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## *When is Development More Democratic?*

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**Abstract** If people are to be empowered by development processes, to be active participants rather than passive recipients, then development must become more democratic. However, the meaning of ‘more democratic’ is not exhausted by the introduction of democratic institutions; it also entails that political activity functions more democratically. In this article, ‘democratic functioning’ is defined in terms of people’s access to political activity, which has greater influence over decision-making that is more effective in preserving or enhancing valuable capabilities. Thus development can be democratically dysfunctional in three ways: exclusion from political activity, lack of influence by political activity over decision-making, and lack of effect on capability shortfalls within the community. The debate on participatory development points to dysfunctions of all three kinds, even within participatory development. Therefore, rather than merely calling for development to be more participatory, we ought to call for it to be more democratic.

**Key words:** Democracy, Development, Empowerment, Capabilities, Participatory Development

### **Introduction**

Development processes that are comparatively more democratic have long been favored by the human development approach. In his 1995 reflections on what he called the ‘human development paradigm’, Mahbub ul Haq listed empowerment as one of four “essential components of human development” (Haq, 1995, pp.16–20). The meaning he attached to ‘empowerment’ was quite expansive, since the human development approach, as he wanted to portray it, advocated expansion not merely of economic choices and opportunities, but of political, social and cultural choice and decision-making as well. What ‘empowerment’ ought to mean, he said, includes “a political democracy in which people *can influence decisions about their lives* ... so that real governance is brought to the doorstep of every person. It means that all members of civil society, particularly non-governmental organizations, participate fully in making

and implementing decisions” (Haq, 1995, p.20; emphasis added). Subsequently Martha Nussbaum has included, in the list of valuable capabilities, the sort of “control over one’s environment” that is afforded by political participation (2000, p.80). This robust conception of democratic empowerment was also at work in some of the best development thinking within the non-aligned movement in the previous decade, being advocated explicitly not only in the Declaration on the Right to Development (United Nations, 1986), but also in Julius Nyerere’s Report of the South Commission (South Commission, 1990). Of course, it gained even greater prominence within the rights-based development later championed in the *Human Development Reports* of 2000 and 2002 (United Nations Development Programme, 2000, 2002).

However, there is an important theoretical question underlying these conceptions of democratic development that has not yet received the attention it deserves. On one hand, the presence of democratic institutions is a necessary condition for democratizing development in the ways that have been advocated by the human development approach. On the other hand, institutions that are similarly democratic in type may function more democratically in some countries than in others, or they may function more democratically at some times than at others, even within the same country. For instance, some may be more inclusive than others in relation to particular racial, ethnic or social groups. In addition, because of the ways in which they do or do not engage with civil society groups, governments with similar institutions may differ in the degree to which they empower their citizens to participate in development decision-making. Moreover, even when participation is promoted, the meaning of ‘participation’ can be so elastic that some of what passes for participation is scarcely democratic or empowering at all. This poses some important conceptual issues. How can one democracy be more democratic than any other? How can democratic systems function more democratically in some times and places than in others? In contexts like these, what should we take ‘more democratic’ to mean?

The concept of democracy is complex in ways that are often ignored. It is not a simple categorical or species concept, like the concept of *cats*. Yet this is the common stereotype: some states are democratic, others are not, and the democratic states are those in which sovereign power is exercised by representatives elected freely (i.e. with universal suffrage, free speech, freedom to seek office) by citizens. The concept of democracy is more complex than this because we may still meaningfully ask, in a literal and not a figurative way, whether a particular democratic state could be made to function more democratically, or whether it is functioning democratically enough. By contrast, it goes beyond the literal sense of ‘cat’ to ask whether a particular cat is sufficiently feline. Furthermore, the stereotypical conception of democracies as a kind or species is not only categorical, but institutional. Thus ‘democracy’ is typically defined in terms of two institutions: regular elections and civil liberties. Both institutions

serve to limit state power, the first by ensuring that the rulers can be thrown out of power, and the latter by ensuring that there are some things that they cannot do even while in office.<sup>1</sup> The weakness of this conception is that it cannot very easily identify democratic shortfalls or deficits in states that already have democratic institutions. To more easily identify these, we need a conception of democracy that focuses not so much on democratic institutions as on democratic *functioning*; a conception that is not categorical (picking out democratic states from the rest), but *scalar* (distinguishing more democratic from less democratic).

My theoretical aim here is to construct just such a functional and scalar conception of democracy; that is, a conception of *functioning more democratically*. Then, more practically, I will apply this to some recent debates about participatory development. The criterion that I develop for *functioning more democratically* reveals that not all participatory schemes make development more democratic, and those that do may do so incompletely, reducing some democratic shortfalls while leaving or creating others. Therefore, merely calling for development to be more participatory is not adequate. What we must call for is making development more democratic.

