

THE RHETORIC OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION: NGOS' DISCOURSES AND
DELIBERATIVE PRACTICES WITH COMMUNITIES IN ETHIOPIA

by

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This dissertation interrogates “community participation” as an international, national, and local discourse and diagnoses the consequences of this discourse for the people living in rural Ethiopia. The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, I critically investigate “community participation” discourses of two purposely selected intergovernmental donors (the UN and the World Bank) and two international NGOs working in Ethiopia, namely Oxfam Great Britain and World Vision. Second, I study grassroots interactions between NGO staffs and the Ethiopian communities they serve. I conducted in-depth interviews with sixty-four members of communities, NGO staff and government officials to understand their experiences and local practices of public deliberation. Additionally, I observed nine NGO-community joint meetings on development issues.

Findings of the study suggest different parties have different reasons for embracing "community participation." Adopting a postcolonial lens and employing ideographic criticism helped me illuminate how the rhetoric of "community participation" warrants Western organizations to do development in ways that advance their interests

while still appearing to promote grassroots democracy. Findings of the study suggest that the communities I studied appear to be the least influential group, denied a real chance of discussing their own situations and influencing decisions. The results are discussed in terms of practical implications for dealing with multiple stakeholders and conducting grassroots deliberations that empower participants and seek collaborative solutions for development challenges. The study also has theoretical implications for communication-based theorization of participation, voice, empowerment and grassroots democracy.

PREVIEW

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DEDICATION

To my loving and incredibly supportive wife Elleni Melles. I could not have done it without your unconditional support, care and prayers for me. You have sacrificed a lot to support my study and provide for us.

In memory of my mother Wosene Tsegaye. You taught me to never give up and keep going even when the going gets tougher.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Located in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia is a country with a glorious history and ancient civilization. Inhabited by about eighty ethnic groups with distinct languages, my country is a mosaic of diverse cultures. We, Ethiopians, relish the fact that we are the only African nation that remained independent, after successfully defending the country against a modern Italian colonial army with just traditional weapons. As much as we celebrate our independence and cultural values, we acknowledge that our country is among the poorest nations in the world on almost all measures of economic progress.

Visiting my place of birth in 1993, 18 years after my family moved out, I was struck by the level of poverty I saw. I was only five when we left that very small community in the western part of the country. I was depressed to see the place had no electricity, running water, telephone service or a properly paved road. The "house" I was born in had gotten so old that it could have come down had it not been for the three big tree branches that supported it, extending from the outside of the wall to the ground. I wondered what life in my community was like around the time I was born. I wondered when it was going to improve. For the first time, I realized my life in the capital city was not that bad. Like many other Ethiopian children, I never had a toy or a proper ball. I loved soccer. The most common soccer "balls" we had as kids were old socks stuffed with rags or cotton. I never went to a swimming pool before I graduated from college. When I was a teenager, my first swimming "lesson" was offered to me by older kids in a polluted river, about a mile away from where I lived. I remember two kids from my neighborhood drown in that river trying to learn to swim by themselves. I did not have a bike throughout my childhood. I had no clue how ice cream tasted until my first year in

college. My mom struggled to provide us with basic food and clothing. But I still preferred to think we were a “middle-class” family, whatever that was supposed to mean. It probably was because I saw far worse cases of poverty than my family experienced.

There came another moment that led me to see real poverty. In 1998, I joined a major aid organization as a communication officer. My job involved writing "need stories," which were to be sent to the West, edited, and used as fundraising materials. I travelled deep in rural villages to find compelling stories. I remember weeping and getting depressed after listening to stories of people in abject poverty. I also handled the visits of several high profile donors (including American philanthropists like Howard Buffet and Hollywood actors Tim Reid and Blair Underwood). I have stood right by their side when some of these visitors cried like babies. I have seen famine-stricken children die a few minutes after I took their pictures.

I have witnessed multi-million dollar community development projects that failed to bear much fruit because we, the aid workers, got the strategies wrong. The communication between us and the communities we served were too top-down. In my days in the field, the protocol of communication was, for the most part, from center to periphery. Experts who came from out of the community tried to introduce innovations without little discussion with the communities. Almost all the big decisions were made at the headquarters or field offices of the NGOs.

I know what poverty is like. I can easily connect with discussions dealing with poverty and development. That is why the topic of this dissertation is so close to my heart. Eight out of every ten of my country's citizens make their living out of subsistence agriculture. The literacy rate stands at 43% (US State Department, 2011). Health facilities

are limited in number and capacity. Seventy-seven children die out of every 1,000 live births before reaching the age of five (US State Department, 2011). According to UNDP, Ethiopia's Human Development Index¹ for the year 2011 stands at a 0.363—in the low human development category—positioning the country at 174 out of 187 countries and territories (UNDP, 2011).

