Participation in development and disaster relief programmes:

A background review of the anglophone literature for ALNAP’s Global study on consultation with and participation by beneficiaries and affected populations in the process of planning, managing, monitoring and evaluating humanitarian action

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# Contents

Executive Summary ........................................................................................................... 3  
Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 8  
I. Definition of Participation .......................................................................................... 10  
   II. Why is participation needed? ................................................................................ 12  
      II.1 Means or end ...................................................................................................... 12  
      II.2 Productivity and efficiency. ............................................................................... 13  
      II.3 Public relations ................................................................................................. 14  
      II.4 Democracy ........................................................................................................ 15  
      II.5 Ethics, morality and human rights ..................................................................... 15  
      II.6 Empowerment ................................................................................................. 16  
III. Who should participate? ............................................................................................ 19  
IV. How can people participate? ...................................................................................... 22  
   IV.1 Information sharing and consultation. ................................................................ 23  
   IV.2 Methods of gathering/sharing information. ......................................................... 24  
   IV.3 Decision-Making ................................................................................................. 26  
   IV.4 Initiating action. ................................................................................................... 27  
V. Participatory development and its relationship to participatory relief. ....................... 29  
VI. The Politics of Participation ....................................................................................... 30  
   VI.1 Doubts ................................................................................................................ 30  
   VI.2 Lack of government interest ............................................................................... 31  
   VI.3 Local Elites. ....................................................................................................... 32  
   VI.4 Mistrust. ............................................................................................................ 33  
   VI.5 The Role of International Organisations ............................................................. 34  
VII. The Practice of Participation ..................................................................................... 37  
   VII.1 Cost and Time ................................................................................................... 37  
   VII.2 Expertise/Methodology ..................................................................................... 37  
IX. Some empirical examples of participation in emergencies ........................................ 45  
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 51  
References ......................................................................................................................... 53
Executive Summary.

This paper presents a synthesis of Anglophone literature on the issue of participation in development and disaster relief programmes. While not exhaustive, it is believed that the main issues surrounding participation have been tackled. The paper aims to highlight and clarify the concept of participation with regard to aiding understanding on the extent to which people affected by development and disasters relief programmes are given opportunities to influence decisions and consequently, the nature of programmes in line with their livelihood priorities.

The paper observes that in disaster relief, as in development, there is much flamboyant rhetoric on the part of aid agencies on their commitment to participation of the beneficiaries of their programmes. Such rhetoric can be heard in their pronouncements in their mission statements and programme documents as well as in publicly from their staff at various fora and also in their fundraising proposals to their donors. However, there is agreement in literature that in practice, examples of genuine participation of beneficiaries are rare and far between.

The reasons why this continues to be the case, despite widespread agreement that participation is a good thing, are many and varied and this paper highlights some of these.

To begin with, it appears that conceptually, there are severe difficulties in attempting to understand what participation actually means. One of the reasons why participation has failed to go beyond token levels in the development field appears to be the mist surrounding the very understanding of what participation is and the purposes that it should serve. This problem has been carried over into emergency relief. Unless aid agencies are clear on how participation should be understood we should, even if they were genuinely interested in it, expect a myriad of interpretations (and thus practices) among them, with each one claiming, as they often do, that their programmes are participatory. Given that aid agencies have various reasons for claiming to be participatory, some of which have very little to do with the interests of the poor or the affected populations, they cannot be entrusted with the responsibility of defining the ways in which participation ought to be understood. Neither can we take as blue prints the a priori theoretical concepts developed by academics and some practitioners on what authentic participation entails.

The fact seems to be that the ways in which affected populations can and wish to participate are governed by many factors, including their own understanding of the social and political environment within which they live, their livelihood priorities, and their perceptions regarding the agency providing them with assistance. Therefore, it is apparent that participation even from the point of view of affected populations will have various interpretations and practices. In this scenario, aid agencies will do well to use theoretical concepts and their own experiences only as guiding principles. In the field the practice of participation should proceed from what is actually found on the ground, incorporating affected people’s views of what participation will actually mean in the specific context in which the relief programme is taking place.
Therefore, the starting point must be to understand that genuine participation is one that occurs when the very definition has occurred in a process of negotiation between beneficiaries and aid providers. Encounters between aid providers and beneficiaries involve an imbalance of power in favour of the former who command economic resources needed by the latter. However, the way the transfer of such resources occurs may be inefficient, ineffective or even inappropriate. To avoid this, the power differentials need to be equalised to accord beneficiaries with an opportunity to influence the nature of a given programme. Beneficiaries should be given opportunities to decide the type of involvement most beneficial to them. On the other hand, this suggestion does not mean that beneficiaries must assume absolute control of a programme. Assuming absolute control on the part of beneficiaries is in fact not desirable in principle and not feasible in practice since the agency is always present and must also account for resources to donors. Therefore part of the process of power sharing is the strengthening of the different capacities of beneficiaries so that even when agencies are not directly involved, they can have the confidence and trust of the representative-ness and accountability of beneficiary structures.

Once we have clarified on how to understand the concept of participation, the next task is to be aware that part of the confusion on the concept emanates from a failure to recognise that there are many purposes that participation can serve. I take the view that the raging debate as to whether participation is an end in itself or a means to an end is unnecessary since clearly, it is both.

On the one hand, there is no denying the evidence in the literature that programmes are delivered effectively when they are participatory. The history of the very attempts to mainstream participation in development and relief programmes lie in the documented widespread failure of programmes to achieve their objectives. To this end, the paper enumerates some of the ‘ends’ of participation as including: productivity and efficiency, where participation can result in efficient use of resources as well as aiding the timely delivery of aid. In addition, it can contribute to programme effectiveness by enhancing, rather than weakening existing structures thus contributing to sustainability. Hence participation can also be a vehicle through which aid agencies become accountable to their beneficiaries; some have argued that participation can also result in empowering people to take more control of their lives and initiate actions in accordance with new opportunities. I have taken the view that ‘empowerment’ may be a difficult concept to understand since most discussions of it are not clear as to how exactly participation per se can empower people. Rather, I have argued that the most empowering aspects may be the provision of new opportunities in terms of improved access to economic resources, information, skills capacities that can enable individuals to take advantage of and benefit from existing opportunities (i.e. to participate). In this sense, my view is that people first need to be empowered in order for them to participate effectively rather than the other way round. It is in fact difficult to see how any individual can participate if he/she were not already empowered in some sense; however, participation can also be used for public relations purposes where it is appended to programme implementation as a way of improving the image of the aid organisation or as a fund raising strategy in line with
donors’ demands. Such types of participation tend to take token forms and may be destructive to existing processes in beneficiary communities.

On the other hand it is clear that participation is desirable as a value in its own right. Here, participation is related to the values of democracy and to issues of ethics and human rights. Put simply, it is the right of every individual to have a say on issues that affect his or her life rather than someone assuming a position of dictating on such issues. Ethically, it is morally unacceptable to treat another human being as if they were an object with no capacity for understanding issues that affect their lives, just because they are poor. It is also morally unacceptable to consider one’s own values as superior merely because one is rich and to try to impose the same on a poor person. Participation in thus a value to be strived for its own sake for it the only sure way to avoiding the objectification of other human beings.

The third step in understanding the concept of participation, the proposes, is to be clear on who should participate and the ways in which people can participate. It must be stated at the outset that people who will be affected by programmes must be given an opportunity to influence decisions on how they wish to participate in their particular situation. Therefore, any prior discussion on this subject merely provides guidelines based on experiences that many practitioners have come across.

To begin with, the paper agreed fully with the idea that disaster relief should aim to save not only lives, but livelihoods as well. Of course, some medical agencies might not see relief in such terms as their focus may be purely on lives. But by and large, any relief programme could be deemed unsuccessful if people rescued from the immediate threat of death posed by the emergency phase of a disaster, die anyhow shortly after because of a lack of a livelihood base to sustain them. Once saving livelihoods is put at the centre of the relief process, communities or social groupings must become the unit of analysis. A complex network of social relationships, which it is impossible to understand if the individual is studied independently, constitutes livelihoods which encompass the concepts of vulnerability and fairness in processes designed to ensure that the vulnerable members of a social grouping are cared for. Furthermore, concepts of vulnerability and fairness vary among different social groupings, making it inappropriate for any aid worker to hold pre-conceived notions of who the vulnerable of any community are.

If the way participation is understood varies according to peoples social-economic, political and environmental contexts, and if vulnerability, a key concept in participation, is itself an evolving concept is space and time, it must be the case that the methods for participation will themselves vary with varying communities. Therefore, it is inappropriate to think that a particular methodology is participatory and therefore can be used in a blue print fashion across different social groupings. Moreover, the success of any methodology depends on the expertise of those involved in their application. Current experience in disaster relief is that a considerable proportion of agency staff who are involved in programme implementation either do not have the experience or training, or do not stay in affected areas sufficiently long enough to apply methodologies in a sensitive and passionate manner. The tendency is thus to go through the methodology in a
checklist fashion and to ignore the sensitivity and the spirit of listening to the voices of the affected that might require the adjustment, even the abandonment of the very methodology in question.

In addition, it is a mistake to use any methodology merely as a way of filling information gaps on the part of agencies. Emphasis should be on information sharing where the affected population is accorded with an opportunity to learn important things regarding the agency’s operational procedures and constraints, accountability requirements, available resources as well as procedures for acquiring and moving such resources, including any other information relevant to the running of the programme. Such information will go a long way towards enabling people to decide the best courses of action they themselves could take to assist the agency better meet their needs. Part of the problem in participation has been that, perhaps because of their attitudes of superiority, agency staff have tended to see poor people, who frequently have little or no formal education, as incapable of comprehending such information as described above. Yet lack of formal education should not be seen as being synonymous with lack of wisdom. Poor people can understand very well the constraints that agencies might face and may even be in a position to offer suggestions on the best way forward.

Beyond issues regarding how participation is understood and how it might be fostered in practice, this paper highlights the many political aspects of participation of which practitioners need to be aware. First, much rhetoric on the need participation should not be taken to mean that all are convinced about the benefits of participation. There are still many who see it as something that merely complicates the processes of planning and implementing programmes. Some even, suggest that it makes programmes more costly, or that it requires a lot of time not usually available in emergencies, despite lack of evidence for this assertion. Others fail to develop the trust that local structures can truly be accountable and representative of the vulnerable. And instead of recognising that problems in achieving these ideals might be related to limited capacities in particular areas, they shun local structures, treating them with suspicion, rather than forging closer links to strengthen capacities. In some cases government interest on participation may be limited as it contradicts political goals. Similarly, some argue that local elites can stand in the way of participation, as it is likely to erode their power and remove them from a position of advantage. However, I have argued that such a view should not necessarily be regarded, as universal since in some cases, because of their relatively wider knowledge base interfacing between local processes and external ones, local elites, if integrated well in the programme, can in fact be a valuable resource. Finally, there is no denying the fact that international aid organisations, by their very nature, are sometimes ill placed to have the flexibility that is required for genuine participation to occur. They are afflicted by the problem of multiple accountabilities, first to their donors, frequently themselves very rigid in their funding and accounting requirements, and second, to their beneficiaries who do not see their livelihoods in terms of a set of formalised procedural attributes. Donor inflexibility has been frequently mentioned in evaluations as one of the reasons why some agencies failed to respond to specific beneficiary suggestions.
Thus, in conclusion, the paper suggests that donors need to reassess their funding and accountability requirements so that ‘upward accountability’ by agencies does not preside over ‘downward accountability’ for surely, the priority in humanitarian action is not to serve donors first, but the affected populations. In addition, it supports calls to put more effort into channelling aid through local structures, including the process of enhancing the capacities of such structures through providing training and education and opportunities for collaboration. Where international agencies continue to be involved in planning and direct implementation of programmes, then the full participation of affected population at every stage is required. What is also required is for agencies to pay particular attention to their recruitment procedures to ensure that people with the necessary skills, experience, passion and commitment for participation occupy required positions in the organisation. Operational procedures within organisations also need to be restructured to allow for such attributes to be acquired. Above all, flexibility, born out of a relinquishing of attitudes of superiority and the realisation that poor people in different circumstances are best placed to understand their own situations, needs to be brought to the forefront of all relief programmes. This call is not new. Its values are enshrined in the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, to which almost all international aid organisations voluntarily subscribe. Agencies must re-affirm and act according to this code, voluntary though it may be. Let us not be given the impression that when not policed, human beings will not do that which is right.
Introduction

The participation of affected populations in humanitarian programmes that are intended to alleviate their suffering continues to gather momentum and receive increasing attention. The language of participation has become increasingly popular with donors and aid agencies, with the former sometimes even making participation a conditionality for funding, and the latter, making explicit pronouncements in their policy documents claiming to put participation in the fore front of all programming.

Yet it is also true that examples of authentic participation continue to be rare and far between. An important question therefore, has been why authentic participation does not happen more often. ALNAP, for example, specifically tabled this question at one of its biannual meetings back in 1998 and contemplated on a number of possible reasons why this might be the case (see Apthorpe and Atkinson, 1999:10). ALNAP’s commitment to addressing concerns regarding the participation of affected population in emergency programmes culminated partly in the commissioning of two studies: one was a review of the experiences of DEC agencies in consulting with affected population during the 1998 famine relief in south Sudan which was carried out by Pierson Ntata (Ntata, 1999). Another was a synthesis paper on shared social learning done by Raymond Apthorpe and Philippa Atkinson (Apthorpe and Atkinson, 1999). These two studies were fore runners to a global study that would look at empirical examples of participation and attempt to identify best practices to assist practitioners.

