+ GEOGRAPHICA
HELVETICA +

Expanding spaces of participation: insights from an infrastructural project in rural Nepal

O. Cima

Department of Geosciences, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland

Correspondence to: O. Cima (ottavia.cima@unifr.ch)

Abstract. The spread of participatory development worldwide has multiplied opportunities for local population to engage in paid and unpaid development activities. However, scholars have pointed out that participatory approaches bear the risk of strengthening unequal social structures, despite their emphasis on democratisation and inclusion. This paper investigates the case of a Swiss-funded infrastructural project in rural Nepal, analysing the role of participatory spaces in the dynamics of development resource capture. The empirical material collected suggests that, although participatory development has created more opportunities for social mobility, these opportunities are not necessarily open to everyone. In the case studied, the transformational potential of participation is only partially fulfilled.

1 Introduction

Participatory approaches in the implementation of development projects have become mainstream in the last 30 years. As a consequence, opportunities for local people to engage in development activities have increased exponentially worldwide. The newly created spaces for participation are considered to bear potential for empowerment and social mobility (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007a). However, scholars are cautious in praising participatory approaches, because, on the one hand, resources mobilised by participatory spaces are exposed to "elite capture" (Olivier de Sardan, 2005:166–184), which strengthens elites instead of empowering marginalised people (see Cook and Kothari, 2001). On the other, the implementation of participation is often reduced to a mere technical issue, downplaying its political meanings (see Korf, 2010).

In this paper I analyse a Swiss-funded development project in two villages of southern and central Nepal, in order to investigate the implications of expanding participatory spaces on the process of resource capture, especially for the marginalised population. In particular, I focus on unpaid engagement in development activities as a specific form of participation, and I will argue how this engagement can be used as a strategy to access resources and contribute to social mobility. My study indicates that binary social categorisations

are reproduced within participatory spaces: this has an influence on both local power relations and the possibilities of social mobility through participation. The empirical material suggests that, although recent approaches to development have created more opportunities for social mobility, these opportunities are not necessarily open to everyone; therefore, it also points out that the transformational potential of participation is only partially fulfilled in the case studied.

The first part of the paper presents its analytical framework focusing on the concepts of development capture and brokerage, engaging the academic debate on participation; then it introduces the specific discussions on local development in Nepal. The following sections illustrate in detail the case study by means of three examples of participatory spaces, dwelling in particular on social categorisations. In conclusion, the paper proposes a discussion on the potential of participation for social mobility in the studied communities.

2 Conceptualising development intervention: spaces for negotiation, spaces for participation

The complex set of institutions, actors, flows and practices linked to development – the "development apparatus" (Pigg, 1992) – offers a wide spectrum of resources ranging from material (e.g. salaries of development workers or infrastruc-

tural outputs of a project) to political and symbolic ones (e.g. prestige and authority).[1] Development can be conceptualised as an arena, meaning a socially constructed and bounded field, or space, within which actors negotiate, and struggle for, such resources (Olivier de Sardan, 2005:185–197; also Long, 2001:58–61). Among actors of the development arena, so-called "development brokers" play a central role as intermediaries between the local community and the international level, acting as translators between the different logics, rationalities and languages (see Bierschenk et al., 2002; Olivier de Sardan, 2005:166–184; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; see also Fujikura, 2013 and Elmer, 2014 for Nepal). Brokers put in place specific strategies to capture the material and non-material resources offered by the development apparatus: in particular, their ability consists in mobilising "strategic contacts" in order to gain access to material resources (Bierschenk et al., 2002:15–16, drawing on Boissevain, 1974:158). While for Lewis and Mosse (2006:13) brokers are the "by-product of the situation", meaning a kind of natural side effect of development intervention, I consider them to be an integral part of the development process.[2] As Olivier de Sardan states, the process of resource negotiation and capture is "a normal phenomenon which cannot, in fact, be eliminated" (2005:207; see also Long, 1992).

The development apparatus thus creates spaces of negotiation in which the "development rent" (Olivier de Sardan, 2005:173–174), in terms of money and privileges acquired through brokerage activities, is the real issue at stake, rather than the project outcome. The expansion of the apparatus implies the multiplication of actors competing for its resources: governments, international agencies, national and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), groups of interest, individuals, all of which can, in different settings, be considered as brokers. As Pigg notes, "[f]rom the local people's perspective, the tangible advantages of [development] lie less in receiving the benefits of its programs (though no one minds if an agency decides to bring them piped water, build a clinic, or install electricity) than in becoming one of the salaried workers who implements [development]" (1992:511). Because of their attractive remuneration and the image of prestige bounded to them, job positions related to development programmes are thus particularly coveted by the locals at all levels (Olivier de Sardan, 2005:137–152; for Nepal Pigg, 1996; Shakya, 2008; Heaton Shrestha, 2010).

Participatory approaches have developed in response to a growing critique (especially post-development and post-colonial: see the recent accounts of respectively Ziai, 2012 and Lossau, 2012) of the traditional development intervention. The promise of these approaches was to democratise development and fulfil its potential for social transformation

(e.g. Chambers, 1994). The spread of participatory development practices, in Nepal likewise elsewhere, has indeed multiplied the opportunities to engage in unpaid development activities at a community level as well as the number and frequency of spaces where people can (or must) participate. This kind of engagement does not bring immediate material benefits as it would for salaried workers; yet, through volunteer engagement, people can access non-material resources, such as strategic contacts, prestige and authority (see Olivier de Sardan, 2005:167–184; Long, 2001; Bierschenk et al., 2002; for Nepal see among others Heaton Shrestha, 2002 and Nightingale, 2006).