Famine has been a recurrent phenomenon in Ethiopia. Since 1973, the country has endured seven national droughts, though none has caused a famine as severe as the one 25 years ago (Oxfam, 2009). According to Oxfam GB, the 1984-1985 famine was so catastrophic that it killed about a million people. By late 1984, the suffering became sufficiently dramatic to attract the attention of Western mass media (Cutler, 1991). What “blew the story open” was a film shot by Mohamed Amin and narrated by Michael Buerk (Harrison & Palmer, 1986, p. 110). In October 1984, this Visnews film was shown first on BBC TV News on the 23rd and 24th of October and then around the world (Harrison & Palmer, 1986). The impact of the television coverage was extraordinary, “one of the rarest in the history of television” (Cutler, 1991, p.176). The shocking pictures “shattered the conscience of the world” (ICIHI, p. 9). Ethiopia became best known for famine (Gill, 2010). It became “the face of hunger,” “the iconic poor country” in the world (Gill, p. 2).

The NGO sector started actively engaging in Ethiopia in the early 1970s as a result of the devastating famine in the northern part of the country (Rahmato, Bantirgu & Endeshaw, 2010). Following the famines of 1973 and 1984, the number of NGOs increased. Later on with the change in government in 1990, a more conducive

¹ According to UNDP (2011) Human Development Index (HDI) is a summary measure for assessing long-term progress in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living.

environment was established that further encouraged the growth of NGOs in Ethiopia. According to Rahmato et al., as of 2007, 1,976 NGOs, of which 234 NGOs (12%) were International, were operating in Ethiopia. These scholars argue that the Ethiopian NGO community is not as developed in terms of diversity in sectors engagement, size and capacity compared to many other African countries.

NGOs in Ethiopia began by providing relief services, which lasted for a long time. With an improvement in the situation after the famine, the focus of NGOs shifted towards helping drought-stricken people get back to normal life. This was then gradually followed by NGOs involvement in economic development programs. Unlike the periods of humanitarian assistance, where funding was raised from individuals through international campaigns, these long-term development programs required NGOs to establish themselves in communities and seek funding from Western donors. In the 1980s, there was an exponential growth of Western NGOs operating in Africa. The NGOs started to compete for funding. This required writing proposals that addressed issues important to donors. One of the issues that emerged at the time was the need for engaging communities in the development decision-making process. Thus, out of these circumstances the rhetoric of “community participation” emerged.

The purpose of this dissertation is to interrogate “community participation” both as an international, national, and local discourse and to attempt to understand the consequences of this discourse for the people living in rural Ethiopia. My analysis proceeds in two steps. First, I critically investigate the “community participation” discourses of two purposely selected intergovernmental donors (The UN and the World Bank) and two international NGOs working in Ethiopia, namely Oxfam Great Britain

(Oxfam GB) and World Vision. Second, I study grassroots interactions between NGO staffs and the Ethiopian communities they serve. In doing so, I investigate whether the rhetoric in the global public sphere has influenced "community participation" and deliberative practices on the ground.

I am uniquely well suited to carry out this project. I speak fluently the two languages spoken in Ethiopia in my research communities—Afaan Oromo and Amharic. I worked for five years as a communication officer for a major NGO working for Ethiopian economic development. I understand the nuances of the NGO-community interactions.

I am a pro-poor, social change-oriented communication scholar. I am passionate about rural community development and the initiatives aimed at making their lives better. I have a deep desire to see the poor have a voice on issues that matter to them. My identification with the poor and the advocate role I choose to assume allows me to make arguments that favor change of the status quo (Creswell, 2007; Hess, 2011). Creswell argues that the basic tenet of the advocacy worldview is that “research should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers’ lives” (p. 21). Similarly, Hess (2011) argues that “criticism becomes enacted as advocacy” through a participatory approach allows the possibility of standing alongside those who seek changes to status quo conditions. By its very nature critical rhetorical study is emancipatory.

The Rhetoric of "Community Participation" as an Area of Inquiry

The participation of citizens in decision-making processes has gained rhetorical popularity in the last three decades. Since the 1980s, it is rare to find a development

program that does not refer to participation (Angeles, 2005). The Google Ngram Viewer² shows constantly increasing use of the phrase “participatory development” between the years 1970 and 2000 (see appendix A). Cornwall and Brock (2005) argue that “participation” (along with “poverty reduction” and “empowerment”) has gained considerable purchase in recent years in the language of mainstream development.

Participation has become a prominent idea in social change discourses since many people are, at least in public, for democracy (Fischer, 2000; Gough et al., 2003; White, 1999). It is not possible to embrace democracy and reject the idea of engaging different actors in deliberations because democracy requires broadly based participation in a deliberative process to come up with “laws and policies that are more inclusive and more just than measures enacted by monarchs or powerful elites” (Hauser, 1999, p. 5).

