workshops and training than women, the gap will continue to increase as men receive more professional development opportunities than women. If there is no gender equity within the CPR, it is also unlikely that it will be achieved at the commune level. The inequality between men and women will also be exacerbated as to date, women have been left out of the research and decision-making of the learning-by-doing projects. The prospects for women’s participation and empowerment in this project, then, remain bleak.

### **Political Issues**

In Vietnam, there are several political issues which hinder the success of development work, particularly those seeking to promote people’s participation. Vietnam remains a highly centralized country, with strict state control (Keenan, 1993). The government structure is very hierarchical in nature, and working at the grassroots is very difficult. According to various NGO representatives, few organizations have succeeded in this regard. For the most part, one has to work with the People’s Committee, which is the lowest level of administration. The government has much control over project activities, including deciding which areas will receive projects. In the case of the Hue CPR, two out of the three communes were chosen by the government in order to promote government interests such as relocating the boat dwellers onto land, and settling a

sparsely populated area. Phu Binh, for example, is a suburb of Hue City, with a large population living on boats in city canals and waterways. The municipality has been attempting to resettle people onto land for approximately ten years, with little success. Hue University has been asked to help with the relocation efforts. The boat dwellers are seen as “backward”, having bad habits, short term vision, and many social problems. Essentially, they are seen as “trouble makers”. While the project’s involvement has been limited so far, the team hopes to “persuade” the people to move to land. A predetermined agenda such as this is obviously a barrier to promoting a healthy, participatory relationship with the people in this area, and ethically questionable. This example raises the question: whose interests are being served by project activities?

In the university system, there are also several obstacles. In the case of Hue University, development projects are highly sought after because of the income they provide to the university. The university is involved in many large projects, and the emphasis is on quantity rather than quality. The interests of the local people, therefore, do not receive top priority. As previously mentioned, the university is also very hierarchical, which is a major challenge in forming a team which will work together, and learn from one another. Instead, steering committee members are usually heads of departments, and party members, and they delegate the work to junior members of the department. These junior members are rarely involved in the planning and decision-making, solely the field work. This approach makes it very difficult for capacity to be built as the same group of people is never present, discussing, learning from their

activities. The government and university hierarchies represent considerable challenges to the promotion of empowerment and participation within this project.

### **Perceptions of Participation and Empowerment**

As illustrated in previous chapters, both participation and empowerment are very vague terms. Unless they are spelled out by an organization before project implementation, this ambiguity can lead to confusion and misunderstandings, particularly across cultures. In this particular project, the perceptions of empowerment and participation differ widely among partners. As we have seen, empowerment is a concept that has been widely adopted by the most mainstream of actors throughout the world. In Vietnam, however, empowerment is equated with women's political power, and is generally regarded as a threat. The language of participation, on the other hand, is much more acceptable, and in wide-spread use. Many of the Canadian partners advocated a bottom-up approach in which power is transferred into the hands of the poor through participation, so that they may be empowered and have more control over their own lives. Many of the Vietnamese professors I worked with, however, had a much different view of participation. To them it meant little more than using traditional methods to do research "on" the poor. There is little interest in using methods such as PRA activities to conduct research, even though they have received extensive training, preferring instead to use traditional methods such as surveys. Expert knowledge is more valued than the knowledge and experience of the people themselves. Professors feel that they know what the problems and solutions are already, so there is no need to conduct participatory



research. Participation of the poor in this project is nominal at best, with little possibility of altering structures of inequality that affect the poor, and in particular, women. The “learning by doing” projects will be limited to welfare projects which do little to empower the poor. The experience of this project also brings up the question of who the participation is for. In other words, who is benefitting? Ultimately, both the Canadian and Vietnamese universities are receiving the benefits. Unfortunately, it seems the needs and priorities of both women and the poor have been marginalized, if not altogether forgotten.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, the project’s record to date for promoting participation and empowerment at both the university and the commune level is discouraging, particularly among women. It is not my intention to criticize the entire project, rather to point out that even projects with worthy goals such as participatory empowerment must be carefully examined. Clearly, in this case the language of empowerment and participation was understood and used in drastically different ways by different groups involved. This has led to various difficulties in project implementation, and has hindered the project’s success. Some of the lessons learned from this case study will be considered more carefully in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Concluding Themes**