However, scholars have pointed out that generally these resources are likely to be exploited by privileged people (elite capture), for which capturing development benefits becomes even easier with the multiplication of participation opportunities (see Olivier de Sardan, 2005:166–184). A consequence of failing to consider power relations is that efforts for an inclusive development through participation can strengthen local elites instead of empowering marginalised groups (Cook and Kothari, 2001; Gaventa, 2006; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007b; for Nepal Rauch, 1998). Authors speak of the "tyranny" of participation (Cook and Kothari, 2001; see also Korf, 2010:711–712), denouncing that decision-making processes, despite their claim of being participative, are mostly led by elites and are determined by group dynamics shaped by power imbalances. For instance, participatory activities require a considerable amount of time, which is not available to everybody, especially to women (the "tyranny of time", e.g. Walker, 2013; see also Byrne and Shrestha, 2014:447). Moreover, post-political critique has underlined that the integration of participatory practices into the mainstream and the imposition of ready-made participatory tools have transformed participation, and development in general, into a technical exercise that tends to blind its political implications (Mouffe, 2005; see Korf, 2010; also Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014).

Indeed, it can be argued that participation efforts in some cases paradoxically strengthen existing inequalities. Recent claims call for a more transparent consideration of power relations as well as the political meanings of the development process within the conception and implementation of participatory practices (see, e.g. Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Gaventa, 2006; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007a). Yet, it has still to be assessed to what extent a plain attention to the problems raised by scholars can allow participation to accomplish its promises of transformation. In this paper, I aim at contributing to this debate with empirical material from rural Nepal, focusing on the engagement of villagers in participatory spaces and its consequences on possibilities of social mobility. Before that, however, it is necessary to outline specific debates related to development in Nepal.

---

[1]This framework draws on Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital, e.g. see Bebbington, 2004, 2007; see also the special issue of Geographica Helvetica (Korf et al., 2014).

[2]I am thankful to Christine Bichsel for this observation.

3 Setting the context: debates on development in Nepal

The spread of development and modernisation ideas in Nepal since the 1950s has drastically impacted the local collective imagination as well as the definition of social categories (Burghart, 1984; Pigg, 1992; Shrestha, 1993; see also Fujikura, 2001; Elmer, 2012). An evolutionary understanding of society is implicit in the narrative of modernisation; as a result, social aspiration consists in escaping the category of "underdeveloped" and entering the one of "developed" (Pigg, 1996; see also the "developmentalist ideology" described in Gellner, 2010:6–8). In a binary logic of knowledge and ignorance, the ones who are "underdeveloped" are "to be taught like children" about how to become "developed" (Nightingale, 2005:589; see also Agrawal, 1995 and Geiser, 2002 for a discussion of indigenous vs. scientific knowledge). This binary logic was evident in development programmes along the 1950s and 1960s[3], but it also implicitly persists in more recent approaches, despite the changes in development intervention paradigms.

In line with the global trend, participatory approaches have proliferated also in Nepal since the 1980s and especially in the 1990s (Müller-Böker, 2000; Shakya, 2008). One of the consequences of this was the "mushrooming" of local and national NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs), and project-specific users groups (Shakya, 2008; Gellner, 2010; Heaton Shrestha, 2010). Claims for social inclusion and for the reduction of discrimination – especially ethnical one – have been a key point in the post-conflict political debate around a "New Nepal" (Panday, 2012; Upreti, 2014). Accordingly to these claims, donors and development actors in the country have put emphasis on the inclusion and participation of marginalised groups in the development process. Social mobilisation at the local level (Jha et al., 2009) and participation quotas for marginalised groups as positive discrimination (Contzen and Müller-Böker, 2014) are nowadays established tools in development programmes throughout the country (see Singh and Ingdal, 2007; GoN (Government of Nepal), 2009).

However, the achievements of Nepal's struggle for development are contested. Despite the rise of most (aggregated) development indicators in the last 6 decades (Adhikari, 2008), the idea that development has "failed" is widespread among Nepalese (see the discussion in Leve, 2009). Scholars have pointed out persisting social inequalities (Rankin, 2003; Gellner, 2007; Heaton Shrestha, 2010; Panday, 2012), suggesting that traditional structures of power (and exclusion) have been assimilated, and thereby reinforced, into the formal structures of development (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2008; see also Bista, 1994; Nightingale and Ojha, 2013). Furthermore, although some researchers indicate the raise of people's "awareness" as a success of donors' efforts (e.g. Adhikari, 2008:14; Baral, 2008:252–253; Hachhethu, 2008:51), the very discourse of awareness reproduces the binary logic of knowledge and ignorance (see the discussion in Fujikura, 2001, 2013).

Research suggests that democratisation and development have provided new means for social mobility; development has indeed become a new variable of social differentiation, however complementing the existing ones rather than replacing them (Elmer, 2014:252; see Pigg, 1992; Ramirez, 2000; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2008; Ollieuz, 2012). More people (though not everybody) can aspire to become a leader, provided they are able to adopt the discourse of development and to build a status as "developed" people (Ramirez, 2000; Ollieuz, 2011). As already noted, "it is better to deliver development than to be its target" (Pigg, 1996:173), since the position of "development deliverer" is linked with a specific social status.