There is a widely held view that grassroots community development initiatives must become democratic by engaging citizens in deliberations. Citizens who get truly involved in the decision-making aspects of development projects not only develop a sense of dignity and self-sufficiency but also become empowered in the process of deliberations. They will build capacities to deliberate over challenges they may face in the future. The participation of community members in affairs that affect their lives is a fundamental aspect of grassroots democracy and serves as a check and balance mechanism. Empowered community members will be in a better position to hold other development actors accountable.

² The Google Ngram Viewer is a phrase-usage graphing tool which charts the yearly count of selected n-grams (letter combinations), words, or phrases, as found in over 5.2 million books digitized by Google Inc. (up to 2008). The words or phrases (or ngrams) are matched by case sensitive spelling, comparing exact uppercase letters, and plotted on the graph if found in 40 or more books.¹ The Ngram tool was released in mid-December 2010

Participatory development was introduced as an alternative to the previously held notion that the mission of donor agencies was to “*deliver* development to poor countries” (Long, 2001, p.2). In the decades following World War II, international development was mainly a donor-driven and outsider-led venture (Cooks & Kothari, 2001). The rapid adoption of participation by international agencies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, according to Long (2001), “signified a major shift in development thinking” (p. 2).

In developing countries like Ethiopia, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are one group of players that are active in international development efforts to improve the welfare of poor people. They play increasingly important roles in fomenting democracy and solidarity within the global system (Dempsey, 2009; Werker & Ahmed, 2008). Especially in Africa, non-government organizations, associations and networks are considered a beacon of hope for democracy (Dempsey, 2009; Orvis, 2003). NGOs claim to provide venues for discourses unregulated by the state (Hauser, 1999). Funding agencies like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have high expectations for NGOs. They see NGOs as “promoters of democracy” (Lugar, 2006, p. v). They channel a huge amount of resources every year through NGOs partly because they believe grassroots based non-government organizations would make a better use of limited resources.

Given their active involvement in the international development arena, NGOs have created and circulated the discourses of community participation. As a result of these discourses, they have been embraced and promoted by international development agencies like the World Bank and by critics of top-down development (Fisher, 1997).

Despite the rhetoric, “genuine participation... is not in everyone’s interest” (Servaes, 1996, p. 23). White (1999) contends that the reality of participation is often at considerable variance from the rhetoric. This might be part of the reason why there are continued debates regarding how and to what extent communities should be involved in deliberations. There are people who think citizens do not have enough knowledge to participate meaningfully in policy decisions (Dempsey, 2009). Others claim it is difficult to legitimately deny citizens a place at the decision-making table despite their level of knowledge (Fischer, 2000). As a result, Fischer notes, many social scientists and politicians see citizen participation as caught in a dilemma between impossibility versus inevitability.

Streeten (1997) argues that NGOs usually use “participation” more “as a slogan than a thought-out strategy” (p. 193). Similarly, Dempsey (2009) contends that the assumption that the democratic culture may be found within civic society organizations does not hold true. She argues that these organizations are structured by a complex set of economic relationships and social and material inequalities. Dempsey also asserts that these inequalities contribute to the differential ability of groups and hence their roles in the global public sphere. In the process of attempting to improve a community’s circumstances, Dempsey (2009) posits that NGOs may privilege a certain kind of knowledge and eventually prevent these very citizens from speaking on their own behalf. So, it is important to discover how far NGOs that swear by democracy and citizen participation have gone in practice toward fulfilling the mission of “giving voice to the people” (Lugar, 2006, p. 1). Whether NGOs have been able to create amateur-friendly deliberative spaces or preferred to maintain an expert-dominated environment is an issue

worth examining. Some NGOs' current practices of limiting "community participation" to the involvement of rural communities in the provision of cheap manual labor might be the result of these inherent contradictions. There are also apparent tensions between the requirements of bracketing differences between participants, on the one hand, and maintaining the values and preconceived missions of NGOs, on the other hand.

Grassroots deliberative processes and relationships between communities and development agents, specifically as related to their differing positions of power, have been relatively unexplored (Gough et al., 2003; UNDP, 2009). The power differential takes a different level when NGOs based in the West are met with indigenous forms of organizing and community structures in Ethiopia. Thus, in this study, I trace the influence of the global discourse of participation to grassroots situations. I try to achieve this by analyzing discourses of selected international NGOs operating in rural Ethiopia, on the one hand, and learning the reactions of communities who are supposed to benefit from NGO-initiated programs, on the other hand. Whereas it is possible to study "community participation" by foregrounding its political, economic, social, or psychological aspects, this study is centered on its communication aspects. More specifically, I am interested in the rhetorical strategies organizations use to frame their messages of "community participation" and the deliberative processes agents of development follow in making collaborative decisions.

"Community Participation" as a Communication Problematic

Chambers (2005) argues that participation can be analyzed mainly on two fronts—communication and resources. However, many writers do not see the communicative side of the participatory development equation. Exceptions to this are