The synthesis paper by Apthorpe and Atkinson constitutes a major review of the Anglophone literature on participation of affected populations in emergency relief programmes. This paper contributes to that literature review as well as the global study through a discussion of some of the important issues that need to be borne in mind when dealing with the concept of participation. Given that the Apthorpe/Atkinson paper already deals comprehensively with aspects specific to participation in emergencies, this paper addresses two main issues: first, the theoretical concerns of the concept of participation, and second, it provides some empirical attempts at participation in emergencies and attempts to link these to the theoretical concerns.

The concept of participation has already gathered more momentum in development practice than it has in disaster relief. This paper is primarily concerned with participation in emergency relief, rather than development contexts. However, it is important to review the concept of participation within the context of development because of the traditional relationship with emergency relief. This relationship has led to a lively debate as regards how to reconcile the two both in theory and in practice. Theoretically, commentators have grappled with issues regarding exactly where emergency relief ends and where development begins as well as inherent variations that exist between the two. Practically, it is normally the case that many international NGOs and government agencies are involved in both relief and development and find it sometimes difficult to distinguish between relief and development activities. As a matter of fact many development NGOs actually started off as relief NGOs, and it appears somewhat paradoxical that relief
should learn from development rather than the other way round. Methodologically, questions have been raised as to whether the same participatory methods (if) used successfully in development settings can and should also be used in relief situations. In both development and relief, if more so in the latter than in the former, doubts exist about the practicality and benefits of participatory approaches, in addition to the question of whether such approaches are also empowering as sometimes claimed.

Apthorpe and Atkinson (1991:11) argue that these comparisons are pertinent when considering the potential for participatory approaches in emergency situations since:

‘there is no a priori reason why these should borrow uncritically from what is not only a substantively and situationally different area but also one in which far too much has been claimed in theory....At the same time there is no a priori reason why humanitarian programmes should not be able to learn much from becoming more collaborative and consultative than they are...the principle conclusion this synthesis paper reaches is that the more collaborative and consultative humanitarian programmes become the better, both ethically and practically.’

It is easy to assume that everyone knows what participation is. But a close scrutiny shows that different people, communities, aid workers, donors may hold different views regarding participation, in addition to holding different views as regards the purposes that participation should serve. Any attempt at identifying ‘best practices’ in participation should take account of these differences and clarify the position from which ‘best practice’ is being viewed.
I. Definition of Participation.

We would agree with several authors who have argued that it is impossible to establish a universal definition of participation (Oakley and Marsden, 1984:18).

There are severe problems in even just trying to understand what participation is. In practice, some of the problems faced in efforts to implement the idea of participation stem from this lack of agreement. Yet it is important that some idea of what participation is about be developed if the concept is to make sense, let alone be implemented. If the quoted statement above is taken to suggest that the definitional playground for participation is so wide open as to provide everyone with the freedom to develop their own understanding, the inevitable implication is that the scope for criticism will be severely limited, if not eliminated altogether. The troubling task then is how to arrive at some form of common (if not universal) understanding of at least minimum characteristics of authentic participation.

Below are presented some illustrative statements of the problems involved:

‘Participation is...generally understood as a process and not as some kind of static end product. And yet when the dimension of time is introduced the positions diverge; one school would argue that “participation” could be manipulated within the context of the time of a particular intervention; whilst others argue the unpredictable nature of authentic “participation”. And although there is unanimity on the importance of “participation” to achieve the desired redistribution of the benefits of development, there is less unanimity on the nature and content of the “participation” process’ (Oakley and Marsden, 1984:18, emphasis supplied).

Writing in the context of industrial relations, French is quoted as defining participation as ‘a process in which two or more parties influence each other in making certain plans, policies and decisions’ (Hebden and Shaw, 1977:14). Viewed in this way, the point is that participation must affect the degree of power that can be exercised by different parties. Thus emphasis is not on control, but on influence, the difference being that the former permits unilateral action by one party, the latter occurs in a social setting in which several parties may participate (ibid. p.13).

The World Bank, writing in a development context, would seem to share this view when it defines participation as ‘a process whereby those with legitimate interests in a project influence decisions that affect them’ (Oxfam, 1995:14. Emphasis added). From this definition the Bank suggests that there are different levels of participation namely (p.15):

- information sharing, where people are put in a position to decide on their involvement in a project by being informed about it;
- consultation, where people are consulted on key issues for them to provide feedback to the managers;
- decision-making, where people influence the development of a project at every stage through involvement in its design and implementation;
- initiating action, where people organise themselves to take action in the face of a shared problem or area of interest, rather than responding to the initiative of outsiders.
What is not clear from this characterisation is whether all the levels need to be fulfilled for authentic participation to have occurred or whether there is a minimum number that determines the threshold. Also, the extent to which information is shared, people are consulted and involved in decision-making, and the methods used, are all important to the outcome of participation. In fact most of the uncertainties on participation centre on these aspects.

In addition, attempting to apply in practice the phrase *those with legitimate interests in a project* may pose problems of interpretation. The question as to whose perspective of legitimacy is valid will always linger in the air. This problem, and thus its answer also, is not unrelated to the problem of defining beneficiaries in general. This will be looked at in more detail below.

In a rural development context, Oakley and Marsden (1984:19) provide a number of working statements on participation that reflect the various understandings of the concept. The basic ideas are the same as those expressed above, although there are some statements which are more specific than others. There do not seem to be any special definitions of participation in the literature specific to disaster relief. From the trend above, however, it can reasonably be assumed that the same ideas expressed with respect to other fields apply.

One of the problems involved in defining participation appears to be that the very definition of participation has so far been constructed in a non-participatory way. Professionals implementing programmes and academics providing commentaries and critiques have unilaterally developed concepts of what they think authentic participation should entail. To the best of my knowledge, there appears to have been little if any effort to try to understand participation from the point of view of those for whom assistance is being provided. The research question here is: in what ways do the people whom the agency believes to be beneficiaries of a project perceive participation? What levels and types of involvement would the beneficiaries feel necessary and appropriate for the protection or the enhancement of their livelihood? Who would they want to be involved and in what ways? This means working backwards from what the intended beneficiaries of a particular project say on participation and then developing a common understanding (from the people’s perspective) of the concept or process. i.e. ‘putting the people first or putting the last first’. Uphof (1985:486) writes: ‘In a real project situation... proposals for various kinds of participation should be checked out with the intended beneficiaries to ascertain whether they are feasible and acceptable’.

What this implies is that participation must become a fluid rather than static concept that changes according to the particular circumstances of the beneficiaries involved. After all, the very objective of participation is to ensure sensitivity to the local conditions of beneficiaries. This approach would free practitioners and academics from the need to theorise *a priori* what authentic participation should involve, and then find that they have come up with meaningless or unworkable statements of the concept.
II. Why is participation needed?

II.1 Means or end.

The distinction between whether participation is a means to an end or an end in itself is important to understanding the range of purposes that participation can serve. It is argued that interpreting participation as a means leads to a description of a state or an input into a development programme. The objective is to achieve previously established objectives. Where it is interpreted as an end in itself the reference is to a process whose outcome is meaningful participation. Here the objective of the exercise is the achievement of power by the powerless so that they can demand more participation. Participation in the former sense adopts the strategy of reform and improvement while in the latter case structural change is implicitly demanded. Viewed in this way Oakley and Marsden (1984) suggest that the ideal situation is one, which incorporates both extremes, but doubt the probability of this happening given the different ideological perspectives reflected by the two positions.

However, it could in fact be questioned as to whether it is necessary that participation should combine the two strategies in order to be real and authentic. The following argument by Chambers (1985:515) throws in some light here:

‘...the case for putting people first...is based not just on ethical grounds, though many find the ethical obligations sufficient on their own. It is also highly practical. With repeated experience, evidence has built up to demonstrate that where people and their wishes and priorities are not put first, projects that affect and involve them encounter problems. Experience also shows conversely that where they are consulted, where they participate freely, where their needs and priorities are given primacy in project identification, implementation, and monitoring, then economic and social performance are better and development is more sustainable. There are, and always will be, other environmental and managerial factors that influence how well or how badly a project does. Irrespective of these influences, evidence shows that in rural development, putting people first is a necessary condition for good performance whenever local people are involved’ (Emphasis added).

Obviously then, there are many purposes that participation is intended to, and can achieve. Part of the current confusion and debate on participation appears to stem from a situation in which people are losing sight of this fact and focusing only on one main purpose. To begin with, to argue that no meaningful participation can take place if it is interpreted as a means to an end is to suggest that it is impossible for the objectives of the beneficiaries to coincide with those of the aid agency. This may not necessarily always be the case. For, despite the fact that the aid agency may have its own specific aims, the very fact that agencies and beneficiaries can work together means that they have at least shared ground. This ground is the general desire to either save or improve lives and livelihoods. However, aid agencies by their very nature also have other objectives to fulfil. What usually differs, and therefore needs compromise, are the ways in which this overall objective is to be achieved in a way that allows the beneficiaries to benefit but also enables the agency to harmonise beneficiary priorities with objectives inherent in
their organisational structures and operational procedures. In this case participation can become a means of reaching this compromise.

It should also be remembered that the more commonly shared view of participation centres on both parties having some power to influence, and not absolute power to control, the other. In the context of development and relief, the aid agency has power, which results from ownership of resources, and technical expertise while the power of the community emanates from its knowledge of local conditions and the priorities and values existing within it. In this sense the notion that true participation requires the total transfer of power to beneficiaries is both undesirable in principle and not feasible in practice. On the one hand, it is possible that the failure of the “means” strategy to achieve meaningful participation may not be so much the result of the nature of the strategy itself, but the way in which it is implemented or operationalised. On the other hand there is no guarantee that meaningful participation will always result from an “end” strategy when implemented or operationalised in whatever way. The hard truth is that even where meaningful participation has been achieved it is not clear whether the outcome will match the level desired by the beneficiaries given that any project must operate within the resource constrains of the aid agency.

Adams (1984), writing in the context of industrial relations, suggests four general categories of purposes that participation can serve, namely democracy, socialist ideals, ethics and morality, and productivity and efficiency. These can be used as a basis for understanding the role of participation even in development and disaster relief contexts. To these can be added public relations, human rights and empowerment. Clearly, for some of these purposes participation can be seen as a means while for others, an end. However, it also appears that for some purposes participation can be both a means to certain ends and an end in itself. If this is true, the validity of making a simplistic “means-ends” dichotomy on the concept of participation should be seriously questioned. For example with reference to the relationship between participation and empowerment, White (1996:9) asserts that ‘participation is...at one and the same time a means to empowerment and an end in itself, so breaking down the division between means and ends which characterises the other types’.

II.2 Productivity and efficiency.

Seeing participation as enhancing productivity, efficiency and effectiveness is perhaps on one end of the extreme where participation is regarded as a means. From an industrial relations perspective research indicates that participation of workers increases efficiency through reduced levels of alienation, dissatisfaction, absenteeism, high turn over and increased sabotage and labour unrest (Adams, 1984:47). In development (and also in relief), White (1996) sees participation in this form as essentially serving an instrumental function. In her view, the major aspect of participation in this form is the provision of labour by the project beneficiaries which is seen by the agency as local ‘counterpart funds’ and guarantees people’s commitment to the project. In the eyes of the local people this form of participation is viewed as a cost which is paid for by time taken away from other activities such as paid employment, household work and leisure. In a relief setting, this cost may be seen in relation to time taken away from pursuing other survival strategies, given that relief assistance is often inadequate to address all immediate needs.
An example from Malawi illustrates this point (Ntata, 1997). There, a WFP policy, endeavouring to promote a transformation in gender relations, required that family ration cards be distributed in the name of the female spouse. However, flour bags for the general ration distribution were too heavy for most of the women to carry over the very long distances involved. Therefore, both spouses had to be present at a distribution centre, the woman to receive the ration, and the man to carry it. Given the long queues and long travelling distances involved, a lot of time was wasted in which one of the spouses would have been involved in other survival strategies, such as paid casual work, common at that time.

Apart from leading to ownership and commitment, participation may also lead to effective allocation and use of time and resources as agencies became well informed of the priorities their beneficiaries. Unlike in industry, however, where efficiency is always measured from the perspective of the employer, this is not so straightforward in development and relief settings. In the latter the question of efficiency or effectiveness has to be answered in terms of whose perspective. An agency may feel that the project was efficient because it fulfilled their targets, for example, how much food was delivered, how many babies benefited from a nutrition programme, how many tonnes of seeds were delivered and so on. Yet affected populations may see the project as inefficient or ineffective for creating disruptions in social relations because of the way the project was implemented. For a humanitarian programme this is a particularly difficult issue since humanitarianism is about doing good. In principle, only the affected populations are in a position to judge whether good has been done or not. Participation then is also an instrument for aid agencies for being accountable to the people they assist.

II.3 Public relations.

It would be unwise to dismiss public relations as a motive for participation among agencies. The literature charting the proliferation of international NGOs makes it clear that beneath the rhetoric of co-operation and co-ordination the spirit of competition flourishes. On such dead ground it is important that an agency creates a good image of itself. Participation is a good instrument since, perhaps like gender equality, it is the “in thing.” Given that ‘the assessment procedures of the British Overseas Development Administration (now DFID, but also many other donors) include checking what steps have been taken to ensure participation of the beneficiaries in planning implementing and monitoring the project it funds’ (Oxfam, 1995:14), participation may even be regarded as a survival mechanism, not of the poor, but of the aid agency.