With the spread of participatory development, the opportunities (and competition) to become a person who "delivers development" have increased and diversified, including both prestigious salaried jobs and volunteer activities at the local level (see Shakya, 2008:273–274; Heaton Shrestha, 2010:192–196; see above). Such volunteer activities are part of the broader concept of *social work*, which in Nepal encompasses various forms of unpaid engagement for the community, including political activities (Caplan, 1985 for India; for Nepal see Ollieuz, 2012:61–97). In fact, it is difficult to clearly distinguish social engagement from political involvement in Nepal.[4] Development intervention and civil society are generally highly politicised (Hachhethu, 2006:129; Singh and Ingdal, 2007:14; Frieden 2012:103–104), and political leaders largely control local development activities (Hachhethu, 2008:69). Therefore, political activities are often labelled as social work to avoid the negative connotations linked to the political sphere.

In Nepal, the distribution of resources at the local level is traditionally regulated on the basis of *aphno manche* (Bista, 1994; Subedi, 2005). Meaning literally "one's own people", this expression indicates the practice of relying on personal ties (kinship, party affiliation, friendship etc.) to acquire resources or solve problems (Subedi, 2005:114). With the expansion of social work practices, tight networks of people engaging in social and political activities increasingly permeate local communities (see Caplan, 1985; Ollieuz, 2012:68–71). These networks complement other types of ties, creating new "coalitions" for the distribution of resources ("distributional coalitions" in Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2008). In the rest of the paper I illustrate how, in the studied communities, volunteer engagement in development activities creates new types of ties which can give access to specific resources.

---

[3]See the analysis of the US-funded Village Development Project in Fujikura, 1996 and the discussion of the Tribhuvan Village Development Programme in Bista (1999) and Malla (2001).

---

[4]For a detailed analysis of the relation between social work and politics see Ollieuz (2012:83–89).

4 Spaces of participation I: the user committee

My analysis draws on empirical material collected in two villages in central and southern Nepal (Ranipur and Dubikot).[5] The project studied is part of the programme for trail bridge building in the country, coordinated by the central government and implemented by local authorities together with a Swiss NGO. For each trail bridge, a user committee composed of 9 to 15 community members is responsible for the implementation and administration of the construction work. This is a common procedure in the country and a generalised practice for Swiss-funded programmes; it also is part of the institutional strategy aimed at involving the local population in the development process (GoN, 2009; see above). In Ranipur and Dubikot, the bridge committee is only one of the several opportunities for engaging in a form of social work. Here, the bridge committee will serve as an example of participatory space where villagers carry out social work, as well as the context for delineating a typical profile of its members.[6]

The user committee is usually formed during a public meeting before the start of bridge construction work. Two quotations[7] are useful to understand which are the features required to become a committee member:

> The senior people, the learned people were selected for the user committee. (...) These people can work actively. They can go to the VDC[8] and ask for the budget in a very polite way. They have contacts with important people. (group discussion with villagers, Dubikot)

> People who have time and can give time are selected for the user committee. People who have experience in working for projects with organisations. (...) We select people who have some knowledge, who can give the information, who can motivate other people. (villager, Dubikot)

Preferential characteristics for a committee member are thus: availability of time to invest in the project, experience

---

[5]The research project was funded by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation and supported by the University of Zurich; I am grateful to both. Fieldwork took place from February to April 2012. All person and place names are modified by the author.

[6]For a discussion of the profile of social workers in general, which matches my observations of committee members, see Borgström, 1980; Caplan, 1985; Ollieuz, 2012:68–71; see also the profile of development brokers in Bierschenk et al. (2002:21–24).

[7]I report all quotations from Ranipur and Dubikot as they have been translated from Nepali into English by my field assistant.

[8]The abbreviation for Village Development Committee (VDC) refers alternatively to the executive body at village level, to village authorities as a whole, or to the village in general. The administrative entity of VDC usually entails several smaller "villages", also called *wards*. Ranipur and Dubikot are wards, not VDCs.

in similar activities (social work, in general), organisational skills, mobilisation potential (linked to one's reputation in the community), network of contacts with people in strategic positions (e.g. local authorities or NGOs), negotiation skills, education and knowledge. An allusion to age is also made in the quotations, though it does not seem to play a central role in the rest of my observation. Instead, gender, which is indeed an important variable, is not mentioned.

The concepts of *education* and *knowledge* need more careful investigation. The quotations clearly show that these concepts not only refer to formal education (school degrees) but also to practical and relational know-how. As a committee member in Dubikot stated, "people with education are the ones who can take the leadership and can also analyse the situation going on in the community". Educated people, in the sense expressed in the quotations, are able to better manage relations with local authorities and NGOs, as well as to relate to them "in a polite way". In other words, they are able to mobilise the correct codes and language, which differ from the common ones in the village.