As we have seen, although the language of participatory empowerment pervades development discourse, it has been used by various groups to signify very different approaches. For the most part, it has been used uncritically by both practitioners and academics. More recently, however, the concepts and practices of empowerment, participation, and community have been problematized and deconstructed. Several critics have pointed out that the goals of participatory empowerment approaches are much more difficult to achieve than they first appear, and that they have their limitations. In particular, they raise the concern that these approaches do not effectively deal with the needs of women and other marginalized groups. As the LPRV case study illustrates, many difficulties can arise in implementing participatory empowerment projects. It is not enough merely to suggest that these approaches do not always work. We must move beyond the rhetoric of participatory empowerment, and learn from experiences in the field, in order to make the theory and methods of participatory empowerment more useful and applicable.

All too often theory and practice work in isolation. It is time they learn from each other, becoming mutually reinforcing. Both the current assumptions and methods of participatory empowerment approaches underestimate the intricacies of community, gender relations, and power structures. There is a need to rethink and complexify the

theory of participatory empowerment, as well as to develop methodologies which can better address these complexities. This, as I have argued, requires more local level analysis, and critical evaluation of development projects. Drawing upon the LPRV case study and critiques discussed in Chapter 3, I will explore some of the lessons learned from participatory empowerment in the field and their implications for strengthening theory and methods.

### **Lessons Learned**

First, my research demonstrates that clarity is absolutely essential. Participation and empowerment are vague and complex terms which have been used by different people to denote diverging things. This divergence has obscured their meanings in both theory and practice. At the theoretical level this lack of clarity has rendered the language of empowerment virtually meaningless. In order to reclaim its transformative potential, the rhetoric of empowerment needs to be used more carefully, particularly in regard to definition and the ends served. Scholars and practitioners, therefore, need to be more explicit in their usage of “empowerment” and “participation”. In addition, definitions should be contextually specific, taking into account the complexities of local power structures and social relations.

In practice, lack of clarity can result in confusion, and possibly failure of a project. Often empowerment and participation are used in project proposals and activities without explication. This, as we saw in the LPRV project, can lead to misunderstandings and negative, unintended consequences. Rather than operating with ambiguous objectives,

clear definitions of empowerment should be developed early on in the project. As Oxaal remarks,

Without clear definition of the term, in the particular context in which they are working, development organizations run the danger of merely renaming old top-down approaches ... without altering the content and character of their programmes or examining the need for changes in organizational culture and processes required (1997: 22).

These definitions should be developed in conjunction with project beneficiaries, and should be appropriate to local contexts and address the needs and priorities of the participants. Generally, this is assumed to be easy through the use of participatory methodologies such as PRA. In reality, however, this is not a simple process as it is unlikely that everyone involved in a project will have common goals and agendas. Nevertheless, it is important that all groups involved declare their reasons for participating and what they hope to achieve from project activities. As Rachel Slocum points out, "The importance of defining the ends served and making them explicit ... should not be underestimated" (1995: 16). By being fully involved in defining project goals, participants will hopefully feel a sense of ownership towards the project.

Once people's priorities are laid out common goals can be established. It is important to bear in mind, however, that communities are not homogenous entities, and that divisions of gender, class, ethnicity, age, caste, etc. run deep. Differences, then, are almost certain to arise. Although this is a difficult process, which can lead to conflict and power struggles, commonly agreed upon goals are necessary. If not, greater problems such as increased inequality and friction between groups will almost certainly emerge

later on. In particular, gender relations need to be carefully addressed and negotiated. Current approaches tend to gloss over these differences within communities and assume that they are easily overcome through the use of participatory methodologies (Chambers, 1994). Explicit methodologies for addressing and mediating differences within communities need to be developed in order for participatory methods to be successful.