More cynically, but perhaps equally true, participation may even be used to legitimate decisions, policies and practices that had already been decided would happen with or without participation. But if it can be said that these aspects of the project were achieved in a participatory fashion, then the agency will gain credibility and respect. White (1996) sees participation in this form as essentially nominal where the groups of people involved mainly serve the function of display. Thus, even though the requirements by donors for participation are nobly conceived, the absence of any mechanism to ensure that not only participation has occurred, but that it has also occurred appropriately, raises serious questions about their role in promoting the process of participation. And given that inappropriate forms of participation may even be destructive to communities, the extent
to which donors and aid agencies achieve their very aim of helping to build or rebuild communities can also be fundamentally questioned.

II.4 Democracy.

‘The fight for political democracy is a proud strand in the history of many countries...and few people would question that democracy in itself is a good thing, a value’ (Adams, 1984:42).

Participation is increasingly linked to the promotion of the democratic process, strengthening people’s capacity to participate in national and international issues. Adams (1984) quotes from a European Community ‘Green Book’ which noted the increasing recognition being given to the democratic imperative that those who will be substantially affected by decisions made by social and political institutions must be involved in the making of those decisions. In this sense participation could be seen as an end in itself since democracy is a value. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the general belief is that institutions function more effectively if they are democratically run, making democracy a means to achieving efficiency and effectiveness.

Aid agencies are well aware of their power that stems from their access and control of resources and technical expertise. Their staffs are also aware of their privileged position vis-à-vis the people they seek to assist. Coming from the West where democracy is a deep-rooted value they may feel compelled by their consciousness to conduct themselves democratically. They thus get concerned with providing their beneficiaries with some kind of voice in the character of the project (White, 1996). White’s view is that this form of participation is representative. From the point of view of the agency it may ensure sustainability by avoiding the creation of an inappropriate and dependent project. From the participant’s perspective, becoming actively involved in their own meetings and in discussions with the NGO may constitute leverage for influencing both the shape and the subsequent management of the project.

II.5 Ethics, morality and human rights.

The participation of affected populations in development or disaster relief projects could be seen in terms of the ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one of whose tenets states that:

‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Everyone, as a member of society is entitled to realisation of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality’ (Quoted in Adams, 18984:48).

Adams notes that this is an ethical and religious position whose essence is that dignity, humane treatment, and the opportunity to develop personality and talents are a moral right by virtue of being human. Ethics and morality in fact lie at the very heart of the humanitarian concept. This may explain why many humanitarian aid agencies have religious roots. The participation of affected population in projects that affect them constitutes their treatment as subjects, not objects of the process.
II.6 Empowerment.

A recent development in the literature points to participation as a process of empowerment. This interpretation has ushered in a new set of considerations as regards the extent to which this is possible in practice. For example:

‘In theory, empowerment and participation should be different sides of the same coin. In practice, much of what passes for popular participation in development and relief work is not in any way empowering to the poorest and the most disadvantaged people in society’ (Oxfam, 1995; 14).

Oxfam views empowerment as a process through which individuals gain the strength, confidence, and vision to work for positive changes in their situations. It is also a measure of the capacity of people to initiate change, whether modest or far-reaching. What is not clear is how these virtues are acquired. Several examples of empowerment are given (p12).

- A woman gaining the confidence to seek legal protection from her violent husband.
- Landless farmers organising to occupy idle land.
- Urban slum dwellers compelling the local authorities to provide essential services, such as water and electricity.
- Refugees demanding to return to their home
- Factory workers lobbying for the right to unionise.
- Families forming a committee to campaign for the release of political prisoners.

Oakley and Marsden (1984:25-26) note that the more common interpretation of empowerment equates participation with achieving power in terms of access to, and control of, the resources necessary to protect livelihood and quote the following statements as illustrative of this understanding:

‘The promotion of popular participation implies a redistribution of power requiring the consideration of political factors, social forces and the role of class in historical processes of social change, and participation is concerned with the distribution of power in society, for it is power which enables groups to determine which needs, and whose needs, will be met through the distribution of resources. Also, power is the central theme of participation and...participatory social action entails widely shared, collective power by those who are considered beneficiaries. The people become agents of social action and the power differentials between those who control and need resources is reduced through participation.’

The obvious idea implied above is that participation can never be real or complete unless empowerment has occurred. This view invites a number of theoretical and practical difficulties.

Theoretically and by definition, the concept of empowerment automatically assumes that the existing state of affairs is one of disempowerment. Logically, there can be no need for empowerment if people are already empowered. External agencies are then seen as catalysts to the empowerment process. The problem seems to be that there is lack of clarity as to the source of power that is supposed to be transferred to the affected
populations. On the one hand, examples of empowerment such as those cited by Oxfam in the paragraph above would seem to suggest that the source of empowerment is primarily the acquisition of new knowledge, attitudes, aspirations, values and other “positive” personality traits. The acquisition of these aspects will lead to access to resources, primarily of an economic nature. This view is inevitably paternalistic, ethnocentric and short sighted at any rate. Frequently, people in poverty fail to act in a certain way often precisely because they lack the resources and an opportunity to do so. In this sense, access to economic resources is not the result of, but a pre-condition for, empowerment. Rather than the other way round, it is access to resources that may lead to the acquisition of new knowledge, attitudes, aspirations, and possibly values, if necessary.

To take some of the examples given above by Oxfam, a woman in poverty situations may not seek legal protection from a violent husband not because she is disempowered (in the social capital sense), but because she is aware of the consequences of that action. Because of her weak economic position, a woman may avoid any action that might end up in divorce, leaving her without sound economic support. In marriages under customary law, the man might resolve his frustration by marrying several wives. This might not be in the interest of the woman. As regards the issue of landless farmers, it is quite difficult to see, without stupefying the farmers, how they could stay landless if there were idle land lying about. It is equally difficult to see why an external agency would be needed to set this process in motion. The example of the urban slum dwellers poses similar problems. Literature on urban studies in developing countries has shown that very often the major reasons why slum dwellers do not press for “essential” services such as electricity and water has nothing to do with disempowerment. In many cases such services are not demanded because they exert a strain on the already low incomes of the slum-dwellers. Studies have shown that low-income dwellers might in fact be willing to move out of serviced areas in favour of un-serviced ones where the burden of paying for the services is removed (Gilbert and Gugler, 1981). In addition, people in these areas may prefer to walk to avoid the costs of using the public transport system. An outsider without this knowledge might mistakenly believe that the community lacks empowerment to push for public transport.

The second interpretation of empowerment, as captured by Oakley and Marsden (1984), seems to be directly opposed to the first one. In this case, the source of empowerment is access to, and control of, economic resources and the political process through which such resources are distributed. Thus, power also stems from the deliberate surrendering of the decision-making monopoly held by the external agency involved. In other words, participation is linked to structural change or the redistribution of basic common assets.

This interpretation confronts a number of practical and empirical challenges. First, there appears to be lack of evidence that aid agencies have a serious commitment to transfer a significant amount of their power to the people being impacted: ‘There is no shortage of comment in the literature or analysis as to why participation has not been achieved. Some dismiss out of hand the very suggestion that there has even been a genuine commitment to participation’ (Oakley and Marsden, 1984:29). The question of whose resources still begs an answer. The failure of genuine participation to take place may suggest that agencies take them to be theirs, to be distributed on their (agencies’) own terms.
The following example illustrates this point. During the 1998 emergency relief programme in south Sudan (Ntata, 1999), many agencies found that the best mechanism for distributing food rations was through the traditional leadership system (the *gol* leaders). These were some kind of clan heads who had jurisdiction over a given section of the community. Their position allowed them to have good knowledge regarding which individuals were “vulnerable” and therefore needing assistance. Distrusting the effectiveness of this mechanism, one international aid agency committed some resources to be distributed in this way but retained a certain proportion of the total amount. After the distribution through the traditional structure had been completed the aid agency would then conduct their own independent assessments and distribute the remaining proportion to those it believed had been bypassed by the traditional distribution mechanism. While it can not be denied that there will always be individuals who fail to find representation in traditional structures, or for that matter any social structure, such “macho-man” tactics are highly questionable as regards the issue of participation. This action would have a lot of questions to answer as regards its impact on social relations within the community as well as on the way in which the agency is viewed. In the context of the present discussion, this example demonstrates how difficult it is for agencies to start the power balancing process.

Oakley and Marsden (1984) sum up:

> ‘The development literature is over-burdened with the documenting of previous participation strategies, most of which it is accepted have failed in terms of giving the majority of rural people any meaningful say in those issues which affect their livelihood. The concept of participation as empowering is a radical departure from years of more traditional practice. Although its conceptualisation is simple and its argument difficult to refute, it is correct to say that it both faces formidable barriers and that it is also difficult to imagine governments and locally established structures offering other than powerful opposition. Historically participation has rarely been willingly conceded to previously excluded groups and the encounter between opposing forces is the inevitable result’ (p.27)

Several issues arise from the foregoing observations. First, it is necessary that the advocates of empowerment always make it clear where the power for the poor will come from: is it political, social, economic or all of these? Second, “empowerment” rather than being a positive term can in fact be a demeaning one because of its inherent assumptions. Third, resources, opportunity and opportunity cost rather than disempowerment account for much of the behaviour of the poor. Fourth, empowerment is very difficult to measure. This implies that fusing empowerment with participation will result in frustrations. In any event the link between empowerment and participation is, in my view, neither necessary nor desirable. It is erroneous to look at local communities as being disempowered in any other sense other than economic. Access to economic resources is a pre-requisite for other behavioural changes.
III. Who should participate?

In principle, people who will be affected by the project are the ones who must participate or, as others would put it, the beneficiaries of the project. However, this statement is far more difficult to put into practice than might appear at first sight. We have already noted the difficulties associated with the World Bank’s phrase, *those with legitimate interests in a project*. Any attempt to define beneficiaries, or those who will be affected by a project is accompanied by difficult questions: beneficiaries or affected in what way? For example, are the beneficiaries of a food distribution programme only those who have received the food? Are they the only ones who will be affected by the distribution? Are they really the only ones with *legitimate interests* or has this legitimacy been imposed by the agency resulting from its own resource constraints and/or its organisational procedures and practice?

The difficulties of identifying those with legitimate interests or those who will be affected by the project become worse when it is remembered that it is not only lives which must be saved or improved in either disaster relief or development, but also, livelihoods. While lives can be considered individually, livelihoods are always linked to the social structure and process of the community and sometimes even to macro-economic and macro-political processes. In many cases government agents will continue to interact and influence people’s lives and affect their livelihoods long after the relief or development project has “ended” and the agency staff have left. Some of the actions taken may be on issues that directly stem from that project. In such a situation one can sympathise with the host governments if they have legitimate interest in the project.

Thus, whether we consider government or community power structures it is clear that the care should be exercised when dealing with individuals or a collection of individuals as a unit for analysis for development and relief activities. To say that so many metric tons of food were successfully delivered to a ‘target’ group of people, for example, doesn’t say anything about the success of the intervention as a whole. What if the way in which delivery took place ostracised the target group from the other community members? What if such delivery destroyed existing local marketing systems and other systems for co-operation? In some cases, an outsider’s interpretation of who has a legitimate interest may in fact differ from that of the very individuals regarded as having this legitimacy.

This is not to suggest that the participation of people as individuals is irrelevant for, as Dichter (1992) argues, there is a conceptual mismatch between the *individual* and the *community*. Noting that in much of the literature on popular participation, the community rather than the individual is both implied object and subject he argues that emphasis on the community to the neglect of the individual ‘makes us prone to diverting our attention away from the very purpose of participation, which is to get individuals involved, to help them to have choices, to empower them as individuals, even though they may be in a group. In addition we make ourselves prone to falling into the trap of thinking that individuals are fundamentally different’.
In addition, there are in fact practical reasons why a focus on the view of beneficiaries as being individuals should be considered carefully. The basic problem is that this focus leads to an emphasis on using numbers as a measure of success. There are two sides to what has been referred to as “the numbers game”. First, aid agencies often operate under severe resource constraints. Because of this, small numbers of beneficiaries are always desirable. In many cases this desire has led to what can be called *institutionalised mistrust* of local assessments of the extent of need. This mistrust is based on the alleged lack of objectivity of local agencies in their assessment procedures, sometimes blamed on inadequate technical capacity, but more frequently on favouritism, dishonesty and corruption. While one cannot deny that such tendencies may sometimes exist, to assume that they always do and then to always proceed on that premise goes contrary to experience. Two illustrative examples will be cited.

The first example comes from south Sudan (Ntata, 1999). During the 1998 famine, it was learned that the SRRA, the relief wing of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement, had produced assessments of the food security situation for that year. These assessments showed an impending famine and the need for external food assistance. However, the magical international media had not yet vindicated the situation and the SRRA was, after all, a representative of a rebel movement. The assessment was of course rejected even by the international aid agencies working in the area. Analysis of the famine later showed that, even without the fighting which triggered it, the SRRA assessment had been fairly accurate of what was going to happen.

The second example comes from Malawi (Ntata, 1997). In 1997 floods devastated many areas in the southern part of the country. Government conducted an assessment of the extent of destruction and need for external assistance and launched an international appeal. The UN responded by sending a DHA team from Geneva. In contrast to the government’s assessment that had relied on its ground-based network, the DHA team relied on a helicopter, literally avoiding the grass roots. Thus the poem was right on the mark:

> [International bureaucrats as well as]
> ...students seeking Ph.D.s
> believe that everyone agrees
> that rains don’t do for rural study
> -suits get wet and shoes get muddy
> (Chambers, 1983:20).

