

# POWER RELATIONS AND THE PARADOX OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AMONG THE SAN IN KHWEE AND SEHUNONG

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## ABSTRACT

*The discourse of community participation has been popularised by both Government and Non-Governmental Organisations as a 'technical fix' to most community development problems. As such, participation is seen as a necessary condition for empowering grassroots communities such as the San in Botswana. However, despite this claims of empowerment, most often than not, the empowerment fostered under the rubrics of participatory development seems to be perpetuating the very disempowerment it seeks to combat among the San communities of Khwee and Sehunong. This article seeks to explore how notions of power and power relations influence how the San perceive themselves in the social fabric, which in turn influences their perceived participation and conceptualisation of empowerment as embedded in the discourse of community participation. The data is from a qualitative multiple-case study using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The findings suggested that since the San are considered to be socially inferior, they are not only left out of decision making and need to be integrated but most importantly, they are disadvantaged by the various institutional and relational structures which only serve the facilitation of selective empowerment.*

**Keywords:** Community participation, Khwee, Non-Governmental Organisations, participatory development, Technical fix

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Community participation has become a buzzword in the field of development as it promises to make people at the grassroots central to development processes. It is believed that, with participation, there is likely to be more success of development projects as communities will feel ownership and commitment towards the projects. However, even though community participation is seen as a panacea to most development problems at grassroots level, its ability to dismantle hegemonic structures that condone unequal power relations among the San and Tswana speaking groups has been less examined. As observed by Co-

binah (2011), power and power relations are among some of the issues that control and shape participatory practice. The dynamics of power relations that shape inclusiveness and exclusion in the participatory spaces for the San is critical for understanding how the participants are perceived and how they perceive themselves in the whole process.

This article seeks to explore how hegemonic structures and relations influence the San's perception of themselves, participation and empowerment as embedded within the discourse of community participation. The rationale to focus on power relations in this article is informed by the subordinate-dominant ethnic relations existing between the San and the Tswana speaking groups. Power in this instance is understood in relational terms, as a relationship between groups and individuals rather than an attribute- it is power over others (Mosse, 2007:7). In its relational sense, power is a scarce resource which groups compete in zero-sum games. It is on this basis that participation is explored in relation to power, particularly the connection between power, voice/silence and ethnicity as well as the structural forces at play (Parpart, 2004:177).

Critical social theory has been used to provide a theoretical framework for this article. This theory argues that social relations are power relations. Hence, the extent to which an individual or community can influence a development

process depends on the power the individual or community has (Cobinah, 2011).

## **2. WHO ARE THE SAN AND THEIR POSITION WITHIN BOTSWANA SOCIETY?**

According to the historical accounts, the San were the first people to inhabit what is now called Botswana (Wagner, 2006). While they are generally considered as an indigenous group, the official position of the Government of Botswana is that no group is more indigenous than others; all Batswana are indigenous except for those who are Batswana by naturalisation (Government of Botswana, 1993:29). The government defended this position by claiming that giving the San an indigenous status will bring divisiveness in the society as this may give rise to negative even racist reactions from other segments of the society (Saugestad, 2001). This position has been contested as others believe that denying the San an indigenous status does not do them any good, but increases social inequality issues. According to, Ditshwanelo (2006) for instance, denying the San their indigenous rights and emphasising on 'formal equality' which is based on seeing everyone in the same form and treating people equally does not make people equal in terms of results. The fact that the San are treated just like everybody else is the very reason they are being ridiculed because they are neglected, thus poor and oppressed (Molosi, 2015). Accord-

ing to Saugestad (2001), in as far as development debates ignore the history of the indigenous people, development will always sideline them and marginalise them even further.

History records that by the time when the *Tswana* speaking groups began to inhabit the same area as the San in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the San were made to live in the periphery as serfs (*malata*), while rising *Tswana* speaking groups gained wealth and power (Mompoti & Prinsen, 2000). According to Chawawa (2015) the relationship between the serfs and the masters provided the masters with exclusive rights to use the serfs for any form of service they deemed fit. As a result, as the masters used the serfs to accumulate property, the serfs (San) remained poor and marginalised. The relations of inequality between the *Tswana* speaking groups and the San can be evidenced by the complex unequally perceived statuses of different ethnic groups, where some are regarded as 'inferior' and others 'superior' (Datta & Murray, 1989).