It is important to note that not every actual committee member corresponds to the sketched profile. In fact, many development agencies, including the Swiss NGO of this study, implement some forms of positive discrimination, for instance fixing quotas for "socially and economically disadvantaged" groups (see Contzen and Müller-Böker, 2014). Marginalised people (in terms of gender, caste, ethnic group, or wealth) had reserved places also in the bridge committees in Ranipur and Dubikot. In both committees, however, a small group of four to five members was more active than the rest and took over most of the project activities, especially the relations with actors outside the community.[9] These active members (mostly men) fulfilled indeed the mentioned characteristics. In several interviews, especially with women, less-active members mentioned the burden of daily activities, and the consequent lack of time, as a reason for missing the meetings. Since their presence was required by the guidelines, they just signed later the minutes of the meeting. In addition, some members referred to their lack of education and knowledge – and the consequent feeling of uneasiness – as an explanation for their limited involvement in the committee. As I will discuss later, binary social categorisations seem to determine this kind of explanations, in return the latter seems to reinforce the former.

5 Skills and contacts through participation

While, on the one hand, some skills are required to become an active member, on the other hand engaging in the committee is an occasion to develop such skills. Among the tasks

---

[9]This is not new: the limitations of participation in user groups and the problems linked to quotas are discussed, e.g. in Agarwal, 2001, 2010; Varughese and Ostrom, 2001; Nightingale, 2003; Masaki, 2010.

of committee members is the management of the relations with local authorities, the local NGO in charge of the project and the Swiss NGO. These relations are various and include, for instance, obtaining the promised budget, implementing the technicians' guidelines on bridge building and organising public meetings. A committee member is indeed an intermediary (or *broker*) between the local community and the external entities. The initiation of the bridge project in Ranipur is a good example of how brokers can access material resources through their strategic contacts. In the following quotation, Madhan, the initiator of the bridge in Ranipur and then chairman of the committee, explains how he could bring the project to his village:

> The VDC and DDC[10] people and the NGO chairperson were sitting together in a hotel for another project. I was there too and, coincidentally, I was speaking about the bridge and the others told me (...), "You have to fill the form [to apply for the bridge], only then we can do the survey [for the feasibility of the bridge]". They explained also when was the time for the application. I got to know there about the bridge form. So we sent the form and the survey was done. I was used to phone, travel to [the district capital] asking and saying not to forget about our bridge. After that the bridge came. I know many institutions in [the district capital] (...). Sometimes I have some work for [an NGO] and I go to [the district capital] and I take the opportunity to visit other institutions.

In this quotation, Madhan himself underlines the importance of his network of contacts: the whole project, in fact, could start thanks to his personal relations rather than through formal channels. It was due to a coincidence, he says – or rather the result of his relational work – that he could find out how to apply for the bridge.

The figure of Madhan exemplifies the role of development brokers and the ways in which engagement in participatory spaces, and in general in social work, can be used as a mean for social mobility. At the time of my fieldwork, Madhan, a young man of a discriminated caste, had started his "career" as social worker 7 years before, when he engaged in an internationally funded development project. Two years later he assumed a paid administrative position within the same project. Madhan recognised that thanks to these activities he could learn several technical, administrative and relational skills, as well as build a tight network of personal relationships with local authorities, local NGOs and international agencies. When I met him, he was engaged in several local associations and projects, in both paid and unpaid positions, had tight relations with political representatives and

was considering starting an active political career. In his village, he was the person of reference, both for co-villagers (for instance in case of disputes) and for external actors (as I will show in the next section). Madhan was thus able to take advantage of the resources offered by development engagement to strengthen his position and authority in the village (see Bierschenk et al., 2002:19–28; Ollieuz, 2011). His election as chairperson of the bridge committee was at the same time an acknowledgement of his status and a new opportunity to strengthen that same status (see Byrne and Shrestha, 2014:445–446).

6 Spaces of participation II: the research project

In his village, Madhan was the reference for all actors coming from outside the community, including myself, and was the exclusive intermediary between the project and the community. Although the space created by my research project is not a participatory space in a narrow sense, I include it in my analysis since it revealed to be an exemplification of brokerage relations. Madhan was the *gatekeeper* to the village for my field assistant and myself: he welcomed us in Ranipur and organised board and lodging for us; he planned our research with us, contacted the people we wanted to speak with (including politicians from the VDC centre); he managed our time schedule accompanying us wherever we wanted to go and supervised our questions to people and their responses. Also in the rare moments we were walking alone in the village, he appeared unexpectedly and joined our conversations with villagers.

Madhan also acted as a *translator*, mastering the language of development (see Bierschenk et al., 2002:21): during interviews and group discussions, after my assistant's English–Nepali translation, he "translated" our questions to the other villagers a second time – from the "development Nepali" in the "village Nepali". Then, he answered in the others' place, translating back from "their language" to "ours". This happened for instance during a group discussion with villagers in Ranipur. Madhan had organised the meeting and gathered about 20 villagers. The spatial arrangement already illustrated the relations between participants: Madhan sat with my assistant and me on a straw mat, like on a stage, while the others sat in a circle in front of us, like an audience. I had already warned Madhan that I was interested in the opinions and perceptions of the other villagers about the project. However, the villagers did not answer our questions and looked at Madhan instead of speaking. After my questions and the linguistic translation, Madhan translated again the questions to the other villagers and explained to them, "You have to say whatever comes to your minds, whatever you feel!". After silence or very little reaction from the villagers, he reformulated complete answers in their place.