Aware of the limitations of their action, but still suspicious of the government figures, the DHA team recommended certain areas for immediate relief assistance. It also recommended that assistance should be extended to all other affected areas only after a verification of the government assessment, to be conducted by an inter-agency team. This verification exercise proved to be one of the key factors why the relief process in general failed to be effective. In spite of the time and resources invested, the results of the verification exercise were later abandoned principally for failing to be representative and the agencies, including the WFP, were forced to revert back to the government figures in most cases.
The two examples have been cited to suggest that, for reasons linked to resource constraints, agencies tend to use numbers as the overriding criterion for defining beneficiaries. And because numbers must match available resources, the mistrust of assessments by local structures is inherent (in-built).

Yet when it comes to reporting on the outcome of the project, big numbers are desirable, if not essential. Prendergast (1996:3) observes that all aid agencies, whether UN, donor-government or NGOs, are under constant pressure to present a picture of the huge amounts of aid inputs delivered to a target population as having a direct impact on saving lives. The result is that logistical targets become ends in themselves. He argues that quantitative, rather than qualitative, assessment is dictated by reporting and fund-raising priorities resulting in the burying of nuances and portraying of tonnage of commodities delivered as the measure of success.

The foregoing observations lead to the argument that, to be effective, communities, rather than individuals, should form the basis for relief operations (it appears to be mostly already so in development). The principal mandate for deciding who should participate and how, should lie primarily with the community decision-making structure. It is true that, as agencies might fear, that not all people in need will be represented in this way, but more harm will be done if the agency were to take on this responsibility. Even during disasters, the social structure usually remains relatively intact. Considering beneficiaries only in terms of numbers of individuals and ignoring the importance of the local power structure and the social structure within which such individuals exist assumes that the affected population has no capacity for decision-making, understanding the needs of the different groups of people in the community and caring for their own vulnerable individuals. In making this assumption, ‘one is accusing the social structure of that society of having descended into Hobbesian chaos’ (Harragin, 1998:3).
IV. How can people participate?

Clearly, even if the right participants have been identified, how they participate is crucial if participation is to achieve its various objectives. The very fact that there are a number of purposes that participation can serve suggests that there must also be a range of ways in which people can participate. In general, the form of participation chosen will determine the degree of involvement and should reflect the purpose of participation. The task here is thus to identify the various forms of participation or involvement and attempt to link them to what they can achieve.

Elsewhere, it has been suggested that making a distinction between mental and physical involvement may be a useful starting point (Ntata, 1999). While seemingly obvious, this distinction is sometimes taken for granted and thus, its importance overlooked. Some of the problems attached to the understanding of participation in fact seem to relate to a failure to consider this distinction.

It has already been noted, for example, that the common interpretation of participation lays emphasis on ability of the affected population to influence decisions that affect them as a key and perhaps the sole aspect. Even the four levels of participation suggested by the World Bank, namely, information sharing, consultation, decision making and initiating action, refer primarily if not solely to the mental aspects of the process. Yet clearly, physical involvement in the various activities of the relief process is also necessary. This necessity emanates not least from the insufficient supply of labour usually at the disposal of aid agencies. It can be argued and demonstrated that without the physical involvement of the community the relief process might encounter many problems. For example, community security arrangements for relief food stocks in south Sudan, which relied on community members as guards, proved to be more effective than one that used agency employed staff.

Since it has been suggested that the community, rather than the individual, should form the basis of relief activities, mental participation refers to the process by which the “mind of the community” (more like Durkheim’s conscience collective) should be engaged at all levels of the relief process. This means providing real opportunities for people to either say how they feel on decisions that have already been made so that adjustments can be made or, wherever possible, to provide opportunities for the people’s say before decisions are made. Physical participation, on the other hand, centres on labour contributions by communities.

It can be argued that so far, in spite of the rhetorical premium placed on the former interpretation of participation, the latter has in fact taken precedence, especially when seen from the point of view of many field staff. While influencing decisions is the key aspect in the common interpretations of the participation process, in practice the answers one gets to the question how did people participate in the project? often reflects the physical aspect of the process. Examples of answers obtained are (Ntata, 1997, 1999):

- In a Nutrition programme: People constructed feeding centres using local materials, that women helped in the management of the centres by cooking food for the children, pounding grain, drawing water, helping to weigh babies etc;
• In a general ration programme: that they acted as porters at food distribution sites. Here, some would even claim that an aspect of women’s empowerment was introduced because the agency employed a policy of using them, and not men as porters. It is also sometimes said that people participated as guards for the food stocks pending distribution.

• In a Psychosocial trauma programme: that they helped build the centres for children to be treated in.

The list of such answers can go on and on. Of course, it is also true that sometimes one gets answers to the effect that some representatives of the community attended this planning meeting or that co-ordination workshop. However, this happens less often than the physical involvement, and in many cases it occurs when the agency has encountered a problem, which it is failing to deal with. So for example, in one case in south Sudan, community members were invited to attend an inter-agency workshop because the agencies had discovered that some people were not being reached in the food distribution programme. In another case, an agency held meetings with male members of the community after discovering that women who were attending feeding centres were having domestic problems with their husbands. There were many other such examples.

For participation to be successful, equal emphasis should be placed on both mental and physical involvement. These aspects of participation can be seen as mutually reinforcing. Greater levels of mental involvement (information sharing, consultation, decision making etc.) will lead to greater commitment in labour mobilisation, while greater levels of physical involvement (provision of labour at various levels in the programme) may lead to a sense of ownership, which may facilitate mental involvement.

The more frequent question that has been asked, however, relates to how people can participate in the ‘mental sense’. This question can be examined by making reference to the different levels of participation mentioned in the foregoing paragraph.

IV.1 Information sharing and consultation.

The word *sharing* at this level of the participation process is important. Some refer to the same process as information *gathering*. The difference in practice is profound. Ideally this is the level at which the agency should learn things about the community it wishes to assist as well as the community learning more about the agency. Very often, only the former applies, i.e. the agency only gathers the information it perceives necessary for its pre-conceived purposes. The agency rarely tells the community about itself, for example, the policy framework within which it operates, its operational procedures, resource as well as staffing limitations, entitlements etc. Perhaps these bits of information are regarded as irrelevant for the community to have. Sometimes, agency staff may fail to share this information because they believe their beneficiaries to be incapable of comprehending such information. However, a correct beneficiary-picture of the agency can go a long way in preventing the creation of “wrong” expectations in the community.

As in participation as a whole, information gathering and consultation can be done in various ways and for various purposes. Information can be gathered to fill a knowledge
gap, to facilitate an action already in process or even to legitimate an action. For example Harragin (1998:ii) observes that ‘Aid agencies in South Sudan work in an information-poor environment because of a profound lack of communication with the local population. The tendency is therefore to latch onto any information that tries to present local perspectives and twist it to fit the preconceived solutions that agencies come up with’. This is one of the reasons why the notion of sharing rather than gathering holds more appeal.

IV.2 Methods of gathering/sharing information.

Of approaches claimed to be ‘participatory’ and ‘empowering’, Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) are the most well known and increasingly becoming popular. Their variants are Participatory Assessment Monitoring and Assessment (PAME) and Participatory Action Research (PAR). Thus ‘...an agency committed to women’s empowerment may find RRA/PRA techniques immediately appealing...’ (Oxfam 1985:129). Some people appear to be caught in some kind of frenzy about them. Some bilateral and multilateral donors even make them a pre-condition for funding. Robert Chambers and associates at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex are credited with popularising RRA.

In recent times however, RRA and PRA have come under considerable scrutiny. For example:

‘It is sometimes claimed that PRA is a tool for people’s empowerment. However, the transfer of power is not a matter of appraisal techniques; power has to be deliberately relinquished by the people and the agencies that hold it.....Unless people are involved in the planning, monitoring and evaluation of development programmes affecting them, the danger is that NGOs may be using RRA/PRA techniques in a cynical way, as a one off exercise in participation, or that they are simply unaware of the extent to which their intentions are undermined by their actions’ (Oxfam, 1985:131).

Ngunjiri (1998:446), who argues that ‘participatory methodologies are double-edged swords that can be used to destroy or to build the capacities of those upon whom they are used’, echoes this criticism. In his view:

‘Asking people to say what their problems are, using all sorts of participatory methodologies is tantamount to asking them to say how useless, weak, empty, powerless and worthless they are in order for them to qualify to be helped. Yet this to many, is called community involvement or participation. It would be correct to say that the community has participated in its own destruction in that after listing their problems, real, discovered and unreal, they discover how useless they are and feel worse off than before the exercise. They actually discover how poor they are and feel they seriously need external support. This is negative discovery and however real or otherwise it may be, it can disempower or depress a community. Negative discovery works the same way three people can have a bad effect on you by separately telling you that you look ill. At the end of this you
most likely end up feeling ill and wanting medical attention. It is as serious as that’ (p 468).

Ngujiri’s argument is especially relevant in cases where, after conducting the exercise, the agency finds that it has no or inadequate resources to implement the programme in accordance with the ‘will of the people’. This certainly appeared to be the case in Malawi where a UNDP PRA-based sustainable livelihood programme could not provide the needed resources one year after conducting exercises in a series of villages. The villagers were assisted to identify their needs and develop action plans that would benefit from external funding. It may well be that the community started feeling worse off resulting from the frustration of having identified ‘needs’ that were never met. This programme was characteristically described as having an ‘open heart but empty pockets’. (Apthorpe, Ntata and Chinsinga, 1998).

Leurs (1997) reviews some of the main challenges facing RRA/PRA. First, he notes that these methods are being used differently by different kinds of people and for different purposes. Some are using them as a research methodology, some as a tool for project appraisal and others as part of a process of participatory development. Obviously this is likely to lead a certain level of confusion and lack of clarity as to what just these methods can and should achieve. Lack of clarity on the context and purposes for which RRA/PRA are being used is likely to result in inappropriate nature and levels of training, as well as it facilitation. the main challenges currently facing PRA are listed as follows:

- Introducing and spreading PRA in communities, especially as regards the training and supporting of local facilitators, as well as ensuring that experience is shared.
- Introducing PRA into development organisations and projects faces problems of unfavourable policy environment, lack of enthusiasm with PRA due to the hierarchical culture of management, or conflict with existing top-down planning and evaluation mechanisms, as well as inflexible or inappropriate accountability requirements of donors, central ministries and politicians.
- Quality and quality assurance are difficult to achieve.
- Lack of methodological critique of PRA.

Despite being perhaps the most popular, RRA/PRA are not the only methods used in development and relief contexts. Appraisal and information gathering can take many forms. These can be informal or formal. The following is a list of some of these methods: (Oxfam 1985:118-150)

- Meetings and visits.
- Consultation.
- Workshops
- Technical advice.
- Capacities and Vulnerabilities analysis (CVA).
- Gender Framework Analysis (GFA).
- Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).
- Logical Framework Analysis (LFA).
• Cost-effectiveness Analysis (CEA).
• Social and Financial Cost-benefit Analysis.

Chambers (1985:523-526) produces an even more comprehensive “menu of methods”

These include: Secondary data reviews; direct observation; do-it-yourself; key indicators; semi-structured interviews; key informants; group interviews; chain of interviews; transect and group walks; mapping and aerial photographs; diagrams; ranking, stratifying and quantification; ethno histories; stories, portraits, and case studies; team interactions; key probes; and questionnaires. As Chambers himself observes, most of these methods involve outsiders learning from, and sometimes with, rural people but they are not necessarily participatory in nature.

IV.3 Decision-Making.

In general it can be said that it appears relatively easier to find ways of involving people at the levels of information sharing or gathering and consultation. These two levels of participation do not necessarily involve the sharing of power between the agency and the affected population. This is perhaps the reason why these two levels happen relatively more often. The real problem appears to start at the level of decision-making, where power is an issue. The question that must be asked here is simply this: how can people participate so that they are able to influence the decisions taken at every stage of the project? Framed in this way, however, this question assumes that the answer simply lies in the manner of participation. As the discussion of empowerment has shown, there has to be a genuine willingness of the agency to surrender some of its power to the affected population.

In terms of understanding how people can participate in the decision-making process it is important to first clarify the process itself. Decisions about the various stages of the project are usually made either at the headquarters or the regional office level. In emergency situations issues leading to the making of decisions may sometimes be discussed during relief co-ordination meetings. These meetings usually take place a safe distance away from the affected areas. Wherever they take place, there is usually a remarkable absence of any representatives of the communities to be assisted. It appears that no concerted efforts are made to find out who the communities feel would be in a position to represent their interests and then include these people in the various decision-making fora. Excuses to do with language ability might sometimes be given but this usually ignores the fact that within many communities there are certain local professionals in the fields of education (such as primary school teachers), health, forestry, local government etc who can be recruited as translators. In some cases failure to include affected people in the decision-making fora has nothing to do with problems of language.

During a disaster relief programme in Malawi in 1997 (Ntata,1997) the District Commissioners (DCs) of the two districts that were receiving assistance suggested that some of the monthly inter-agency planning and co-ordination meetings be held in one of the two districts rather than the main commercial city where these meetings were being held. The DCs reasoned that this would allow the agency and government staff to have a first hand experience of the situation which would have allowed them to appreciate some of the arguments presented by them (the DCs). Additionally, they suggested that holding
meetings in the affected areas would have enabled many traditional leaders to attend and present their thoughts on the relief programme. Everyone agreed that this was a very good idea but nothing was done to respond in practical terms.

In 1998 in south Sudan (Ntata, 1999), co-ordination meetings were taking place at the Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) base in northern Kenya. There was no evidence that the traditional leaders attended these meetings. What they attended were meetings held at the implementation level by agency field staff and their contributions were therefore limited to presenting ideas to an already pre-decided agenda. Moreover, it was not clear whether field staff were mandated to handle these contributions on their own, and if so, with what room for manoeuvre or if mechanisms existed to provide feedback to their regional and head offices.