### **3. THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION**

Participation simply refers to the engagement and involvement of people at the grassroots level in decision making processes. Penderis (2013) distinguishes between participation as a means to achieve the objectives of development, as opposed to participa-

tion as an end which stresses empowerment and transformation to capacitate beneficiary groups in the development process. Participation as an end is of great interest to this article as it lays the empowerment nature of the concept.

Participation according to Hickey and Mohan (2004) should ensure the transformation of development practice by closing the gaps that have been causing social exclusion of the excluded groups. The form of inclusion through the participation discourse is not a straightforward thing. For some, it simply means involving beneficiaries in the planning and implementation process through selective engagement while for those aligned with the 'NGO view', participation is just a moral imperative which is a precondition for funding (Green, 2000). According to World Bank (1994: 6) participation is a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources that affect their lives.

Even though the concept of community participation promises some degree of beneficiary involvement in project planning and implementation, it is fraught with vagueness in its definition, and ambiguities in its interpretation. Cobbinah (2011:53) has observed that sometimes participation is confused with just representation whereby community members are just invited to meetings where they are meant to witness devel-

opment decision making taking place. According to Molosi (2015) participation at times comes in the form of consultation where communities are informed of the decisions already taken and their position sought. This form of participation is problematic because it lacks the power to ensure that the community's position is taken on board should they challenge decisions already taken. Mohan (2002) cautions that participation as consultation and information sharing is only used by the dominant to maintain the status quo and retain their privileges as they only allow the 'have nots' to be heard with no power to change anything.

In explaining different forms of participation, Arnstein (1969) noted that the concept of participation takes different shades which differ in terms of where power and control lies. Power and control in participation practice implies that the greater the bargaining power the better the opportunity for a group's voice to matter in the development process (Cobbinah, 2011). According to Arnstein, participation can be understood in terms of a typology that ranges from citizen control (where communities actively make decisions) to merely consultation which is tokenistic.

Participation takes place in a variety of spaces that are created by different people for different reasons. As suggested by Gaventa & Valderrama (1999), community participation is about power and

how it is exercised by different social actors in the spaces created for interactions between the community members and development facilitators. As such, these spaces are not just 'there' and neutral, but are dynamic social products humanly constructed means of control and domination (Lefebvre, 1991). Foucault (1977) also draws our attention to the fact that spaces are not homogeneous and empty, but are sites of social relations. In this regard, spaces are defined by those who are invited into them, as well as those who are doing the invitation. As such participatory spaces reflect power differentials which determine the shape participation can take at a particular point in time.

According to Cornwall (2002), participatory spaces can be organic/ created or invited. Gaventa (2004) informs us that 'invited' participatory spaces are designed and enforced by external forces and the beneficiaries are invited to participate. The challenge with the 'invited' spaces of participation is that although it's a common form of participation, the dominant are still situated within a position of privilege as 'conveners' of participation. As such, as the 'invited', you will have to play by the rules created by the 'convenor', which can be disempowering (Cornwall, 2008). The 'convenor' will have the latitude to shape the boundaries of what is possible and which interests can be pursued. The 'created' spaces

of participation are those claimed and constituted by citizen groups. These spaces are formed by the less powerful to challenge the more dominant or to raise common concerns that are not being adequately addressed by authoritative figures (Penderis, 2013:116).

#### **4. THE PARADOX OF PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT**

For the rights-based approach, the right to participate is a basic citizenship right which helps to protect and guarantee all other political, social, economic and cultural rights through an empowered agency of citizens (Gaventa, 2004). From this view point, participation has progressed from just a simple invitation offered to beneficiaries of development to a right (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). As such, the proponents of participatory development sell community participation as a very critical component of successful community development initiatives because it gives 'voice' to the communities. It is this 'voice' that leads to greater consciousness of abilities and possibilities of making a difference (Budiriwanto, 2007).