## **Democratic functioning**

### *The concept of democracy*

It is useful to put the concept of democracy in context by considering what kind of concept it is. I find that the concept of democracy has much in common with the concept of development. While both are anchored by descriptive content, they are also normative concepts. 'Development' refers descriptively either to expansion of productive capacity or social infrastructure, or, more commonly, to economic growth. Nevertheless, an irrepressible question within development discourse has been: What is development, *in so far as it is a worthy social policy goal*? Answering *this* question yields a normative concept of development, of which several have been proposed: growth with equity, growth with participation, sustainable growth, and growth that enhances valuable capabilities (Haq, 1995, pp. 3–23). Notice that none of these latter conceptions is considered to be arbitrary or alien to the concept of development; they are debatable, and some economists may argue that this debate is without resolution, but none is an extraneous addition if we conceive of development as the kind of growth that is a worthy social policy goal.

Much the same can be said of democracy. The core descriptive content might be that the holders of public decision-making power are determined by free and fair elections.<sup>2</sup> In short, those who govern must win at elections. Let us call this 'electoralism'. This still leaves room for further debate about what *further* conditions may be required for electoralism to be a worthy social goal. Indeed, every major position

advocated in democratic theory can be understood as contributing a particular answer to this question. For instance, one might object that those who win at elections may skew the effective public interest by over-representing the interests of particular groups. The view that electoralism is a worthy social goal only if it avoids this sort of over-representation yields the normative conception of democracy that we associate with pluralism. From a different perspective, one might object that it is possible to win at elections, yet ignore in office much of what the public wants, in which case one might hold that electoralism is a worthy social goal only if the public will continues to be expressed and engaged by those who are elected. This yields participationism as a normative conception of democracy. Alternatively, one might object that those who win at elections could still, for all that, trample citizens' rights. This would argue for a liberal conception of democracy, according to which the proper sphere of electoralism is bounded by rights.

My proposal is simply that one more element must be added to this normative concept of democracy. That is, there is one further answer to the question: What is democracy, in so far as it is a worthy social goal? I would begin from the observation that it is possible to win at elections and yet deprive people of influence over social conditions affecting their capabilities to live in ways that they have reason to value. This occurs, for instance, whenever upper and middle strata form coalitions ganging up against the poor. If electoralism is to be a worthy social goal, it must not do this. If we conceive of democracy normatively, as electoralism that is worth having, then we observe that, when this kind of ganging-up occurs, the political system is not functioning as democratically as it might.

Some illustrations may indicate why we ought to think of democratic functioning in this way.

- *Scenario 1: racial neglect.* Think of a fully-fledged liberal democracy in which racial minorities are concentrated in poorer districts lacking resources to provide health and other services at national standards. In national elections, one majority after another chooses political representatives who give lower priority to the problems of these districts than to other concerns, favored by the majority of electors.
- *Scenario 2: eviction/displacement.* The government of a developing country has been elected with a mandate to promote industrial as well as rural development. Once in office, they formulate a development strategy that includes the construction of dams serving rural development by means of irrigation and industrial development by means of power generation. Landowners in the floodplain, generally smallholding farmers, are compensated for land lost; all floodplain inhabitants are evicted. The effect of displacement is to impoverish the oustees. Even those who are compensated are unable to reestablish the livelihoods they had produced for themselves in the floodplain.

- *Scenario 3: flat-earththers*. Imagine that a Flat-Earth Coalition campaigns perennially in elections to gain public acceptance of their view that the Earth is flat. They never win.
- *Scenario 4: deliberative stalemate*. A small jurisdiction has a political culture of reaching compromise by means of deliberation. Some of their tacit rules are: (i) representatives must consult their constituents on major issues through public deliberations; and (ii) in these deliberations as well as those at the representative level, everyone is expected to seek out common ground, offering only those reasons that they think others likely to accept. A common political value is preserving each other's freedom, but there is no agreement about what 'freedom' should mean, city-dwellers focusing on freedom from poverty and freedom to become educated and employed, country-dwellers focusing on freedom from regulation and taxation. Local deliberation serves only to entrench these views in their respective communities. At the representative level, there may be common ground on some decisions, but not enough to support the city-dwellers' program of reducing poverty and improving health, education, and employment.