IV.4 Initiating action.

It has been argued above that this is the level at which people spontaneously organise themselves to take action because of a shared problem or area of interest, rather than respond to inducement from outside agencies. It is true that communities may spontaneously initiate action in order to respond to certain environmental or social changes. However, the influence of access to resources and knowledge of new opportunities in limiting the actions of the poor should not be forgotten. So rather than using all sorts of participatory approaches to get the community to recognise its problems and start considering ways of solving them, the most empowering action by the agency may be simply to make the community aware of what resources it is in a position to offer and under what conditions, or/and new opportunities that may have arisen beyond the community setting.

This information alone can propel the community into organising itself in various ways in order to access the resources. Such organisation can spark other types of action as well. The community will usually be in a position to judge whether the resources or the conditions under which they are offered are beneficial or disruptive. If the latter is felt to be the case the community may choose not to participate. As White argues (1996:12), ‘Participation is not always in the interest of the poor. Everything depends on the type of participation and the terms on which it is offered. In [some] cases...exit may be the most empowering action’. Rejecting the idea that those who do not ‘participate’ are passive she argues:

‘People have always participated...on the most favourable terms they can obtain. They wait with a mixture of expectation and scepticism what the new agency in their area is offering, and what it will want in return. They have opted in or out of projects as they suited their interests. At least some of what agencies may see as project ‘misbehaviour’ can from another standpoint be viewed as their co-optation from below’ (p. 14).

Some writers have used the term “Shared Social Learning” to provide a wider interpretation of what is commonly known as “beneficiary voice.”

‘By “Shared Social Learning”...we mean the process and the products of people working together to discover and understand actual and preferred practice, about, in the case of humanitarian programmes, best ways of meeting immediate survival
needs in times of severe stress. Meeting these needs may be through understanding of, and support for, ‘coping mechanisms’, emergency relief goods, providing humanitarian protection or contributing to peace-building processes, or all of these’ (Apthorpe and Atkinson, 1999:12).

This interpretation can also be applied to development situations, if one chose to separate relief and development. Interpreted in this way the issue of beneficiary voice should not be methodologically constricted: ‘Rather we would suggest that ‘shared social learning’ by a variety of methods is desirable and possible, where there are no counterproductive effects, whether this is exactly “participatory” or not’ (p. 9).

As mentioned above, it also appears that in most development and relief work there is an overwhelming emphasis on the agency learning about the community selected for intervention. Similar emphasis is missing as regards the community learning about the agency facilitating the intervention process. This can be seen as an aspect of paternalism. Agency staff may assume that local people are not interested or do not have the faculties to understand the operational aspects of their organisation. In addition, agencies may fail to realise that knowledge regarding resources, objectives, affiliation, operational procedures etc., may help the community in its own assessment of what is achievable, or to understand why certain decisions and actions are being taken. This can have a profound impact on the success of the programme. For example, during a disaster relief programme in Malawi, communities that understood that relief items were not being provided by the government had less difficulty understanding why relief was being targeted and were less likely to associate the programme with local and national politics. Those without this knowledge accused the government of favouritism. In one extreme instance, this resulted in the traditional leader of a particular community barring relief from reaching his area.

To summarise the argument so far, for development and relief to be successful, agencies need to have adequate knowledge of the communities selected for intervention. Participatory methods of information gathering and appraisal should be used wherever possible. However, it is a mistake to assume that empowerment should always be an objective for participation, basically because in most cases it is not required, or very difficult to achieve and measure otherwise. Moreover, there may well be non-participatory methods that can contribute to the process of understanding communities. Therefore, over-emphasis on participatory methods should not blind people about these.
V. Participatory development and its relationship to participatory relief.

The process of development (as also that of emergency relief) has been undergoing an evolutionary process. Traditionally, development was theoretically seen in terms of economic growth. Such growth was regarded as a means through which the society’s economy would meet the basic consumption needs of its population, particularly the underprivileged groups. Subsequent perspectives on development drew attention to the need to raise the self-awareness of the people rather than educating or indoctrinating them, giving them the power to assert their ‘voice’, and stimulating their self-driven action to transform their reality. In addition, some views appeared to draw on Marx’s ideas of the self-emancipation of oppressed groups, while yet others saw development as the release of people’s creativity (Rahman, 1995:25). According to Rahman (bid), ‘such radical theoretical or philosophical conceptions of popular grassroots mobilisations have, however, lacked a political theory for macro-level social transformation, without which the micro-level assertion of popular power and release of people’s creativity remain heavily circumscribed.’

The language of participation has become so part and parcel of development dialogue that it almost sounds redundant to state that many organisations are advocating it. The manuals and policy documents of almost all international as well as local NGOs contain phrases expressing the agencies’ commitment to participation. Participatory development has also received a major boost from vigorous support from other international development agencies, most notably, the World Bank. Several UN agencies also actively promote participation either through funding and facilitating the implementation of devolution programmes, funding participatory projects or sponsoring research and academic enterprise into the concepts of participation and development.

But so far, despite strong and growing endorsement of participatory development, cases of successful implementation of genuine participatory programmes and projects are rare. The concept of participatory development appears to suffer from an apparent paradox. On the one hand, there seems to be a consensus that participatory development offers the potential to succeed where the earlier approaches to development failed, namely to ensure that the underprivileged groups in society are not by-passed in the development process. On the other hand, there are increasing out-cries that participatory development continues to fail to achieve extensive application. The question that many are attempting to answer is why.
VI. The Politics of Participation.

There are many reasons why participation has failed to gain wide application in both relief and development fields. I will present only a summary of some of these below. One reason appears to be failure by aid agencies and donors to abandon the notion that they are ‘expert’ planners and implementers with technical know-how for assisting affected communities. Thus, ‘donor organisations have often assumed that participation processes were to be used to induct marginalised groups of people into the presently western-type economic and cultural systems-but with more sensitivity and within their own time frames. This essentially leaves the assumption surrounding the necessity for externally induced change untouched and unreflected upon (The World Bank, 1998:2).

Furthermore, there is an apparent lack of commitment to make the necessary structural reforms that will accord peasants or the urban poor access to and control of resources. Rahman (1995:26-27) argues that:

‘Participatory development is far from being adopted in practice anywhere in a way which leads to major structural reforms and the transfer of resources away from those vested interests that control dominant social and political structures towards underprivileged people. Dominant lobbies in the Southern countries are accepting PD (Participatory Development) as at best a poverty alleviation strategy, to be implemented sporadically at the micro-level, and then only by mobilising the resources of the poverty groups themselves, supplemented by donor support, rather than redirecting the mainstream of development resources to support PD on a national scale. Mainstream development efforts supported by the great bulk of foreign development assistance remains very much non-participatory, and poverty-augmenting rather than poverty-alleviating’ (emphasis supplied) (Rahman, 1995:26-7).

VI.1 Doubts

It is important to note that within the overwhelming endorsement of participation, and despite the fact that many declare their convictions about its benefits, it would seem that there is some level of doubt among some as to the benefits of participation. For example: ‘Research should be undertaken to try to determine the net benefits of participatory practices. This research should include a test of the hypothesis that lower borrower commitment and low levels of popular participation often lead to high costs later because of low impact or project failure’ (Bhatnagar and Williams, 1992:5). Similarly, Picciotto (1992:1) comments that as regards the concept of participatory development ‘more examples are needed to beef up the theory and more theory in needed to illuminate an elusive development reality.’
In some cases, this uncertainty seems to stem from difficulties involved in identifying and quantifying the benefits of participation. Thus: ‘This problem is most evident when examining ongoing projects, especially those still in the early stages of implementation; participation related benefits may not be seen until several years of implementation have yielded evidence on, for example, the quality and likely sustainability of the project activities’ (Rietbergen-McCracken, 1996:18). These views may be a clue to a situation in which many tend to endorse participation simply in order not to be seen to go against the tide, but deep down are neither convinced about the benefits of, nor committed to, genuine participation. In part this may also explain why there is so much rhetoric and limited practice in participatory development.

**VI.2 Lack of government interest**

In some cases it seems that resistance or lack of enthusiasm for participation is generated by fear of losing political control and economic benefit, especially in the case of government officials of the host country and local elites. Oakley et al (1991:11-12) note that there are several structural obstacles to genuine participation. Firstly, a political environment that results from an ideology that prefers controlled decision-making to encouraging openness or views from the citizens can inhibit participation. Secondly, genuine participation can be severely curtailed by a political system that does not put local administration mechanisms and decision-making in the mainstream. Thirdly, participation can be thwarted through tensions that can be generated by the friction between mechanisms promoted by the state on the local level, aimed at achieving centrally planned objectives and the development efforts generated informally at the grass-roots level. Fourthly, participation can be frustrated by the legal system, especially when information on legal rights is not disseminated to the poor and where legislation governing the right of legal associations of different groups of poor workers is withheld. In such a situation efforts by the poor to build organisations to represent their interests will be severely limited, as they would be in a situation where legislation gives the government sweeping powers to disperse “unlawful assemblies.”

Reviewing a number of studies documenting the experience of the World Bank and other stakeholders on participation in development projects, Rietbergen-McCracken (1996:4) observes that ‘in several of the projects studied the proposed participatory approach met with resistance from government officials...and limited the success of the implementation of the approach’. In the case of a Rural Development Project in Ecuador, the writer reports that government interest in utilising the participatory approach during the early stages of the project was based on seeking financial and labour contributions from the beneficiaries rather than on achieving more meaningful participation. In addition, there was weak commitment on the part of government officials in the implementing agency because of their lack of adequate involvement during the preparation phase of the project and also because they had little experience with participatory approaches. During a change in leadership in the implementing agency brought about by elections, more traditionally minded ministers replaced many who had supported the participatory approach.
VI.3 Local Elites.

The argument about local elites is that when they stand to lose a position of advantage socially and economically as a result of a more participatory approach to the development of their community, they are more likely to offer resistance. According to a study of the Northeast Rural Development Programme in Brazil by Kottak et al, for example, (Rietbergen-McCracken, 1996) high state-level commitment to participation was undermined by the behaviour of a municipal-level politician. The politician had obtained substantial economic gains through middleman activities. The formation of a local association aimed at regulating the sale of local products put middlemen in a disadvantaged position. In an effort to protect his privileged position the politician accused the association of being linked to the Leftist Workers’ Party in an attempt to arouse state-level opposition and reduce the flow of resources to the project.

It would be erroneous, however, to hold a view that all local elites are opposed to all forms of community participation in all circumstances. To begin with, there is no consensus on the model of state-society relations that depicts local elites as obstacles to the democratisation of authority and greater participation in development (Mitra, 1992). Viewing local elites as a dominant force that accumulates benefits because of their control of land, capital and high social status, is just one alternative. This model contradicts alternative models born out of research findings in some parts of the world. With reference to the case of India, for example, Mitra argues that there exists tremendous internal diversity in the social origins of local leaders. In addition, the base of their political support may be fragile and variable, frequently dependent upon their ability to deliver the goods.

The author argues that the available evidence in India shows that there has been a steady broadening of the political arena, considerable turnover of leadership and the entry of hitherto excluded groups into the political process. Concluding his argument regarding the relationship between the peasantry, local elites

The apparent contradiction in the experiences of the behaviour of local elites seem to call for an investigation into the forces that lead them to behave in a particular way. On the one hand, it might be true that individual elites would seek to maximise the advantages of their privileged position by opposing changes that lead to the loss of that position. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that the predominant view that local elites are likely to behave in this way may lead, especially when international agencies are involved, to unwarranted prejudice, suspicion and hostility being directed against them. Thus, instead of being treated as partners in the development of their community, they may be treated as obstacles and be excluded from genuine participation. In the end a self-reinforcing situation can arise as the local elites attempt to react to the sentiments and treatment directed against them.
VI.4 Mistrust.

Some commentators assert that there is usually a general mistrust between various stakeholders in the development process. Rietbergen-McCracken (1996:4) contends that ‘in many instances, the relationship between beneficiaries, NGOs, and government (and in some cases, the World Bank) has been, at least initially, based on mistrust and suspicion.’ She cites a case from a study of a waste management programme in Nepal to demonstrate that such mistrust could be based on previous failures experienced by communities.

However, it must be stated that such mistrust is usually mutual rather than uni-directional. There are various reasons why aid agencies are wary of government officials. While they may lack the necessary skills and incentives, as suggested earlier, one of the most frequently implied, if not openly mentioned causes of mistrust and suspicion is that government agents are, allegedly, frequently corrupt. Indeed such allegations are sometimes justified on the basis of rampant reports in the press regarding the misuse of donor funds by top government officials. In addition, external agencies frequently view ‘government and its bureaucratic apparatus as essentially hostile to the whole notion of reducing central control, devolving decisions to local level and supporting demands made by rural people for the kinds of radical changes that might be required to find lasting solutions for the poverty they suffer’ (Oakley et al., 1991:20); and, despite the fact that there are some government ideologies that overtly promote people’s participation, such as those of Tanzania, Ethiopia and the Philippines, ‘governments are inevitably the main protagonists of a top-down approach to development and the object of much critical comment on the effectiveness of big, donor-supported development projects’ (ibid. p.22).