As observed by Green (2000), much of the literature on community participation and the kinds of programmes it legitimates, rests on a particular philosophical construction of participation as leading to the empowerment of communities in the grassroots. However, even though empowerment is the main basis for community participation (Green,2000),

the capacity of participatory development to bring about empowerment to people in the grassroots is in question, firstly because there is no detailed empirical evidence indicating that indeed participation has brought empowerment to rural people (Cleaver,2001). Empowerment in this instance refers to the capability to influence social spheres and question the status quo (Freire, 1972). Secondly, power relations that stem from ethnicity are rarely a focus of attention in the participatory development literature. Gaventa (2004) cautions that if power relations are ignored, participation evolves as underhanded disempowerment because in many development programmes thought to be participatory, they are only participatory when the ideas of the oppressed are aligned to those of the oppressors. In fact, Cleaver (2001:36) asks the proponents of participation to be careful of entrenched beliefs that participation is essentially good and that its practice ensures success and issues of power and politics must be 'avoided as divisive and obstructive'. A further analysis by Mwanzia and Strathdee (2010:4) has illuminated that one of the challenges with participatory development is that power is frequently delusional and conceals the extent to which participatory processes are manipulative and marginalising rather than liberating to disadvantaged people.

In this context, empowerment should be understood as the basis

for agency and resource bargaining in the communities. Agency is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them or a process by which choices are made and put into effect (Budiriwanto, 2007:7). Drawing from Freirean philosophy, people should be able to question the status quo and recreate their reality through conscientisation. Freire argues that the proper objective of participation is to ensure the 'transformation' of existing development practice and, more radically, of social relations, institutional practices and capacity gaps which cause social exclusion. In this context, participatory development is directly intended to challenge existing power relations, rather than simply working around the power with more technically efficient service delivery (Hickey & Mohan, 2004:168-169).

Both agency and resources form the people's capabilities to live the lives they want. Resources are not simply distributed based on dire need, but distribution is located on various institutions and relationships of power (Budiriwanto, 2007). Resources in this context refer not only to material resources, but also human and social resources that help to exercise choice. As alluded by Kabeer (2005), the way in which resources are distributed is influenced by the ability to define priorities and enforce claims which is based on social power. Equally important here is the people's perception of themselves in as far as bargaining of resources is concerned. The

way people perceive themselves may influence what they say, how they say it and whether they are heard. As explained by Budiriwanto (2007:8) empowerment begins from within, it is rooted in how people see themselves, their sense of self-worth.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

This *article* draws from a more comprehensive qualitative study undertaken among the San in Khwee and Sehunong settlements. Qualitative research approach was used as it is considered to be more faithful to the social world as it allows data to emerge more freely from context (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used to collect data. The use of these two data collection methods were considered to compensate for each method's individual limitations and strengthen their advantages as well (Shenton, 2004). Participants were selected through purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. A total of 36 participants were selected for in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews were categorised into three cohorts. The first cohort was made up of 12 San people from each research site (Khwee and Sehunong) who are the recipients of a poverty alleviation programme known as the Remote Area Development Programme (RADP). The other groups of participants were village leaders and government community development workers. The village leaders group consist-

ed of councilors, chiefs and members of the Village Development Committee (VDC). There were eight participants in this group. The other group – government community development workers (GCDWs) – consisted of four participants who were mainly extension workers in education and social and community welfare. It is important to note that in all the settlements, both community development workers and the councilors were from Tswana speaking groups, thus non- San.

For focus groups, participants were chosen from among the RADP recipients group and the VDC. People chosen from these groups were later joined by eight people from a category for the purpose of this study was termed the Village Mobilising Group. This group consisted of leaders of active groups in the village such as the Parents Teachers Association, Community Home Based Care and Out of School Youth Group.

Nvivo software was used in the data analysis process. The data analysis followed the grounded theory data analysis procedures.

## **6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The findings and discussion presented in this article are in accordance with research questions raised for the study. The findings and discussion are presented as follows

### **6.1 The meaning of participation**

It is evident from the findings that participation is seen as a necessity in facilitating successful development projects and programs. Most participants of this study emphasised that participation is important in any development intervention because it gives the community a voice to be in charge of their development processes.

However, even though there is common acknowledgement of the empowerment ability of participation, this was understood in two different ways. The different ways in which participation was understood depicted two different levels of decision making power and control. Participation was understood as consultation and as decision making power. Both the interpretations of participation imply different power levels which have been explained by Ainstein's ladder of participation.

Participation as consultation was mainly popular among those participants with education levels lower than the Botswana Government Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE). This group conceived participation in terms of different shades of tokenism which represents a top-down development approach. They indicated that they are actively involved in the development processes because they are informed about decisions made concerning their settlements as indicated in the following excerpt,

We are actively involved in the RADP decision making. Whatever they plan to do, they inform us. There is nothing that is done without being informed and consulted. Even for projects, they tell us about them and we choose amongst what they offer (BNS3).