I observed precisely the same dynamics during several interviews: the behaviour and answers of villagers were clearly

---

[10]The meanings of District Development Committee (DDC) are the same as for the VDC, but at district level (see footnote 8).

different if Madhan was present or not. People who usually spoke freely and spontaneously felt suddenly silent as soon as Madhan was appearing. People who easily answered our questions alone, would suddenly need Madhan's translation and encouragement when he was present, and then answered with monosyllables. Furthermore, the presence of Madhan increased the frequency of clichéd sentences like, "we have the ownership", "we are aware that we have to work for the bridge", "with the bridge the society will be developed" (from different interviews with villagers, Ranipur). Madhan acted on the one hand as a gatekeeper and translator towards us, on the other hand he operated as a guide and a *teacher*, who carefully explained to his co-villagers how to behave and what to say. I will come back to this teaching posture, after presenting another space where such attitude can be observed.

7 Spaces of participation III: public meetings

In line with the general strategy to increase participation of local people in development activities, the Swiss NGO promotes a participatory tool consisting of three public meetings held in the timeframe of project implementation. The goal of these meetings is to provide a space for sharing project-related information, for discussion and participatory decision-making. In both Ranipur and Dubikot I was present to one such meeting, attended by the Swiss NGO, the local NGO, the user committee, villagers and a representative of local authorities. Such moments were highly symbolic, also in a spatial sense: people with particular positions (such as NGO employees, local authorities and of course myself) sat on plastic chairs or on straw mat, while the audience sat on the ground or stood.

These meetings are an occasion to perform specific roles, in particular to show one's own familiarity with the language of development and with the strategic actors who control development-related resources (see the "scenographic competence" in Bierschenk et al., 2002:22–23). In the first very ample part of both meetings, the staff of the NGOs, political representatives, local authorities and active user committee members held "metaspeeches", which I define, drawing on Anderson (2009), as speeches focusing on the meeting itself, for instance on its functioning and meaning. Both meetings lasted several hours: in Dubikot, after 3 hours, only few of the numerous participants were still present. This means that the majority of participants only heard metaspeeches and missed the discussion on concrete project issues. It must be noted that our presence (especially of a representative of the Swiss NGO who accompanied me to the meetings) surely affected the length and content of such metaspeeches. I can suppose that people who held metaspeeches were also motivated by the desire to show their skills and competences to the guests coming from outside the community, performing thus their role as "developed persons".

Metaspeeches were highly rhetorical and repeated the guidelines on public meetings given by the foreign funder, which stress the importance of accountability and participation. NGO employees and those in the community who had learned the development language insisted in *explaining* to the others what they were expected to do, and tried to *convince* them to do it: feel the ownership for the project, be aware of their rights, actively engage in meetings and in project implementation. In this way, the public meetings of projects often become a space where some can (or should) *learn* how to be developed while others can *teach* it, exhibiting their knowledge about it (see Nightingale, 2005).

8 Understanding development: the building of social categories

The binary categorisation of who can teach and who should be taught depends on the definition of what kind (and whose) knowledge counts (see Nightingale, 2005; Olivier de Sardan, 2005:153–165; also Agrawal, 1995; Geiser, 2002). Pigg has noted that in Nepal this distinction is expressed through an idiom of "understanding" that creates a dichotomy between who "understands" and who "doesn't understand" (1992:507; Pigg, 1996:173–179). Some user committee members complained about their colleagues because "they are less educated, and therefore the more educated have to convince these people to work for the project" (user committee member, Dubikot). In a similar way, NGO workers lamented the scarce interest of participants to public meetings:

> We focus also on how to increase the participation of local people. In my experience I saw that people are happy that the bridge is ready. They don't have enough level of awareness about what we are doing in that meeting. (. . .) People are not much interested about the process. They just sit there: "Bridge is made?" "Yes." "Good, so we are happy!". (NGO employee, Dubikot)

This logic posits a causal link between the lack of education and the scarce engagement in development activities. In my observations, "understanding" seems to refer to the specific idea of participatory development promoted by international agencies, which confers substantial importance to the active involvement of the beneficiaries of projects. "Educated" people are those who understand the need to participate in development activities and of "giving their time for the community", as expressed by several active villagers.

This logic, however, lacks consideration of other obstacles that might hamper people's participation: among others, as discussed above, time scarcity, missing experience in social work (with the ensuing lack of practical skills), lack of familiarity with development codes, feelings of inadequacy. Moreover, being categorised as "non-educated" can rise mecha-

nisms of self-censorship, as it appears in a committee member's words in Ranipur, "We [women] don't have education. We forget everything, and nothing comes into our minds!". The quotation suggests that the self-categorisation as non-educated can weaken self-esteem as well as the motivation to zealously engage in development activities. The use of unfamiliar technical terminology in meetings can frustrate participation too. As mentioned above, the predominance of metaspeeches in meetings, intended as explicative, can paradoxically result as an impediment to the real aim of the meeting.

I already advanced that engaging in development activities offers the opportunity to acquire specific skills and knowledge and to extend one's own network of strategic contacts; shortly, it allows to *understand development*, its language and codes. However, I discussed how being categorised as a person who "doesn't understand (development)" limits the possibilities to engage in development activities, which, in its turn, reduces the chances to *learn development*. The risk is therefore to enter a closed circle where such categories are reproduced and reinforced. The measures for positive discrimination in development intervention commented above are meant to break this circle. Concerning the present case study, quotas for marginalised groups ensure that the bridge user committee is not exclusively composed of experienced social workers. Nevertheless, quotas alone are not enough, since, as showed above, being officially a member of the committee does not necessarily imply being able to actively engage in it. Another widespread attempt to break the circle is social mobilisation (see GoN, 2009), meaning targeted activities at the community level to mobilise marginalised villagers. My empirical material suggests that social mobilisation activities tend to reproduce the binary logic of teacher–taught; however, more specific investigations are needed to better understand this point (e.g. see Biggs et al., 2004:29–40).