The second lesson pertains to the process of empowerment. Once clear definitions of empowerment and common goals are established with beneficiaries, specific strategies to reach these goals should be developed, and project activities can be thus designed to promote empowerment. Again, this is generally assumed to be an easy task. Given the complex power structures and divisions within communities, this is actually a challenging process which takes time. The recent critiques of "community" need to be built upon and incorporated into the theoretical foundations of participatory empowerment. As well, the theory must adopt a long term vision and take into account all the complexities and difficulties that may arise in these processes.

At the practical level, methods to enhance empowerment need to be carefully designed and carried out. Empowerment strategies should be determined with participants very early on in the project. Ideally, this would occur prior to the project proposal, so that the project would truly reflect the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries. Participatory methodologies, supplemented by a variety of other techniques, such as focus groups, interviews with local leaders, etc, should be used to develop these definitions, goals and strategies. The following questions need to be

addressed in this process. What does it mean to be empowered in this context? How can these goals be reached? How can the project play a facilitating role? It should be recognized that this is not a “quick and easy” process. PRA activities, as they are usually conducted, tend to be quite short, lasting only a few hours, or a few days. This approach, however, does not provide enough time for a true exchange of information, or to get at more subtle information such as local power structures and gender roles. PRA all too often is an extractive process, rather than a true dialogue. Instead, a substantial time commitment is required, as well as a considerable amount of knowledge of the local community. It is also important to build a sense of trust with the local people. This requires a considerable time investment as well as properly trained experts. The use of practitioners from the local community or nearby is generally beneficial as they will have a better understanding of local issues than outsiders. This should be balanced, however, by the involvement of representatives from the implementing or donor agency, in order to ensure accountability and transparency in the process. As illustrated in my case study, without mechanisms to ensure accountability, the process may be appropriated by local elites for their own goals and agendas. Transparency and accountability to both the project beneficiaries and donors is vital to the success of any project. Currently, though accountability to donors is heavily emphasized and formalized within monitoring and evaluation processes, accountability to project beneficiaries is often neglected. This accountability can be promoted through the use of participatory methodologies. As discussed earlier, however, participatory tools have their limitations, and these need to be

acknowledged by practitioners. Methods should continue to evolve. New methods are also needed in order to address these limitations, and push beyond them.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, empowerment is a process, the end results of which cannot be foreseen. It is vital, then, for projects to remain flexible enough to deal with changing priorities. Flexibility is key to ensuring that the project can continue to meet the needs of participants. Thus, while projects should clearly lay out the goals, definitions and strategies for empowerment early on and have a long term vision, flexibility is equally important, in order to adapt to possible changes in direction of the process.

The third lesson pertains to the role of organizational culture and structures. These have a significant impact on projects, and can facilitate or hinder empowerment. Participatory empowerment theories generally focus on empowering women, the poor, and other marginalized groups, without paying attention to broader organizational structures involved. There is a need, however, to incorporate an analysis of organizational structures and cultures into empowerment approaches. Explicit methodologies to examine broader structures and their impacts on local communities and projects must be developed. As Holcombe states, “development projects can never expect to achieve participatory and empowering poverty alleviation unless the management of those projects is itself participatory and empowering” (1995: 3). The design of a project, as well as the hierarchy of universities, governments and donors can all hinder a project’s attempts to promote empowerment. As we saw in the case of the LPRV project, decision-making was quite vertical, decisions were made by the UBC and

NCSSH project members, and then passed down to the CPRs. In addition, the hierarchy of Hue University was disempowering to those within the project, particularly to women. This negatively affected the quality of work done in the field. The organizational culture did not promote full participation among professors; incentives were not distributed equitably, nor was decision-making power. It is clear that a project working within this organizational culture is unlikely to successfully promote empowerment at the local level<sup>21</sup>. In addition, the centralized decision-making structure of the Vietnamese government impinges upon the project's capacity to promote bottom-up decision-making.