Arguably what I have imagined to occur in some of these cases is unjust, but is it in any way undemocratic? If we had only the stereotypical institutional conception of democracy to guide us, we should have to conclude that nothing stands out in any of these scenarios as undemocratic. This is unacceptable because *racial neglect* and *eviction/displacement* are both cases of majoritarian tyranny carried out within otherwise democratic institutions. One response to this would be to bite the bullet and accept that democracy does not exclude majoritarian tyranny. That would mean thinking of majoritarian tyranny as an abuse of democracy, not as undemocratic. However, this will not succeed in so far as we are discussing democracy normatively — that is, democracy in so far as it is worth having, democracy as a worthy social goal.

According to the view of democratic functioning that I am proposing, the political systems in these first two scenarios are not functioning as democratically as they might, because of the ways in which the racial minority and the oustees are deprived of political influence over decisions damaging to capabilities that they have reason to value. In *flat-earththers*, by contrast, no such damage is involved; consequently, we have no comparable reason to think that the flat-earththers are treated undemocratically. The *deliberative stalemate* scenario challenges both participationist and deliberative conceptions of democracy (Shapiro, 2003, pp.21–33), for in this case deliberative participation in decision-making leads to the same result: people are deprived of influence over decisions damaging to capabilities to achieve health, education, and employment, which they value for good reason, as anyone would. I infer: what is crucial to *functioning more democratically* is not participation or deliberation *per se*, but whether they enhance people's influence over

decisions that may damage capabilities that everyone involved has reason to value.

This conception of democratic functioning has the further advantage that its application is not limited to decision-making of and within states. Any organization can be assessed by this standard as to how democratically it is functioning, in relation to its members or in relation to others affected. So, when the World Commission on Dams demanded that “demonstrable public acceptance of all key decisions is achieved through agreements negotiated in an open and transparent process conducted in good faith and with the informed participation of all stakeholders” (World Commission on Dams, 2000, p.215), it was thereby calling for the adoption, planning, and implementation of these projects to *function more democratically* in relation to stakeholders.

### *Defining ‘functioning more democratically’*

My proposal is based on earlier work by Canadian political philosopher Frank Cunningham, who gives the following analysis of ‘more democratic’:

To say that the social unit ‘A’ is more democratic than ‘B’ is to say that:

1. proportionately more people in A have control over their common social environment than do people in B; and/or
2. people in A have control over proportionately more aspects of their social environment than to people in B; and/or
3. the aspects of their social environment over which people in A have control are more important from the point of view of democracy than those over which people in B have control. (Cunningham, 1987, pp. 25–27)

To give this analysis a better fit with development contexts, I suggest a number of modifications: first, clarifying that ‘control’ does not mean strict control, but influence; second, distinguishing between: (a) the capability of individuals and groups to engage in political activity, and (b) the influence of that activity on important aspects of their lives; third, adding that those *important* aspects of people’s lives (i.e. important for them to influence) are their valuable capabilities, which generically comprise their well-being freedom.

### *Control*

It would be an overstatement to say of any political system that the electorate exercises *decisive* influence over *everything* done by their representatives. That would be an exceptionally and unreasonably strong sense of ‘control’. To avoid such connotations, I will speak instead of ‘influence’. One’s influence, of course, might be weak or strong, including influence over few things done by an organization or many. In the development context, stakeholders rarely have control in the strong sense over development projects, and yet we may want to say that, in so far as

certain stakeholders have achieved greater influence within a project, that project was made more democratic. It is more useful, therefore, to define 'more democratic' in terms of influence (narrow or wide, weaker or stronger) than in terms of control in any strong sense. Indeed, this may be consistent with Cunningham's conception, and, if so, then it is not a modification so much as a clarification.

*Political activity and its effects*

'More democratic', however, is not synonymous with 'more influential'. The influence must be of a particular type. Imagine this possible scene from a magical-realist novel. Spirits of the city square grant Hector three wishes, provided that he chooses wishes that reduce corruption in city administration. This, of course, makes Hector more influential on how his city politicians and administrators behave, and the effects may be that the city functions more democratically. But Hector's gain in influence does not in itself make the city more democratic. On the other hand, if Hector had, with others, succeeded in bringing about the same effects by means of public campaigning (whether electoral, protest, or civil disobedience), then this gain in influence would count as a gain in democratic functioning. The reason for this difference is that magic is not the type of influence that constitutes democratic functioning. The relevant type is exercising influence through electoral and other campaigning, or similar types of political activity. I draw the boundaries of the political quite widely: I take the defining feature of 'political activity' to be mobilizing support with a view to influencing decision-making. So defined, political activity can take place in any sphere of life, and, as a result, it is legitimate to ask how democratically any sphere of life functions. But for the most part, interest in 'democratic' as an evaluative term focuses on decision-making that can have the greatest influence on people's well-being and their ability to achieve it. Consequently, this focus centers on decision-makers and institutions that can have the greatest effect on the population in this regard. Hence, for the most part, interest in using 'democratic' as a critical and evaluative term focuses on the public sphere (including public regulation or takeover of private decision-making).