Governments may also suspicious of the international donor community for various reasons, some of them born out of previous experiences. For example, there are no shortages of reports in the media showing leaders of governments in developing countries accusing foreign envoys of wanting to run their governments for them. Such leaders sometimes argue that foreign envoys lack the internal knowledge necessary for the proper assessment of the feasibility of new ideas. In some cases, political leaders may see ideas emanating from the international community as potentially dangerous with respect to their hold on power. In other cases, these leaders are not happy with the inflexibility of the international community in terms of which programmes to support. There are also cases in which government leaders feel that the international community is more likely to heed proclamations made by internal opposition and watchdog groups on isolated and specific incidences, even if such proclamations are not justified in the context of the wider political processes. The issue of ‘strings’ attached to aid given to developing countries is also another well-known grounds for government mistrust and suspicion of the international community.
VI.5 The Role of International Organisations.

Stiefel and Wolfe (1994) note that there is still a wide gap between rhetoric and reality in the behaviour of many international agencies. While they strongly advocate participation in their pronouncements, a good many of them still tend to concentrate exclusively on economic and technical factors to the neglect of political factors and realities. In addition, despite theoretically regarding development as a historical process, these organisations continue to plan and implement their activities within a traditional, a-historical ‘project approach’. The following quote sums up the state of affairs aptly:

‘Studies conducted recently in various international organisations, both at headquarters and in the field, show that instances of real participation as defined in this book continue to be rare. When it comes to the practical implementation of development policy, international organisations invariably tend to put aside the ‘empowerment’ rhetoric and revert to traditional ‘beneficiary’ or ‘target group participation’....International organisations continue to have few direct contacts with the actual grassroots communities...their main partners remain government agencies at central, and possibly down to the district levels, other international agencies, international NGOs, and consultants and technicians. The gap between rhetoric and reality is particularly pathetic in those organisations and agencies that like to maintain a progressive image: while the organisations’ top management and their governing bodies call for extensive beneficiary participation in all projects, and while their policy departments translate and legitimise these calls within a flamboyant rhetoric, the agencies’ staff at headquarters and in the field are confused or ambivalent, do not know how to translate participation into reality within concrete projects against often practical and political obstacles, and finally put it aside as one of these new ‘soft’ elements that complicate development projects, introduce factors of risk and unpredictability and create difficulties in implementation. What remains is in most cases a traditional top-down and non-participatory approach which focuses on the achievement of physical and financial project targets, sanctified in appropriate statistics, albeit within a new rhetoric’ (Stiefel and Wolfe, 1994:225-226).

Clearly, the key question to be asked is why, despite little action, international organisations continue with this ‘flamboyant rhetoric.’ One possibility could be that this rhetoric is simply an artificial costume designed to make them look good in the eyes of the poor in relation to their (the poor’s) governments who are believed to have let them down. Perhaps international organisations hope that by turning up the volume on rhetoric they are acting as a spokes-person for the poor and putting pressure on governments to act. However, this tactic is unlikely to be successful since with increasing globalisation, the actions of these governments are heavily dependent on the development agendas, mostly not sympathetic to participatory development, of the very same organisations that are generating the pressure.

It would also appear that international organisations and governments alike fail to transform rhetoric into reality because their staffs is caught up in bureaucratic systems
that are not conducive to the promotion of genuine participation by the poor. Korten and Uphof (1981), for example, have argued that bureaucratic reorientation is needed as a way of fostering participation in rural development. In their view, the attitudes of superiority and paternalistic postures assumed by many staff can be understood not just in terms of personal dispositions:

‘Here too we must be careful not to blame the victim. In part, and sometimes in large part, the observed behaviour and manifest attitudes of government staff grow out of the bureaucratic context in which they find themselves: the role expectations communicated through training programmes and contacts with their superiors, the performance measures against which they are assessed, the structure of rewards and the kind of sanctions focused on them.’ (p.5, emphasis supplied).

Korten and Uphoff are not alone in making this argument. At the Annual Xavier Institute Convention (Xavier Institute of Social Service, 1991:5), ‘most speakers seemed to agree with the view that bureaucracy is nothing but hypocrisy and is the fundamental obstacle to (participatory) development.’

Over and above attempting to change attitude and values, the authors argue that ‘the more important part involves changes in job definitions, performance criteria, career incentives, bureaucratic procedures, organisational responsibilities and the like’ (p.6, emphasis supplied).

The authors argue that prevailing bureaucratic practices and the procedures and reward system that support them tend to be reinforced by three value equations, all of which are often mistaken, reflecting deeply held assumptions regarding the nature of the development process:

- That expenditure = results: staff in aid agencies are under inexorable pressures to design programmes and implement them with all possible speed so that they and their superiors can report $X$ amount of progress in terms of $X$ amount of money spent’ (Korten and Uphoff, 1981:10).

In disaster relief this equation surfaces in terms of amount of resources spent versus the numbers of people assisted, regardless of the social impact of the programme.

- That education = superiority: Here, the authors contend that the assumption that formal education makes the possessor superior and that his or her judgement and values should prevail vis-à-vis those with less education, is unwarranted. according to this argument the knowledge of a well-educated person may be necessary but not sufficient for programme planning and implementation. On the other hand while local knowledge in unlikely to be sufficient, it almost always necessary. A blend of the two is thus necessary.
While the emphasis of this argument by Korten and Uphoff is government staff, the same is also true for staff working in international organisations. They usually have very high levels of formal education and are frequently addressed as ‘experts’ which is likely to make them feel superior, and they too have to report to their superiors who expect results based on pre-determined methods of assessment. Thus this conclusion is just as relevant for staff in international organisations as it is for government staff: ‘We also believe that the commonly observed lack of commitment and imagination among the personnel of development agencies is more a consequence of bureaucratic systems which treat creative behaviour as dysfunctional than a reflection of any inherent qualities of their personnel’ (Korten and Uphoff, 1981:14).

Dichter (1992) draws our attention to the mismatch between Artistry and Science. On the one hand there is a tendency among many to focus on the higher ground of technical rationality. On the other hand there is lack of enthusiasm to venture into the messy swamp of the indeterminate zones of practice. In other words professionals are called upon to be flexible in their approach to development (and relief) practice in order to be responsive to changing circumstances and processes rather than adhering to some pre-formulated blue print. ‘It is perhaps because of our unconscious attachment to the norms of technical rationality, and our resistance to the messiness of the swamp, that it is difficult to quality in practice. For in practice, popular participation is a messy business...if we were to break out of the confines of technical rationality in which we quite naturally take refuge, we might be freer to deal with the artistry needed in the swamp....we are talking about the art of development rather than the science of it’ (p.92, emphasis supplied).

Dichter also draws our attention to the mismatch between process and technique. This situation is said to arise when implementers, especially NGOs, sometimes because of their over-zealous inclinations about participation, make the process rigid by transforming it into a technique or a checklist mentality. Participation thus becomes a mere routine and emphasis is upon the letter, rather than the spirit of participation.

Finally, the quality of popular participation is compromised by a mismatch between:

‘participation as an element of development and participation as the basis for development: Following the tendency toward technical rationality, we too often make popular participation another element of the development process that we must watch closely, add onto projects, and apply according to specially desired guidelines...In the business world, for example, for all its own disjunctures, there was never a time when getting people to buy the company’s product was just another element of the company’s work. It was the entire reason for being. Similarly, in all grass-roots development, where people do not have stake (do not “buy in” to a project) or begin to perceive their stake to be less worthwhile than before, projects will fail’ (Dichter, 1992:93).
VII. The Practice of Participation.

Problems emanating from theoretical dispositions such as those above can be distinguished from views that would seem to suggest that there are some external agencies that are not only convinced of the benefits of participation, even if non-quantifiable, but also genuinely believe in the capacity and efficacy of indigenous groups and their institutions to initiate social and economic development. For this group of people, the will exists but practical factors constrain their actions.

VII.1 Cost and Time

The World Bank explored the idea that participation makes projects more costly than would otherwise be the case. Referring to a study done by Hentschel, Rietbergen-McCracken (1996:3) notes that participatory projects cost the Bank ten to fifteen percent more, on average, than non-participatory ones. Workshops, consultations and the hiring of participation experts mainly constituted the additional costs. The author implies, however, that this additional cost is likely to have been under-estimated because only identifiable and measurable costs could be included. Costs that could not be measured included, for example, staff time spent in negotiating with sceptical governments to adopt a participatory approach, meeting with local organisations, strengthening their capacity, and building links between different stake holders. In addition the writer argues that time-accounting procedures are often done in a way to mask costs of an expensive operation by referring some of the time spent to other, lower cost projects. However, this study is also reported to have shown that there was no significant difference between participatory and non-participatory projects in terms of overall time elapsed between project identification and disbursement of funds, with some participatory projects actually disbursing quicker that non-participate ones because of the former’s increased stakeholder commitment and better project performance.

VII.2 Expertise/ Methodology

One of the most frequently mentioned obstacles to participation is, it is claimed, lack of adequate numbers of personnel within implementing agencies who have the relevant skills to use participatory approaches in development projects. ‘Clearly, if project staff are not provided with the necessary skills and incentives to work in a participatory way with local communities, their willingness and ability to do so will be severely hampered’ (Rietbergen-McCracken, 1996:4). Referring to a study of community management of rural water supply in Indonesia undertaken by Smith, the author noted that NGO staff was generally better trained in facilitating community action than their government counterparts. As a result the former were flexible and responsive in their approach. By contrast, the latter were less qualified, needed to cover more communities, resulting in a more top-down approach involving only village leaders or a small group of the local elite.
Such findings have led some to undertake a critical exploration of the precise skills that are needed for enhancing participation. In reviewing the experience of the World Bank on participatory development in 20 of its projects, Bhatnagar (1992:20) argues that expertise in any one academic field did not appear to be critical for promoting participation. Rather, ‘participatory approaches seem often to have resulted from the personal commitment of individual project managers, whether these have been economists, financial analysts, urban planners, sociologists, engineers, anthropologists, demographers, management experts, public administrators, lawyers, psychologists, political scientists, or architects.’ According to the writer, World Bank project managers have identified cultural sensitivity, negotiating skills, vision, perseverance, conviction, and practical work experience as some of the key character traits to the development of a participatory approach. Practical experience is arguably the most critical missing ingredient. The key issue therefore appears to be how to reorient existing staff, given the Bank’s limited capacity to hire new staff. This finding may be applicable to other aid agencies as well.

While probably true, Bhatnagar’s argument should not be taken to suggest that aid agencies should not make concerted efforts to employ field staff and planners who are trained in specific academic fields such as anthropologists and sociologists. The dominance of economists and logisticians in many aid agencies has contributed substantially to the limited nature of efforts, on the part of agencies, to gain a deeper understanding of the communities they seek to assist.

Nevertheless, regardless of what makes some individuals more oriented towards a participatory approach than others, the question that continues to perplex many is what precisely constitutes a participatory methodology. For example, although they claim that ‘there are now sufficient examples of participation in practice in development projects for us to begin to discern elements of methodology prevalent in this practice’ (Oakley et al, 1991:205), Oakley et al also note that ‘one of the more difficult tasks in a review of project practice is to identify clearly the methodology used in the implementation of participation’ (p.210). And although ‘project files (of agencies) reveal further detail of this practice and give us glimpses of the actual methodological tools used to promote participation’ (p.205), ‘these, however, are scattered randomly across agencies and projects and few have systematically attempted to analyse the practice and present a coherent methodological statement’ (p.206). In a similar vein, Cernea (1992:96), argues that ‘no matter how intense or loud, the advocacy for people’s participation in development programmes remains gratuitous rhetoric if it is not translated into a how-to social methodology for making popular participation real’ (emphasis added).

Drawing from information contained in the Project files of a number of development agencies, Oakley et al (ibid.) then set out to extract and isolate the tools for a participatory methodology. And drawing on their work (p.205-229) the following paragraphs attempt to provide a summary of these tools. The terminology of tools or instruments for a participatory methodology is important to grasp because frequently, such tools or instruments have been regarded as being synonymous with the methodology itself.
The authors note that different methodologies of implementation result from different interpretations of participation, of which three can be identified: (a) Projects which methodologically follow a conventional project planning cycle and seek to make it more participatory: in these types of projects participation is either non-existent or tokenistic with an emphasis on participation in benefits; (b) Projects which methodologically seek to involve people in externally managed development projects: here, participation is still interwoven to conventional practice but the methodology is explicit and emphasis is on organisation, the promotion and development of people’s awareness, and increasing their involvement, to participate primarily in physical activities; and (c) Projects which seek to promote a base for continuing people’s participation: These are projects in which emphasis is on developing, over a period of time, a base among people, and in which the methodology unfolds and responds to the different stages of the process.

Cernea (1992:96), identifies the specific elements of a social methodology for implementing popular participation as including: the identification of social actors who will carry out the programme; the conceptualisation of the programme goals and participatory principles, in line with the needs of the social actors; the organisation of adequate linkage systems and forms of co-operation between government (and aid) agencies and the grassroots social actors; the establishment of information and communication patterns and procedures for joint decision-making, particularly regarding financial resource allocation and priority selection; and mobilisation through structures and authority mechanisms endogenous to the group of social actors.

Several authors have undertaken to pinpoint the actual tools, or tool-kit or software that can be used to implement a participatory methodology (Chambers, 1985; Apthorpe, 2000; Cernea, 1992; Oakley et al., 1991; Oxfam, 1995). The following section, relying primarily on the work of Oakley et. Al (ibid.), is a summary of these tools as well as an attempt in some cases to give empirical examples.