9   Participation: transformation and tyranny?

In the present study I showed that unpaid engagement in development activities can pay well, even though it does not bring direct material benefits. In addition to the acquisition of skills and contacts, this kind of engagement helps building reputation, prestige, and eventually authority, in the community. This is possible through a subtle work of mediation between local community and international agencies. In a social context that distinguishes people who "understand" and people who "don't understand" (Pigg, 1992), participation to development activities can offer the means to enter the former category.

The multiplication of participatory spaces (and, in Nepal, of social work in general) broadens the opportunities to access several kinds of resources. Furthermore, the emphasis on inclusive development encourages specific practices (social mobilisation at the community level and quotas for user groups, among others) that disclose participatory spaces to a broader population. This opens new prospects for social mobility to people, like Madhan, that had no such possibilities in the traditional Nepalese hierarchy (especially concerning caste, ethnicity and gender).[11]

Nevertheless, my study suggests that these opportunities are not necessarily open to everyone. Once people have entered participatory spaces, there might still be barriers for their *active* engagement within such spaces. These barriers can be material (lack of time) but also psychological (the self-categorisation as non-educated) and social (lack of familiarity with development codes) (e.g. see Agarwal, 2001). In this sense, efforts towards participation and inclusion open the possibility of "elite capture" to non-elites, and can therefore foster social mobility and transformation. On the other side, however, the "tyranny" of participation might persist for some groups of population. Indeed, the binary logic between teachers and taught people seems to be still relevant in my case study and risks to reproduce a dynamic in which development-related social categorisations operate as barriers to social mobility.

Scholars have noted that development has become a new variable in the regulation of local power relations, underlining yet that it has not replaced the existing variables (e.g. Ramirez, 2000). In my investigation I have focused on only one kind of social categorisation (the one linked to development) and of social ties (the ones built through development engagement). I have thus offered an insight into one specific aspect of local "distributional coalitions" (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2008, see above). Indeed, also other categorisations and ties play a role in defining social structures in Nepal, both traditional ones based for instance on caste and ethnicity and more recent ones linked especially to political activity. Development programmes in the countries need to consider all these variables, if they want to avoid the tyranny of participation and the reproduction of inequalities. Especially, they should avoid participation to become a mere technical exercise, where quotas are fulfilled only on paper and meetings are mostly a rhetorical performance.

Edited by: B. Korf
Reviewed by: two anonymous referees

---

[11]This resonates with recent ethnographic accounts, e.g. Ramirez, 2000; Ollieuz, 2012; Byrne and Shrestha, 2014.

References

Adhikari, J.: Changing livelihoods. Essays on Nepal's development since 1990, Martin Chautari, Kathmandu, 2008.

Agrawal, A.: Dismantling the divide between indigenous and scientific knowledge, Dev. Change, 26, 413–439, 1995.

Agarwal, B.: Participatory exclusion, Community Forestry, and gender: an analysis for South Asia and a conceptual framework, World Dev., 29, 1623–1648, 2001.

Agarwal, B.: Does women's proportional strength affect their participation? Governing local forests in South Asia, World Dev., 38, 98–112, 2010.

Anderson, A.: Metacommunication, in: Encyclopaedia of communication theory, edited by: Littlejohn, W. and Foss, K., Sage, Los Angeles, 650–654, 2009.

Baral, U. N.: Local democracy and local government: a case study of Dhikur Pokhari Village Development Committee, Kaski, Nepal, in: Local democracy in South Asia. Microprocesses of democratization in Nepal and its neighbours, edited by: Gellner, D. N. and Hachhethu, K., Sage, New Delhi, 232–257, 2008.

Bebbington, A.: Social capital and development studies 1: critique, debate, progress?, Progress in Development Studies, 4, 343–349, 2004.

Bebbington, A.: Social capital and development studies II: can Bourdieu travel to policy?, Progress in Development Studies, 7, 155–162, 2007.

Bierschenk, T., Chaveau, J.-P., and Olivier de Sardan, J.-P.: Local development brokers in Africa. The rise of a new social category, Working Paper 13, Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz, 46 pp., 2002.

Biggs, S. D., Gurung, S. M., and Messerschmidt, D.: An exploratory study of gender, social inclusion and empowerment through development groups and group-based organizations in Nepal: building on the positive, The World Bank and DFID, Kathmandu, 168 pp., 2004.

Bista, D. B.: Fatalism and development. Nepal's struggle for modernization, Orient Longman Limited, Calcutta, 187 pp., 1994.

Bista, S. K.: Rural development in Nepal: past efforts and current approaches, Tribhuvan University Journal, 12, 107–114, 1999.

Boissevain, J.: Friends of friends, Networks, manipulators and coalitions, Blackwell, Oxford, 300 pp., 1974.