This group equated consultation with decision making power, when they were in fact only perceived as clients and consumers rather than equal partners in the development process. Paradath (2006) reminds us that the only meaningful participation entails decision-making partnership, which does not only enhance development practice but also contribute to deepening the democratic process. Viewing participation in terms of consultation by some of the participants may be reiterating the confusion that surrounds the definition of the concept of participation which is usually associated with any form of involvement offered to beneficiaries of development projects (Cobinah, 2011). This view of participation is problematic for many reasons.

Firstly, this view of participation shows how the concept can be used to perpetuate the very disempowerment it seeks to combat. Despite its claims of empowerment, its interventions are premised on a denial of the poor's capacity to bring about changes for themselves, by themselves, there is always development agency institutional structures involved (Green, 2000:67-68). As indicated in the findings, when su-

perordinate groups are involved, practices that only reflect false sense of power or control may be confused with control and decision making. Following from this, Gaventa (2004) cautioned that in many development programmes thought to be participatory, they are only participatory when the ideas of the oppressed are aligned to those of the oppressors. As suggested by the findings, the outsiders who are mainly Tswana speaking who serve as both policy makers (councillors) and implementers (community development officers) at local level, are at the centre of the whole process while the San are located within the peripheries of power but made to believe that they are in fact in control. According to Crewe and Harrison (1998) when those in a position of power locate themselves at the centre of a participation process, they consolidate their power and perpetuate the unequal social structures. As a result, unequal social structures may be perpetuated and the status quo maintained as the dominant groups advance their interests.

Secondly, this San's perception of what is participation may influence their ability to engage with authorities because the way people are perceived influences what they say, how they say it and how they perceive themselves (Cobinah, 2011). This has implications for the community's agency and empowerment because both agency and empowerment pro-



cesses are rooted in how people perceive themselves and how others perceive them (Budiriwanto, 2007). Borrowing from the work of Bourdieu (1990), the construction of social reality is determined by people's position in the social space or *habitus*. It is this position that influences a community's ability to engage with authorities or people seen to be superior to them. According to Molosi (2015) this view of participation shows that the San might be seeing themselves as too powerless to question their 'masters' which leaves the status quo untouched. In fact, the discourse of participation has been criticized because it fails to question the relational and institutional forces at play, which may continue to (re) produce unequal power relations.

The other view presented meaningful participation as decision making power and control, where the community is seen as equal partners in a development partnership. This understanding was mainly aligned to those participants with education level at BGCSE and above. As indicated in the following excerpt, some participants wanted to be located at the centre of power and not the periphery.

When it comes to development, the community should take the lead in controlling the process. Government should act on the priorities given by the communities, not whereby things are just thought up in high offices and we are told about them (BNS6).

The findings suggested that participants who viewed participation in terms of decision making felt that the way participation is currently done is just used as a tool to grant development projects a stance of moral authority, while they are in fact only perceived as clients and consumers rather than equal partners in the decision making processes. It appears that even though structures such as the Village Development Committee are recognised as platforms to engage the community in development discussions and negotiations, the findings suggests that VDC only plays a symbolic role in Khwee and Sehungong. This is indicated in the following statement,

Even at times when we are involved as the Village Development Committee (VDC), when we are invited thinking that we are going to contribute our views, instead we will find that everything has been thought about us and there is nothing we can contribute (FGK)

The above statement can be explained by what Arnstein (1969) calls tokenism. Tokenism according to Arnstein's ladder of participation is a stage of information sharing whereby the 'uppers' inform the 'lowers', and the latter are able to inform the 'uppers'. However, in this arrangement the decision making power remains with the powerful as the 'oppressed' do not have the power to challenge the dominant in cases where opinions differ. According to Molosi (2015) this is the same

concept of participation and decision making as embedded within the traditional *kgotla* system. Although the *kgotla* was believed to offer the subordinated groups a chance to voice their concerns, it was mainly the voice of the dominant Tswana speaking groups that was given priority because of their social standing (Mompoti & Prinsen, 2000). Following from this kind of structures, groups considered inferior may end up internalising their powerlessness and perceive them as 'natural'.