It may be argued that this stretches the meaning of 'democratic' beyond any reasonable shape, since, properly speaking, 'democratic' should refer specifically to activity within democratic institutions — such as voting in general elections, running for election, and voting as an elected representative. However, the narrower definition seems to exclude too many people from the scope of democratic activity. For instance, while it includes candidates, it would seem to exclude their supporters who put time and effort into their campaigns. And if campaigners for candidates are counted as participating in democratic activity, it seems arbitrary to exclude people who devote as much or more time and effort to issue-oriented campaigns, such as human rights advocates or environmental campaigners. In the development context, moreover, the rights-based



approach to development has advocated a wide range of participation in political life. The *Human Development Report* of 2000 calls for a strategy of “using civil and political rights — of participation, association, free speech and information — to enlarge the political space and press for social and economic rights” (United Nations Development Programme, 2000, p. 75). It is inevitable, in such contexts, that many types of political activity will come into play, as the *Human Development Report 2002* acknowledges. “In democratic societies people participate in the public sphere in many ways — debating issues with friends and neighbors, writing to newspapers on the rights and wrongs of government policies, marching in protests, becoming members of political parties or trade unions — giving them a say in decisions that affect our lives” (United Nations Development Programme, 2000, p. 75). We should want to ask and evaluate to what extent such activism constitutes enhancement of democracy. But if the meaning of ‘democratic activity’ is limited to activity within democratic institutions, that question cannot even be asked.

Whether people are free to engage in a wide range of political activity is one dimension in which to judge how democratically political life is functioning. However, there is another dimension, equally important: what influence that activity gives people over decisions and outcomes that are important. Before saying more about this, we need to clarify: by what criterion is this importance to be judged?

### *Importance*

Which are the aspects of life over which democratic control or influence would be most important? If we cannot tell which decision-making it is most important to bring under democratic control, then we cannot tell when a democratic system is functioning more democratically or less so. Suppose we follow Cunningham in saying that a social unit becomes more democratic in so far as more of its members acquire greater control over more aspects of their lives that are important (Cunningham, 1987, pp. 25–27). The question remains: important how? Adopting subjective importance as the criterion would raise the familiar problem of reduced expectations. In order to avoid subjective importance as the criterion, Cunningham proposed, instead: importance for the sake of enhancing democracy. This pragmatic, recursive approach has its advantages, chiefly in avoiding both subjectivism and dogmatism over which aspects of one’s life it is important to control. However, with the resources of the capabilities approach (Sen, 1992, 2000; Nussbaum, 2000; Alkire, 2002), another account can be given, by tying the criterion for decision-making importance to capabilities that people have reason to value.

In brief, having a ‘capability’ in this sense means having what Sen sometimes calls the ‘substantive freedom’ to achieve something for oneself — indicating by ‘substantive’ that this freedom comprises not only liberty (freedom from interference), but the real opportunity required for achieving it. Which capabilities are most important? As a first step, consider

those ways of functioning that are part and parcel of living well. These might include meeting needs, keeping healthy, having an occupation, cultivating good personal relationships, and so on. Then the valuable capabilities include substantive freedom to meet needs, to keep healthy, to have an occupation, to develop personal relationships, and so on. As a second step, let us not substitute our own judgment for that of other people, but let us respect that we all have reasons for valuing particular ways of functioning, as constituents of living well. For all of us, these reasons get corrected from time to time in light of discussion and experience. The valuable ways of functioning, then, for any population, are the ways of functioning that they have good reason to value, and likewise the valuable capabilities are the capabilities to achieve those types of functioning that they have good reason to value, as constituents of living well. These particular capabilities comprise what Sen calls “well-being freedom” (Sen, 1992, p. 40; see also Sen, 1985).

Now let me state my revision of Cunningham’s proposal more precisely by identifying three constituent ideas. First we need to bear in mind that, while voting in elections is one type of political activity, there are other equally important types, such as public advocacy campaigns, demonstrations and strikes, and trade-union activity. We are interested in these types of action both (on the input side) regarding their availability to individuals and (on the output side) regarding their effectiveness. The capabilities of individuals to engage in such collective actions vary with the effective extent of their civil and political rights. Arguably they vary as well with the availability of education and communication, and with the degree to which cultural factors encourage or discourage such activity. On the output side, we are interested in impacts upon capabilities that can be effected by these means. Political activity leading to better public finance for education may have the effect of enhancing capabilities to become educated, which may likewise be diminished where political activity cannot resist imposition of higher school fees.