The organizational structures and cultures of donors must also be examined. Rigid donor regulations regarding funding, project proposals, and the project cycle impede long term processes of empowerment. Most decision making remains in the hands of "experts", and project planning is top-down. The possibilities for empowerment are inherently limited within the current structures, as the focus remains on short-term results, rather than long term processes.

The final lesson to be drawn from the critiques and case study is that participation in and of itself is not empowering or transformative. As we have seen, participation of local people can take many shapes and forms, and can be used to transform a system, or to maintain the status quo. As Slocum points out, "Over the decades, participatory methodologies have been employed carefully by some, and abused by others" (1995: 3).

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<sup>21</sup> Kelly and Armstrong describe a similar situation in a project between McGill University and the University of Visayas, Philippines, in which the hierarchy of the universities hindered the participation and empowerment of local people (1996).



Rather than assuming that participatory projects are inherently good and transformative, we must probe more deeply. "Participation does not exist in the abstract. Participation is defined through specific institutions, processes and ideological and cultural factors. It is defined through the individuals and groups of individuals involved (or not involved) in a participatory process" (Kaufmann, 1997: 20).

While participation has been seen as empowering by "giving a voice" to the poor, it does not necessarily address the underlying causes of poverty and oppression. Merely providing an opportunity for the poor and marginalized to speak does not necessarily challenge the power structures. This is particularly evident in regards to gender relations. Encouraging women to participate does not automatically mean their voices are heard, or that gender roles will become more equitable. Participatory empowerment approaches assume empowerment to be as simple as giving people a voice, and getting them involved. This presumes, however, that power exists in the centre, and that people just need to be brought in to share in this power. A postmodern perspective which allows for a more nuanced understanding of power has much to offer in this regard. Power is not something that only some people possess, rather everyone, even the most marginalized groups, have some degree of power. A process which focuses on the power of marginalized groups and builds upon their power is more likely to achieve empowerment than one which adopts either a "zero-sum" or a "power-over" approach, which leads to conflict and struggle. In addition, the incorporation of a GAD approach, which examines social relations, gender relations and power structures would deepen our understanding of

processes of empowerment. Most importantly, participatory empowerment theories need to explicitly address and challenge power structures in order to be genuinely empowering and bring about transformation.

On a practical level, we need to examine whether or not participation is serving the needs of the poor and marginalized. First, the level of participation needs to be determined. How involved are people in decision-making and in shaping the project? Are some groups marginalized? Are women's voices effectively heard? Does the participation reinforce or challenge traditional power structures between or within groups? How does it do so? Who is gaining from the participation? For what ends is participation being promoted? Who benefits the most? As the example of Phu Binh in the LPRV case study illustrates, the participation of the boat dwellers is being used to implement the city official's goals of relocation. In this case, participation is being utilized in an instrumentalist fashion to realize the pre-determined goals of local officials<sup>22</sup>. Obviously, this is not empowering, when the boat dwellers have little control over the agenda, and cannot easily resist relocation. In fact, the entire LPRV project is based upon participation of the poor for the benefit of the universities. In addition, though it was an unintended consequence, the local bureaucracy has also benefited from this project. The participation of the Vietnamese poor in "learning by doing" projects allows for capacity-building of Vietnamese professors, and research opportunities for Canadian professors. I was told on several occasions that success on the ground was not

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<sup>22</sup> James Ferguson notes similar "unintended consequences", and the spread of the state bureaucracy through a CIDA funded project in Lesotho (1991).

as important as learning from the process, and that this provided valuable research opportunities for Canadian graduate students and professors. Recognizing this reality, a Canadian researcher acknowledged that this project allows "... us as researchers to stand back and observe and write about such processes, and become well known and credentialed through the process, whether or not the experience on the ground is a success". Obviously, in this case, participation was not empowering for the Vietnamese poor.

This is not to say that participation cannot be empowering, merely that it is not inherently empowering. Rather, it depends on the agendas of those who are implementing the project, and whether or not they foster empowerment. Participatory methods must continue to evolve in order to explicitly challenge and transform power structures.