## 6.2 Spaces of participation and power relations

The findings have shown that the interplay of social relations seem to be critical in the way the San understand the concept of participation. There is evidence that due to their inferior social status within Botswana society, their democratic right to participate in decision making is compromised. For example, some participants explained that because '*ke masarwa*', even when they make suggestions they are rarely taken on board. According to one participant, '...other people's voice is always listened to, but for us it doesn't matter, '*ke masarwa*'. The data suggests that the '*ke masarwa*' connotation is used to highlight San's powerlessness as a class of no consequence. Based on this, it appears the San have accepted the powerlessness bestowed upon them by the Tswana speaking groups such that they consciously or subconsciously, keep reminding themselves of who they are within

the social ladder when it comes to participation. For instance, one participants indicated that because the San are mostly poor, they cannot initiate any engagement platforms, government and other stakeholders should create such platforms and engage with them. Freirian philosophy terms this scenario internalised oppression. According to Freire (1972) internalised oppression is whereby the people tend to normalise their discrimination and see it as a part of them. This is not surprising because as explained by Penderis (2013), past experiences and social relations leave their footprints even in participatory contexts.

Although some participants valued participation as decision making and control, the findings suggested that they still preferred participation within the invited spaces. It seems most of the participants believe that government and other stakeholders should be at the forefront and create spaces for participation and invite them to discuss their lives. In this context, this group of San believe that it should be community development workers and councillors who invite them to discuss their development, they seem not to want things done the other way round. This view of participation is problematic. Firstly, the problem with the invited spaces is that those who offer the spaces have power over the spaces- they decide the form of participation. As such, people will be joining a game, the rules of which have already been

decided (Vincent, 2003). Borrowing from Gramsci (1971), invited spaces may serve as places of hegemony and platforms for control and repression to preserve the status quo rather than an opportunity for citizenship and the exercise of agency.

Secondly, invited spaces are frequently reduced to hierarchical sites of inequitable relations, which reproduce dependency and undermine the potential for meaningful participation and deliberation (Penderis, 2013). As explained by Budiriwanto (2007), the process of empowerment is rooted in how one sees their self-worth. Hence, due to the norms and values that has over the time deprived the San an opportunity to be equals in the social rung, they may even not consider themselves with any capability to engage Tswana speaking people and other development stakeholders on their own terms as indicated in the following,

It's difficult to initiate things on our own because we do not have resources and also we do not know a lot of things. That is why we continue to depend on outsiders who end up bossing us around (BNK7)

Using Foucault (1980) to explain the preceding view, Foucault has argued that if in the development process there is a dichotomy of those who are seen as developed/undeveloped, those developed will be seen as the creator and giver of development while those underdeveloped are only objects. This perhaps stems from the fact

that being the recipient of generosity means to be 'inferior' to the one who gives because when you ask for something, you make the person from whom you are asking great (Saugestad,2001:218). This has implications for participation because unequal power relations maintain the status quo of disempowerment and powerlessness.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

As indicated by Hickey and Mohan (2004), the proper objective of participation is to ensure the 'transformation' of existing development practice and, more radically, the social relations, institutional practices and capacity gaps which cause social exclusion. However, if participation is just done on an 'add-on' approach, without addressing power relations between the San and the Tswana speaking groups, empowerment though participatory development is still a dream far from reach. Measures should be put in place to help the San to create their own world through meaningful participation. This is important because no person can empower another, people should engage in their own empowerment (Freire, 1972). As argued by Inglis (1997), there is a distinction between individuals being empowered within an existing social system and struggling for freedom by changing the system.

When viewed through the lens of a critical social theory framework, the findings of this study calls for

a change of position, moving the San from the peripheries of development where they are development objects, into the core where they would have genuine control and decision-making power as actors of development. However, if participation is implemented on an 'add-on' basis, without transforming the social structure, development initiatives will only be useful in furthering selective participation. In this sense, transformation will need to take place even 'upwards' before those at the 'bottom' can have any reason to believe that they can have an effect.

It is also recommended that appropriate education should be used to help conscientisation of the San so that they can engage in self-reflection and action. For example, education grounded on Freirean critical pedagogy ideas, which provides skills and knowledge necessary to help the expansion of capacities to question deep seated disempowering social practices. Both formal and non-formal education can be utilized in this instance. San youth who have been exposed to different worlds and education could be useful in taking the lead.

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