Borgström, B.-E.: The patron and the panca. Village values and Panchayat democracy in Nepal, Vikas, New Delhi, 188 pp., 1980.

Burghart, R.: The formation of the concept of nation-state in Nepal, J. Asian Stud., 44, 101–125, 1984.

Byrne, S. and Shrestha, G.: A compromising consensus? Legitimising local government in post-conflict Nepal, Int. Dev. Plann. Rev., 36, 435–453, 2014.

Caplan, P.: Class and gender in India. Women and their organizations in a South Indian city, Tavistock, London and New York, 220 pp., 1985.

Chambers, R.: The origins and practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal, World Dev., 22, 953–969, 1994.

Cook, B. and Kothari, U.: Participation: the new tyranny?, Zed Books, London, 224 pp., 2001.

Contzen, S. and Müller-Böker, U.: How to identify "target groups"? Considerations based on experiences from Honduras and Nepal, NCCR, 16 pp., 2014.

Cornwall, A. and Coelho, V. S.: Spaces for change? The politics of citizen participation in new democratic arenas, Zed Books, London, 288 pp., 2007a.

Cornwall, A. and Coelho, V. S.: Spaces for change?, in: Spaces for change?, edited by: Cornwall, A. and Coelho, V. S., Zed Books, London, 1–29, 2007b.

Elmer, S.: Postkoloniale Erschliessung ferner Länder? Die erste Schweizer Nepalmission und die Anfänge der technischen Hilfe an unterentwickelte Länder, in: Postkoloniale Schweiz: Formen und Folgen eines Kolonialismus ohne, edited by: Purtschert, P., Lüthi, B., and Falk, F., Transcript, Bielefeld, 245–266, 2012.

Elmer, S.: Visions and agents of development in twentieth century Nepal, PhD thesis, ETH Zurich, 282 pp., 2014.

Frieden, J.: A donor's perspective on aid and conflict, in: Nepal in transition. From People's War to fragile peace, edited by: von Einsiedel, S., Malone, D., and Pradhan, S., University Press, Cambridge, 100–113, 2012.

Fujikura, T.: Technologies of improvement, locations of culture: American discourses of democracy and "Community Development" in Nepal, Studies in Nepali History and Society, 1, 271–311, 1996.

Fujikura, T.: Discourses of awareness. Notes for a criticism of development in Nepal, Studies in Nepali History and Society, 6, 271–313, 2001.

Fujikura, T.: Discourses of Awareness: development, social movements and the practices of freedom in Nepal, Martin Chautari, Kathmandu, 310 pp., 2013.

Gaventa, J.: Finding the spaces for change: a power analysis, IDS Bulletin, 37, 23–33, 2006.

Geiser, U.: Knowledge, knowledge management, and sustainable resource use: an introduction, in: Local environmental management in a North-South perspective. Issues of participation and knowledge management, edited by: Flury, M. and Geiser, U., vdf Hochschulverlag, Zurich, 157–180, 2002.

Gellner, D. N.: Introduction: transformations of the Nepalese State, in: Resistance and the State: Nepalese experiences, edited by: Gellner, D., Berghahn Books, Oxford, 1–30, 2007.

Gellner, D. N.: Introduction. Making civil society in South Asia, in: Varieties of activist experience. Civil society in South Asia, edited by: Gellner, D. N., Sage, New Delhi, 1–14, 2010.

Government of Nepal (GoN): Local Governance and Community Development Programme. Social mobilization guideline, Ministry of Local Governance, Kathmandu, 38 pp., 2009.

Hachhethu, K.: Civil society and political participation, in: Nepal: quest for participatory democracy, edited by: Baral, L. R., Adroit, New Delhi, 111–132, 2006.

Hachhethu, K.: Local democracy and political parties in Nepal: a case study of Dhanusha District, in: Local democracy in South Asia. Microprocesses of democratization in Nepal and its neighbours, edited by: Gellner, D. N. and Hachhethu, K., Sage, New Delhi, 45–70, 2008.

Heaton Shrestha, C.: NGOs as thekādārs or sevaks? Identity crisis in Nepal's non-governmental sector, European Bulletin of Himalayan Research, 22, 5–36, 2002.

Heaton Shrestha, C.: Activists and development in Nepal, in: Varieties of activist experience. Civil society in South Asia, edited by: Gellner, D. N., Sage, New Delhi, 181–216, 2010.

Hickey, S. and Mohan, G. (Eds.): Participation: from tyranny to transformation, Zed Books, London, 304 pp., 2004.

Jha, C., Prasai, S., Hobley, M., Bennett, L.: Citizen mobilisation in Nepal. Building on Nepal's tradition of social mobilisation to make local governance more inclusive and accountable, Government of Nepal, Kathmandu, 164 pp., 2009.

Korf, B.: The geography of participation, Third World Quarterly, 31, 709–720, 2010.

Korf, B., Deffner, V., Haferburg, C., Sakdapolrak, P., Eichholz, M., Etzold, B., and Michel, B. (Eds.): Bourdieu and development geography, Geographica Helvetica, http://www.geogr-helv.net/special_issue281.html, 2014.

Leve, L.: Women's empowerment and rural revolution: rethinking "failed development", Dialect. Anthropol., 33, 345–363, 2009.

Lewis, D. and Mosse, D.: Theoretical approaches to brokerage and translation in development, in: Development brokers and translators. The ethnography of aid and agencies, edited by: Lewis, D. and Mosse, D., Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, 1–26, 2006.