### **Implications for Theory, Policy and Practice**

What, then, are the implications of this study for theory, policy and practice? If empowerment, with its original, transformative goals were to be adopted by mainstream agencies, several changes in regulations and policies would have to occur. Most importantly, the conceptual understanding of development would have to be drastically altered from a top-down, technocratic, expert driven approach towards an alternative development approach - one that places people firmly at the centre, and makes people "architects of their own development" (Streeten, 1997: 204). While the adoption of the rhetoric of empowerment and participation signals a move in this direction, commitment

to the process would be a radical change for most development agencies.

In practice, to truly promote empowerment, funding structures would have to be altered, along with reporting, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms, in order to give more accountability and control to the project beneficiaries. In addition, the project design and project cycle would have to be modified in order to make room for more involvement of the beneficiaries at the needs identification stage, before the project proposals are completed. Clearly, the sooner the project beneficiaries are involved in the process, the better. As we have seen, empowerment is a process which encompasses all aspects of life, therefore projects should be holistic, rather than sectoral in nature. In addition, emphasis would have to be placed on long term processes and qualitative indicators, rather than short term results. Clearly, projects which last between three and five years are not long enough to empower participants in any long-term, sustainable way. Agencies should adopt policies which promote devolution of decision-making, and experiment with more flexible approaches. NGOs must continue to push donors to evolve and to become more accountable to their beneficiaries while also maintaining accountability and transparency to the donors themselves. If an agency has the will to do so, their contributions could prove quite valuable in fostering empowerment. Unfortunately, however, most development agencies and government development policies continue to be rooted in the modernization model, which is profoundly opposed to holistic transformative change.

## **Conclusion: Ways Forward**

Where then, does the potential for empowerment lie? The impetus must come from the grassroots. Grassroots organizations must continue to mobilize people and to promote empowerment and participation at the local level. In addition, however, they need to acknowledge larger structures, and to develop strategies to work with them, or to challenge them in order to bring about change. The state, for its part, must be willing to let these organisations flourish, and to work with them and listen to their demands. International development agencies and INGOs can provide support in the form of capacity building, forging networks and alliances, and, possibly, financial support. This support, however, must not undermine the autonomy of the movement.