Economic or physical activities:

*Project group meetings and discussions:* As opposed to the traditionally-styled meetings which merely aim at communicating information to people of pre-agreed programmes, meetings, held regularly and conducted on the basis of equal partnership between group members and project staff, are aimed at promoting an authentic participation function as a forum for involving people, creating awareness of issues and solutions and, serving as a basis for a more formal structure that exhibits solidarity, cohesion and unity of action. The characteristics of such meetings include among other things, use of local language, pace and style fitting the people’s way of life, open-endedness and sometimes an apparent lack of structure.

*Workshops, seminars and camps:* While traditionally these activities are used merely as forums for formal knowledge transfer, as instruments of participation they must be characterised by: the absence of domination by the facilitator and the people; the relating of theory to practical, everyday life experiences; the absence of pre-determined answers and theories which aim to offer quick-fix solutions; and the ability of participants to
structure or restructure the workshop’s content and outcomes based on their experience and lessons learnt from the exercise.

**Popular theatre and song:** as opposed to being used to try to persuade people to adopt certain views or undertake particular action, as instrument for participation, these activities should aim at challenging people to look critically at their situation and think about ways of changing or improving it. These activities should be entirely participatory involving people at every stage, for example, in story construction, as actors and stage managers and so on.

**Bible Circles:** ‘Given the widespread involvement of the Christian Church in development at the grassroots level...the emergence of a theology closely associated with participation as an act of liberation, it is not surprising to find Bible study as a means for furthering people’s awareness and involvement’ (p.226).

**Small group Media:** Here, equipment such as video, puppetry, sound slide productions and photographs is used to promote people’s involvement. However, the high levels of capital investment as well as technical skill required for operation limit the use of such equipment. Consequently, its use has tended to be limited to urban areas.

**Public meetings and campaigns:** These are usually useful for provoking interest on specific issues in the general population and for seeking possible people’s involvement in developing solutions. Such meetings and campaigns aim to have a widespread immediate and powerful impact upon a large group of people on a particular issue. Follow-up with other instruments of participation may be needed to sustain their initial impact.

Much of the literature shows that that there is agreement that the concept of participation in development continues to suffer from a wide gap between rhetoric and practice. What is more disturbing is that there is little evidence to suggest that this situation might change for the better. In concluding their book whose title asks the question whether popular participation is a utopia or a necessity, Stiefel and Wolfe (1994:238) state that:

‘Unfortunately, our exploration suggests that there are as many answers as there are collective social actors and that the different interpretations of ‘development’ and ‘participation’ internalised by these actors perpetuate the dialogue of the deaf.’ Further, they also state that: ‘The decade and a half since UNRISD decided to inquire into participation has brought astonishing transformations but has confirmed the dominance of a ‘development’ that seems very doubtfully compatible with the organised efforts of the excluded. The coming decade will bring its own surprises’ (p. 242).

It is not certain as to whether one of the surprises anticipated by Stiefel and Wolfe (ibid.) will be a proliferation of genuine broad-based grass-roots participation. Such uncertainty is based partly on observations such as those made by Bonvin (1995:7) who, noting that
participatory development has been on the development agenda since the 1950s and the 1960s, albeit under the disguise of community development, argues that ‘participatory development is no “quick fix” but a learning process which takes time, resources, imagination and sometimes courage to implement. It requires behavioural change on the part of many actors, calls into question old habits and often reveals conflicts of interest because of the need for power sharing.’

From the literature reviewed it is clear that one of the principle conclusions that can be made is that a major barrier to genuine participation in both relief and development contexts is a lack of convergence of agenda, priorities and values between those who own and control economic and political resources and those that need access to such resources in order to better their lives. For genuine participation to occur those that control resources and hold power must change their attitudes and behaviour and demonstrate the sincerity of their concern for the poor by relinquishing some of their power to the latter. Without this power sharing, poor people will continue to become not merely spectators, but victims of the development and even the disaster relief ‘game’ since, unlike conventional sport, non-participation means becoming worse-off.
VIII. Development Dialogue: What relevance for Emergency Relief?

In tracing the emergence of the need for ensuring the participation of affected populations in disaster relief, it is important to refer briefly to the debate on the differences (or similarities) between relief and development. One dominant view is that there is a real difference between the two. Relief is principally viewed in terms of charity and development as something that has moved beyond that. Others see development and relief as being two ends of a continuum. I would argue that there is scope for a third perspective namely that relief, especially when considering poor countries, is actually part and parcel of the development process. At least two points can be made to support this claim.

First, it can be argued that the social, economic and environmental conditions of certain poor communities already constitute a state of emergency. An emergency does not occur only when a starving child has been featured on BBC or CNN television, or when UN-DHA has declared a situation an emergency. The existing conditions may already be undesirable and what are sometimes known as emergencies refer merely to a change in degree. This poses a troubling question: how can external agents justify their action of determining this threshold? If development and relief are to be truly ‘people-centred’, then only the affected populations have the right and mandate to decide when an emergency begins. Some studies have shown that in some cases people’s lives and livelihoods were saved in large measure due to their own coping mechanisms rather than a particular humanitarian intervention (see Ntata, 1997). In such situations wouldn’t it be more accurate to say that the people were in a better position to determine their own ‘humanitarian’ needs? Obviously, there are those who argue that leaving communities to determine their own needs results in a ‘list of unrealistic demands’. This view comes about largely either because the agency does not have adequate resources to address those needs or because the ‘needs assessment’ has not been done properly.

Secondly, if it is agreed that capacity building and the construction of sustainable livelihoods are major development goals, then relief should be seen as a development activity which ensures the preservation of these under conditions of severe stress. Should large numbers of people who have acquired different skills and ideas die because of a sudden rise in the mortality rate or should community social and economic structures be incapacitated, this would mean that the development process has been curtailed.

Thirdly, there is a tendency among some people to think that relief applies only to the period immediately following a disaster. Such are the people who argue that the relief programme in south Sudan has moved to the development phase because it has now lasted more than ten years. However, this view ignores the important fact that any situation requiring relief intervention will have several stages. There is what is commonly referred to as ‘the emergency phase’, a ‘rehabilitation phase’ and a ‘post-rehabilitation’ phase. Activities and approaches may vary according to these stages. This consideration for example, is a criticism of the view that participation and consultation are difficult in relief programmes because of time constraints. The rehabilitation and Post-rehabilitation
phases of the programme need not necessarily be so urgent as not to present opportunities for participation and consultation. Moreover, it has been shown that it is possible to do consultation and promote participation even in the emergency phase of the relief programme.

In examining the relevance of development dialogue for emergency relief the relief-development continuum appears to be the inevitable starting point. The idea of the ‘relief-development continuum’ is a subject for increasing attention and debate the details of which it is not necessary to dig into presently. But it is generally accepted that a well-implemented relief programme might pave the way for more successful development programmes. Stated another way, a poorly implemented relief programme could put any forthcoming development efforts in jeopardy. Thus: ‘For instance, the relief products could depreciate the local market and make the beneficiaries dependent on the external assistance. In order to avoid this, the relief operation needs to find distribution mechanisms which are appropriate to local culture and society, involve local people in administration and organisation, and are gender-sensitive’ (Kimura, 1996:56). On the other hand, a successful development programme might help to better relief. For example, with respect to participation, a successful participatory development project/programme might have strengthened community structures and processes of representation allowing it to cope better with the distribution of relief materials. In addition, a good development programme can in fact be seen partly as disaster mitigation in so far as it addresses issues that prevent a disaster from exerting maximum impact.

At the conceptual level the basic features of relief and development are essentially the same. Thus, although it is generally the case that relief is short term and development, long-term in nature, both tend to involve outside intervention and an interface between indigenous populations and foreigners. Both start from a position of power imbalance where a disproportionate amount of power rests in the hands of those with resources at their disposal, in this case the foreigners. Little wonder then that most of the same issues that arise with regard to development are also true for relief. For example, if we recall Harrell-Bond’s (1986) argument regarding the failures of relief, she identifies the attitude of superiority of moral virtue as the key factor. In addition, many of the politics of participation encountered in development contexts also feature in emergency relief. The mistrust that exists between donors and governments in the development context is also replicated in relief. In the latter, the problem of mistrust has been a continuing cause of lack of agreement of the numbers affected by a disaster and in need of assistance. Donors frequently dispute figures generated by host governments or other local counterpart organisations on the basis of fears that such numbers would have been inflated for ulterior motives. Moreover, some observers have held the view that in many relief programmes, donors only pay serious attention to immediate relief needs but show considerable lack of enthusiasm with rehabilitation and preventive measures. This reluctance only leads to keeping poor governments in a perpetual position of dependence on donors. In the case of the 1998 relief programme in South Sudan, donors and other aid agencies disputed reports prepared by a local organisation, denying the very existence of famine. They only later agreed with that report only after CNN had featured a story
depicting the extent of the famine. This led some to raise questions as to the role of the affected population in arriving at the very assessment of whether a famine exists or not.

There is also much rhetoric in relief about participation, especially on the part of donors and international NGOs that does not match the level of action observed in the field. The policy documents as well as programme and project documents of aid agencies contain statements indicating how committed they are to participation. However, most such statements are very general in nature failing to demonstrate exactly the ways in which the agencies will ensure implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the participatory process itself. Indeed, most of their evaluations are more about whether the programme measured up to its quantitative targets than about the overall qualitative effect on the recipient communities. More seriously, there is frequently no input of the recipient population in such evaluations. Also, as in development, host governments themselves may not actively promote participation in relief for fear of losing control, sometimes related to the political agenda. Indeed politics, rather than corruption, may sometimes lie at the very heart of the temptation by governments to ensure that the relief programme benefits as many people as possible so that they can be seen to be providing equitable welfare.

However, much as there is much similarity on the conceptual level there is still a great deal of uncertainty at the methodological level. Specifically, doubts exist as to whether participatory methods used successfully in the development context can and should be used in relief. For example, Apthorpe and Atkinson (1999) note that some forums have found that participation in relief may not happen more often because it is ‘regarded as time-consuming in time-pressured contexts and culture, threatens agency control, is difficult to do in conflict situations, (with what guidance is available having often) been developed in relation to development programmes in stable contexts, (and as a rule is not required by) donors (and implementing agencies) who remain preoccupied with upward accountability’ (ALNAP minutes, Quoted in Apthorpe and Atkinson, 1999:9). Yet so far, little has been done by way of systematic assessment of various methodologies in emergency to see what works and what doesn’t. For example, it may be the case that some of the concerns about participatory methodology may apply more strongly to an emergency complex rather than a slow onset natural disaster, or to a therapeutic feeding programme rather than a general ration or a seeds and tools distribution programme. Thus clearly, the global study on participation should be regarded as an important step towards addressing this problem.

In any case, questions of methodological compatibility between development and emergency relief would have more justification if participation in development had attained broad-based implementation. The fact that this has not been the case and perhaps more importantly, the fact that the forecast for this to happen is bleak, means that perhaps there is need to focus equally strongly on the politics of participation as on its methodological concerns. Clearly, the emerging methodologies reviewed in this chapter will not achieve much without the political will to change attitudes, behaviour and to share power. On the other hand, efforts at developing methodologies need to continue to prevent methodological inadequacy from becoming a scapegoat to genuine participation while the real barriers lie else where.
IX. Some empirical examples of participation in emergencies

An evaluation of NGO responses to Hurricane Mitch noted that:

‘DEC funded projects generally succeeded in involving beneficiaries closely in the implementation of projects and, to some extent, their management. The widespread use of self-construction techniques in re-building social infrastructure demonstrated DEC agencies’ recognition of the importance of ‘sweat equity’ in relief interventions…However, due to time constraints most of the projects did not undertake to a complete training programme, and many counterparts mentioned the inflexibility of funding to support training activities’ (Grunewald, de Geoffroy and Lister, 2000: 21).

However, the evaluation also note that:

‘although agencies involved beneficiaries in the actual implementation of projects, it was not common for their views to be elicited before projects were implemented’ (p.21)

Similarly, an independent evaluation of the DEC India earthquake appeal in 2001 noted that in the large majority of interventions (59%), participation was felt to be insufficient. In some interventions participation happened only minimally in the form of consultations with leaders only, or with committee members and community representatives only. In many cases communities are reported to have expressed the view that even when consulted, their views were not incorporated into the programme, thus, vindicating the observation by many commentators that agencies sometimes use participation as a cosmetic aspect of interventions. Participation is done so that the agencies paper work looks good. While some agencies gave excuses that failure to incorporate the views of affected communities resulted from funding limitations and requests that were beyond agency mandates, the prevailing view was that agencies had designed programmes prior to discussions with communities. Hence, it was not surprising that communities did not accept some projects. For example, there were widespread complaints that clothes provided as part of the relief package were not appropriate as well as housing, which failed to take into account social-cultural aspects of traditional settlement patterns. Worse still, communities felt that participation in interventions was only on the terms of the agencies, happening only when it was to their benefit, for example, in order to reduce costs or to provide community labour.

In contrast to the experiences of DEC agencies, my own study, which was part of a research degree, of how the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), a grassroots member-based women’s trade union, responded to the earthquake disaster shows that vulnerable women and affected people were at the forefront of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the relief programme. Even the DEC evaluation report noted that as regards the problems of lack of adequate participation levels, SEWA managed programmes were an exception.

Key among the factors that enabled communities to participate fully in the relief programme was the absence of outside interference in planning and implementation. Through its grassroots structures, including various self-created village-based committees SEWA members were able to direct the course of interventions to address their needs not
only swiftly, but also in a culturally appropriate manner. For example, SEWA did not experience the rejection of housing structures because the whole housing programme, from design to building, was owner driven. Furthermore, SEWA’s numerous committees, which offer women an opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process were complimented by other processes aimed at involving the wider community in the decision-making process. SEWA’s district association field teams underwent orientation programmes to conduct sandesh yatras in the villages. Sandesh yatras are meetings aimed at orienting villagers on scientific and safe building standards. Gram sabhas followed the sandesh yatras in each of the villages. SEWA village-based organisers mobilised all village members to participate in the gram sabhas. The participation of SEWA members in the gram sabha represents one front where SEWA interfaced with village government. Gram sabhas are traditional meetings of all adult members of the community.