Long, N.: From paradigm lost to paradigm regained? The case for an actor-oriented sociology of development, in: Battlefields of knowledge, Long, N. and Long, A., Routledge, London, 16–43, 1992.

Long, N.: Development sociology. Actor perspectives, Routledge, London, 320 pp., 2001.

Lossau, J.: Postkoloniale Impulse für die deutschsprachige Geographische Entwicklungsforschung, Geogr. Helv., 67, 125–132, doi:10.5194/gh-67-125-2012, 2012.

Malla, Y. B.: Changing policies and the persistence of patron-client relations in Nepal: stakeholders' responses to changes in forest policies, Environ. Hist., 6, 287–307, 2001.

Masaki, K.: Rectifying the anti-politics of citizen participation: insights from the internal policits of a subaltern community in Nepal, J. Dev. Stud., 46, 1196–1215, 2010.

Mouffe, C.: On the political, Routledge, Abingdon, 144 pp., 2005.

Müller-Böker, U.: State intervention in Chitwan: on the historical development of a region in Southern Nepal, Studies in Nepali History and Society, 5, 173–200, 2000.

Nightingale, A.: Participating or just sitting in? The dynamics of gender and caste in Community Forestry, Journal of Forest and Livelihood, 2, 17–24, 2003.

Nightingale, A.: "The experts taught us all we know": professionalization and knowledge in Nepalese Community Forestry, Antipode, 37, 581–604, 2005.

Nightingale A.: A forest community or Community Forestry? Beliefs, meanings and nature in north-western Nepal, Online papers, Institute of Geography, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh, 26 pp., 2006.

Nightingale, A. and Ojha, H. R.: Rethinking power and authority: symbolic violence and subjectivity in Nepal's Terai Forests, Dev. Change, 44, 29–51, 2013.

Olivier de Sardan, J.-P.: Anthropology and development. Understanding contemporary social change, Zed Books, London, 256 pp., 2005.

Ollieuz, A.: The political history of Indagru VDC, Nepal Journal of Social Science and Public Policy, 1, 32–48, 2011.

Ollieuz, A.: Authority, leadership and democracy in southern Nepal. A village ethnography, PhD thesis, University of Oslo, 252 pp., 2012.

Panday, D. R.: The legacy of Nepal's failed development, in: Nepal in transition. From people's war to fragile peace, edited by: von Einsiedel, S., Malone, D. M., and Pradhan, S., University Press, Cambridge, 81–99, 2012.

Pigg, S. L.: Inventing social categories through place: social representations and development in Nepal, Comp. Stud. Soc. Hist., 34, 491–513, 1992.

Pigg, S. L.: The credible and the credulous: The question of "villagers' beliefs" in Nepal, Cult. Anthropol., 11, 160–201, 1996.

Pfaff-Czarnecka, J.: Distributional coalitions in Nepal: an essay on democratization, capture, and (lack of) confidence, in: Local democracy in South Asia. Microprocesses of democratization in Nepal and its neighbours, edited by: Gellner, D. N. and Hachhethu, K., Sage, New Delhi, 71–104, 2008.

Ramirez, P.: De la disparition des chefs. Une anthropologie politique népalaise, CNRS Éditions, Paris, 370 pp., 2000.

Rankin, K. N.: Cultures of economies: gender and socio-spatial change in Nepal, Gender Place Cult., 10, 111–129, 2003.

Rauch, T.: "Nun partizipiert mal schön", in: blätter des informationszentrums 3. Welt, Sonderheft: Nachhaltig zukunftsfähig? Entwicklungspolitik in den 90er Jahren, 4–7, 1998.

Shakya, K. M.: Foreign aid, democracy, and development: personal experiences, in: Local democracy in South Asia. Microprocesses of democratization in Nepal and its neighbours, edited by: Gellner, D. N. and Hachhethu, K., Sage, New Delhi, 258–275, 2008.

Shrestha, N.: Enchanted by the mantra of bikas. A self-reflective perspective on Nepalese elites and development, South Asia Bulletin, 13, 5–22, 1993.

Singh, A. and Ingdal, N.: A discussion paper on donor best practices towards NGOs in Nepal, NORAD Collected Reviews, Oslo, 44 pp., 2007.

Subedi, M. S.: Corruption in Nepal: an anthropological inquiry, Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology, 1, 110–128, 2005.

Upreti, B. R.: Post-conflict reconstruction and development, in: Contested development in Nepal: experiences and reflections, edited by: Sharma, S. R., Upreti, B. R., Manandhar, P., and Sapkota, M., Kathmandu University and NCCR, Kathmandu, 27–56, 2014.

Varughese, G. and Ostrom, E.: The contested role of heterogeneity in collective action: some evidence from Community Forestry in Nepal, World Dev., 29, 747–765, 2001.

Walker, J.: Time poverty, gender and well-being: lessons from the Kyrgyz Swiss Swedish Health Programme, Development in Practice, 23, 57–68, 2013.

Wilson, J. and Swyngedouw, E. (Eds.): The post-political and its discontents, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 336 pp., 2014.

Ziai, A.: Post-Development: Fundamentalkritik der "Entwicklung", Geogr. Helv., 67, 133–138, doi:10.5194/gh-67-133-2012, 2012.