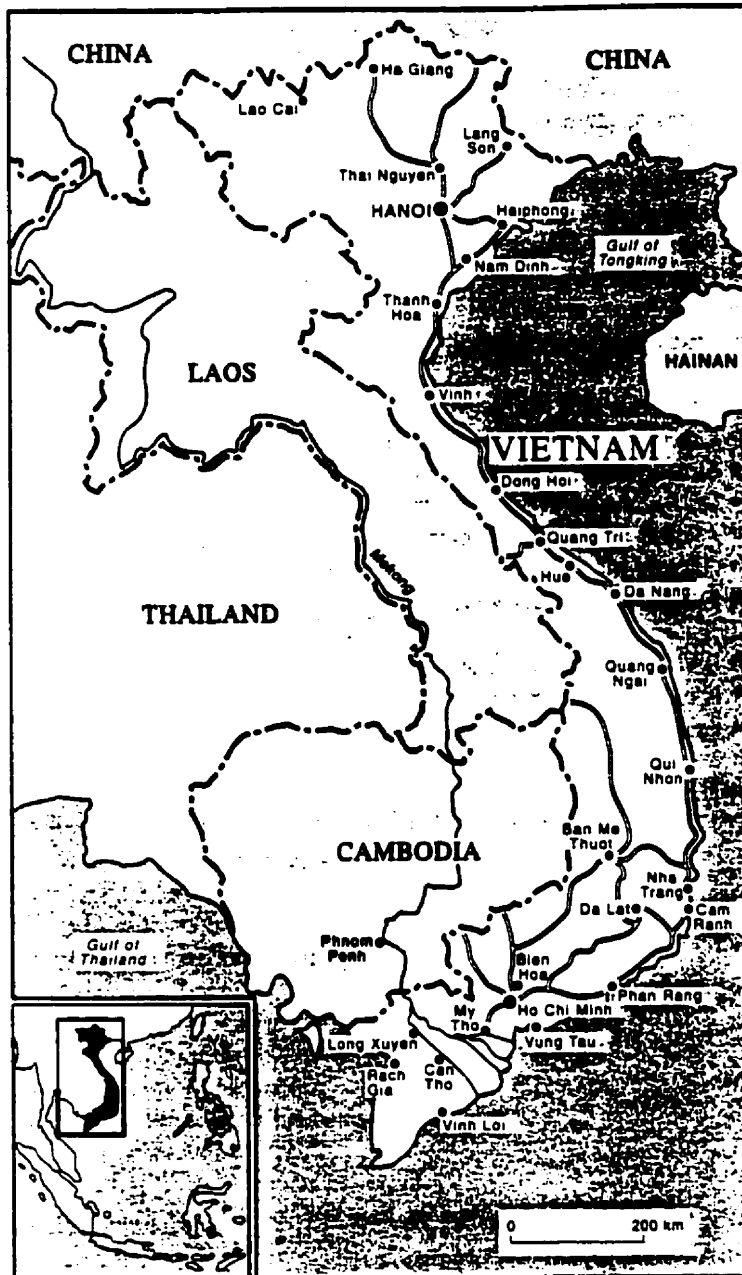
It is the potentially transformative agenda of the empowerment approach which puts it in danger of being undermined by national governments and international development agencies. Until governments and international development agencies accept the need for people-centred development as well as economic growth, the empowerment approach will continue to be embraced only at the grassroots level, while those at higher levels interpret it to promote their own agendas.

While participatory empowerment is not as simple and easy as it may first appear, it remains a worthwhile goal to pursue. My goal is not to say that “empowerment” cannot work, rather, that it is a much more complex process, and more difficult to implement than is usually acknowledged. This is not to say that empowerment never occurs through development efforts, rather that we need to look more closely at how it is being used, to

what ends, and with what results. We need to move beyond abstract theorizing in order to determine how peoples' lives are affected. To date, the theory and practice of participatory empowerment have been quite separate. It is time to bridge that gap by paying more attention to what is happening on the ground, how these approaches are being played out, and how we can improve upon them. I am not suggesting that we throw the approach out, rather that we contextualize and ground it, so that it may better address the needs of marginalized groups throughout the world. At the theoretical level, the trend of critical analysis needs to continue, and be incorporated into the participatory empowerment theory. This analysis, however, should be grounded in the daily experiences of those who are involved in participatory empowerment projects. Only through grounded, field level research will the theory be contextualized and balanced by everyday experiences of those men and women involved in empowerment projects. While this is what I have attempted to do, much more grounded research needs to be done in order to strengthen both the theory, and the methods of participatory empowerment approaches. In an era of increasing globalization, the need for grounded theory is particularly important.

# APPENDIX 1

## Map of Vietnam



Source: Murray, Geoffrey, *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, p.5.

## **APPENDIX 2**

### **List of Interview and Meetings**

UBC Team Members	May 17 - 19, 1999
NCSSH Team Members	May 25, 1999
Phu Binh People's Committee Representatives	May 31, 1999
A Tuc People's Committee Representatives	June 1, 1999
Phu Da People's Committee, Representatives	June 2, 1999
Hue Steering Committee	June 3, 1999
Hue Steering Committee	June 17, 1999
Gender Team Member	June 22, 1999
CIDSE Representative	June 24, 1999
NAV Representative	June 25, 1999
Phu Da Women's Union Representative	June 29, 1999
Phu Da People's Committee Representatives	June 29, 1999
Hue Team Member	July 9, 1999
Various NGO Representatives	July 19, 1999
Gender Team Representatives	July 22, 1999
Red Cross Representative	July 28, 1999
Provincial Women's Union Representative	July 19, 1999



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