Participation in these meetings was important because it was in the gram sabha that the main issues were discussed including: the entire work plan and methodology to be followed in the reconstruction plan; the need for total involvement and integrated village planning; the identification of possible aspects and areas for the re-use of debris; the formulation of the village committee with at least 50% women and agreement on the representative basis of this committee; the restoration of the heritage monuments and the preservation of the village heritage; the preparation by the whole village of the village plan to integrate housing reconstruction, natural resource management and livelihood. Here the village would also plan the revival of wastelands, development of fodder farms, reviving and maintaining water resources, village roads and community and demonstration centres; the preparation of the time plans for the different stages of implementation namely: the identification phase, removal of debris, assessment of water availability, identification of local masons and their rates, and the procurement of construction materials; the finalisation of village plans, preparation of cost estimates and discussion of the type of facilitation needed to get these plans and cost estimates approved by the government as well as facilitation needed during the procurement of construction materials; selection of masons to be trained by the Mahila Housing Trust.

What emerged from SEWA’s intervention strategy was that allowing affected communities to be in the forefront of planning and implementation enabled them to plan integrated interventions that took into account the how various livelihood activities were related to each other and how one could be implemented so that it fostered the other. In the end, the implementation of the relief programme itself provided the basis for rehabilitation work and sustainability of livelihood strategies. This is in contrast to programme whose planning and implementation is dominated by outside agencies. In most of such cases, agencies tend to specialise in one or few activities in line their interests, expertise and sometimes funding. The impact of implementing such activities on other livelihood processes is rarely assessed. The reality of affected populations is that they do not see their livelihood needs in terms of a particular single activity or service, or a set of independent services, which appears to be they way in which agencies see them. Affected people see their livelihood needs as an interwoven set of relationships that exist in changing geographical, environmental, political and social contexts. Thus any planning
by them seeks to strike a balance that takes into account these factors. Foreigners, given their limited knowledge of these factors and the short periods they normally spend in affected communities, are ill placed to see interventions in this complex and wholesome way.

Little wonder then that most documented cases of successful grassroots participation in development or disaster relief contexts have tended to be those in which foreign aid agencies have merely played a supportive role in terms of improving access to resources and providing training and education to enhance the capacities of locally-based structures. This is the reason why there are now increasing calls in the development and disaster relief fields for relationships of partnerships with existing local structures, rather than those of patronage that we have witnessed, and are still witnessing in many interventions.

Oxfam has been running an action research programme in Sri Lanka called Listening To the Displaced (LTD). The aim of this research programme is to provide a channel through which the national authorities and the international community can hear the voices of displaced people in northern Sri Lanka (Demusz, 2000). Demusz asserts that this research project provides a ‘useful methodology for listening to the people before planning a response that will be relevant to their needs…A listening project could be used by relief agencies to help them to engage with any population undergoing change resulting from conflict, natural disaster, or economic disaster, including communities who have not had to move, such as host communities or conflict affected communities in situ’ (p.7).

While using familiar tools such as semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the emphasis of the listening programme is on developing a methodology that is responsive to changing circumstances and in incorporating lessons learnt from previous exercises. The methodology attempts to use the tools in such a way as to enable affected people to take the lead in determining the direction of discussions on what and how programmes should be implemented.

This approach should in fact lie at the heart of any attempt to foster the participation of people affected by disasters. Methodological tools should not be used in a checklist fashion. They should be regarded as merely guiding principles, which should always be adjusted according to specific situations in a way that can bring maximum benefits to the affected.

The Oxfam Ikaf/Ivempi refugee settlement programme in northern Uganda is one of the few well-documented humanitarian programmes with regard to how attempts were made to enable the affected people to take a greater and significant role in the running of the programme (Payne, 1998). The programme aimed at enhancing the capacities of refugees to manage their own community by devising systems of delivery that strengthened, rather than undermined informal and indigenous structures. The programme faced many problems but what is useful in the account is the analysis of how these problems were
generated and the lessons that were drawn out for each stage of implementation such as registration, representation and community-based food distribution, what adjustments were made and suggestions of what could have been tried to improve some of the processes. Again, the major lesson appears to be that agencies should be willing to work from ideas, values, concerns and priorities that communities have and attempt to incorporate these into their own operational procedures. For example with regard to registration of refugees, one of the main problems resulted from registering individuals apart from their close kin relations who could have provided some of the needed social support. In some cases registration and subsequent resettlement separated people from their clan and ethnic ties, creating problems of integration. As Payne (1998:58-59) observes:

‘The disregard for tribal ties did little to help build social networks. Refugees maintained links that crossed the imposed boundaries of points. The influence of some chiefs extended right across the settlement, and over the heads of Point leaders. When insecurity struck, people were quick to regroup on ethnic lines. The representative structures set up in Ikafe might have more effect had communities been based on clans or tribes. Having mixed communities created barriers to restoring cultural practices… and inevitably affected the degree to which refugees responded to self-help initiatives’.

Throughout Payne’s account, it is clear that many problems faced related to the fact that, even though consultation took place in some instances, Oxfam rather than the communities themselves had initiated processes. Hence, ‘despite the months of consultation, the refugees in Ikafe never took ownership of the communities, and most structures collapsed as soon as refugees were displaced, to be replaced by the traditional tribal systems’ (p. 62).

The key issue seems to be that refugee communities were not part and parcel of the original planning process. However, it is important to also note that in many cases Oxfam was able to incorporate lessons learnt from the problems that were being faced to improve the programme. Thus flexibility became a key word in creating structures that could represent the vulnerable.

This means that agencies need to pay particular attention to the recruitment of staff that are receptive to and capable of understanding community processes. A large part of problems faced seemed to relate to the inability of inexperienced staff to understand and incorporate the complex network of social relations that included local chiefs, clan heads, different ethnic groups, and various organisational and power structures that were created for the purposes of the refugee settlement programme.

The Save the Children Fund (UK) reports of a 1998/99 programme in Tanzania where the management of the distribution of food aid was successfully run by communities.

‘Communities themselves are given the power to make decisions on who among them most needs to receive food aid and the communities then manage the actual distribution of the food. This method of food distribution ensures that the best local
information from inside the village community is used to decide who most needs the available food. A specially elected village committee, accountable to the entire village community, is given responsibility to establish criteria to select which households need to be included and which can be excluded. This committee also manages the distribution of the food, with the village government watching over the process and reporting any problems’ (SCF, nodate).

The community managed distribution process consists of a series of simple steps that enable the entire community to become involved and represented in the decision-making process as regards the distribution of food. Key among the activities carried out by agency staff are village public meetings where a Village Committee, with balanced representation in terms of gender, is chosen to run the distribution, including the development of criteria, ratified by the village public meeting, for selecting beneficiaries and the registration of beneficiaries based on the agreed criteria using house to house visits. After registration, registration lists are again presented to the village public meeting for confirmation or rejection. The Village Committee is also responsible for making arrangements for receiving food from the aid agency, storing it and the actual management of distribution to households. After distribution, a final public review meeting is held at which the Village Committee gives an end-of-distribution report. Monitoring surveys by agency staff are part and parcel of the whole food distribution process. Agency staff also attend the public meetings in partly a monitoring, partly a facilitating role. The agency also ensures that the community is fully aware of the quantities of food available, likely delivery times and all relevant information regarding the food aid. Through this methodology, SCF asserts that:

‘It is worth noting that Iramba district government in Singida successfully applied by itself in March 1999 the same community managed methodology to target the poorest 20% of the population in each of 18 villages - the majority populations of these 18 villages agreed to restrict a very limited supply of food aid to giving a meaningful ration to a 20% minority of households determined by criteria to be those most in need. This last example from Iramba demonstrates that if given the full information, communities can make and implement responsible and caring decisions to ensure meaningful use of whatever level of aid is available…Experience has shown that the community managed approach to food distribution is (i) significantly more effective in meeting food aid objectives, i.e. the most needy people get the food as the targeting is based on better information, and (ii) cheaper than more traditional approaches which have used large numbers of agency or government personnel to manage the physical distribution and which also may unnecessarily provide 100% coverage of the population. Any initial costs associated with agency or government staff facilitating at public meetings are more than balanced by later cost savings in logistics as management of the actual food distribution is taken on by the elected village committees’ (SCF no date:).

SCF’s experience in this programme in Tanzania contradicts the usually unwarranted belief by many aid workers that individuals in affected communities are essentially untrustworthy bent on abusing food aid to benefit themselves and not the vulnerable. Instead, it points to the value of broad-based participation in improving accountability not only to the beneficiaries but also to the aid agency.
Attention is also increasingly being given to the participatory evaluation of relief programmes. For example, a UNHCR team evaluating a refugee programme in Delhi claims to have seen its role in terms of acting as facilitators bringing together the opinions of the refugees and the position statements of OCM and partners about the assistance and the services, working as independent analysts by making its own observations in the field, and by studying documents and consulting people. The team claims that this approach differed distinctively from the conventional method of measuring impacts of programmes and projects which is usually dominated by external 'neutral experts'. (UNHCR, 2002)

The evaluation team gives the following illustration of the differences between the conventional and the participatory method:

### Differences between Conventional Evaluation and Participatory Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional</th>
<th>Participatory</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External experts</td>
<td>Community people, project staff, facilitator(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predetermined indicators of success, principally cost and production outputs</td>
<td>People identify their own indicators of success which may include production outputs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on ‘scientific objectivity’; distancing of evaluators from evaluated; uniform and complex procedures; remote, limited access to results</td>
<td>Self-evaluation; simple methods adapted to local culture; open, immediate sharing of results through local involvement in evaluation process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually upon completion of activity; sometimes also mid-term</td>
<td>Merging of monitoring and evaluation; hence frequent small-scale evaluations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability, usually summing up to determine if funding continues</td>
<td>To empower local people to initiate, control and take corrective action</td>
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In concluding, it is important to reiterate that participation is an evolving rather than rigid concept changing according to people’s circumstances, values, goals and priorities. It can also serve different purposes. Based on an analysis of some of empirical examples of participation, Mary Anderson, at a USAID Participation Forum in 1995 (USAID, 2002), made a good summary of the common themes that underlie good practice in participation: first she notes that the promotion of participation depends on attitude more than asset of events, arising from a deep respect for the people who are already in the setting and from recognising that local people have capacities and are trying to cope; second, participation should fit into what is already happening rather than being based on an outsiders analysis of what is needed; third, a good approach to participation must link what is existed before the crisis with what would remain after the crisis. This means working in a way that strengthens peoples coping capacities and ensuring that social systems are not left prone to disintegration; fourth, people’s awareness of their own efficacy must be increased, so that affected people are left with a filling that their efforts were valued and given due recognition. Finally, while participation may pose dangers in situations of internal conflict, agencies need to look harder for options since in all communities there are people who do not support the conflict and can be supported to set up alternative systems for peace building.

This discussion makes it clear that participation is a very costly exercise for aid workers. Its price comprises commitment, investment of human energy and resources and the willingness to abandon the self-determined superiority of moral and technical virtue of aid workers. Participation involves making conscious efforts to develop tools and ability to listen to the affected population. Such tools need not necessarily fall within the realms of formal scientific inquiry but may incorporate traditional forms of communication and the tools that local people already use to organise. Efforts to incorporate the attributes advocated above should be reflected in the various operational procedures of aid agencies including recruitment and employment procedures, reporting procedures, monitoring and supervision of staff, and accountability processes and, above all, flexibility.

It also seems that the time is ripe for donors to reassess their accountability requirements and priorities in order to change ‘upward accountability’ from being a bottleneck to agencies that might be committed to participation. For both donors and aid agencies, the key to increasing the participation of the affected population lies in their refraining from developing blueprints for planning, implementation and evaluation based on their own perceived technical competence or superior value judgements. They need to see affected populations as actors with their own sets of values, social and technical knowledge that are in equilibrium with their environments and livelihoods. Aid agencies also need to build on the fact that many poor communities already have their own notions of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian assistance is not only that which comes from the international organisations of the West. This is a call for partnerships not patronage, for building on the existing processes and structures, not replacing them, and for flexibility not rigidity. This call echoes not only the many other voices of practitioners and researchers but also it also the silent voices of people affected by disasters themselves.
However, as with any call, its real significance lies in the willingness of those being called to respond. So far the generation of this willingness has proved difficult. We cannot negate current efforts to make humanitarian assistance more appropriate and aid agencies more accountable to the people they assist. It is be probably true that certain aspects of humanitarian programming will benefit from these efforts in various degrees depending on the commitment of various agencies. Therefore, such efforts must continue and more research, of the type being undertaken by the ALNAP global study, should still be devoted to them. Nevertheless, far reaching changes with regard to the participation of people affected by disasters in emergency relief programmes can only be achieved through the willingness of all stakeholders including, donors, aid agencies, host governments, local institutions abandon the spirit of superiority and the temptation to let this feeling lead them to want to plan things for others and to work together to strengthen grassroots structures through which the poor can act and find forms of representation. The challenge is to find ways of generating this interest, on a stage where policing the actors is both impossible and inappropriate.
References


Save the Children Fund (UK) (nodate) Recommended Guidelines for Implementation of Community Managed Targeting and Distribution of Food Aid in Tanzania