This yields the idea of sharing in political influence over decisions affecting capabilities that people have reason to value. It also enables us to distinguish several different ways in which such influence might be shared well or badly. On the input side, ‘better sharing’ means that more people are capable of engaging in political activity, possibly in a greater variety of ways. Examples might include removing impediments to voting, but also removing impediments to association, organizing and mobilization, and various means of expression. On the output side, ‘better sharing’ means that the political activity in which people can engage can be more effective in reducing capability risks and shortfalls — which in a contemporary way echoes the Lockean idea of preserving each other (Locke, 1690, book II, ch. II, §6). As an example, there is ongoing debate between federalists and separatists in Québec as to whether an independent Québec would be better able to protect and enhance health care, employment, and other aspects of social welfare. Debates about whether developing countries are

being hamstrung by international financial institutions can be placed in the same category. These are debates about whether there is sufficient shared influence through domestic political activity over the state of citizens' valuable capabilities.

This notion of functioning more democratically may be clarified by the following.

- *Functioning more democratically.* Political life functions more democratically when political influence on decision-making affecting valuable capabilities is better shared.
- *Better sharing of influence.* Sharing of influence is better when one or more of the following is true:
  - (a) There are more types or instances of political activity in which people are capable of participating.
  - (b) The political activity of which people are capable has greater influence over decision-making that would affect valuable capabilities.
  - (c) Decision-making influenced by political activity is more effective in preserving or enhancing valuable capabilities.

Greater access to political activity makes political life more democratic, but it is yet more democratic if that activity influences decision-making, and more democratic still if the decision-making affected has a real impact on the capabilities that people value as building-blocks of a good life. What if (b) occurs without (a)? This might occur when decision-makers become more attentive to the people. In this way, *good governance* (e.g. through good consultation) can render political life more democratic without requiring increased political activity on the part of citizens. This may be especially important in developing regions, where, for people struggling to make a living, time is scarce. This may also clarify the democratic role that can be played by civil society organizations. They need not be seen as distorting democracy by imposing special interests. On the contrary, if, by making decision-makers more attentive, then, by achieving greater influence for citizens upon decision-making, they may contribute to making political life more democratic. And if (c) occurs without (b) or (a)? This would occur if decision-making is more effective in preserving or enhancing capabilities, even though the influence of political activity is no greater. This might occur if external circumstances change, so that government is better able to meet the needs and demands that are expressed in political activity. A good reason for considering this an enhancement of democratic functioning is that, in the contrary case, where external (e.g. international) circumstances made a government less able to meet politically expressed needs and demands, we would want to count this as a democratic setback.

The foregoing still falls short in two respects. First, consider this scenario:

- *Scenario 5: elite awakening.* A relatively privileged interest group that had previously been politically quiescent is awakened by political threats to its position and succeeds in protecting its privileged position by capturing greater political influence. They enjoy high levels of health, education, and earning power, and their political intervention succeeds in preserving these advantages.

If *better sharing of influence* were the only criterion by which to assess this case, we would have to conclude that the *elite awakening* does make political life more democratic. This raises an interesting conceptual challenge: in what sense is *elite awakening not* an improvement in democratic functioning? To answer this, we must focus on democracy as a normative concept and ask: What does democratic functioning involve, in so far as it is a worthy social goal? Even if we cannot give a full affirmative answer, it does seem reasonable to say, as a partial response, that the proper goal of democratic functioning is *not* the creation and preservation of elites. This suggests a contrasting stronger sense of 'democratic functioning':

*Stronger democracy*

Sharing of influence is better *in a stronger sense* when its effects on capabilities are non-privileging; for example, in the following ways:

- (a) the social standards for service and outcomes relevant to basic capabilities (such as health, education, employment) are raised;
- (b) shortfalls in such capabilities, below the social standards, are reduced; and
- (c) support for exceptional capabilities (such as higher education, coaching in arts and sports) are made more widely accessible.

Whether democracy is *stronger* in this sense depends on what it can accomplish. The idea is that democracy is stronger if public influence creates or widens access to capability-enhancing institutions (such as schools) and programs (such as social welfare) for the population as a whole, rather than for elites. It may do this by raising social standards (such as rates of literacy or educational attainment), by reducing poverty (capability shortfalls), or widening accessibility to high-achievement activities (such as higher education, arts and sports). The *awakening elites* scenario moves in the opposite direction, towards preserving capability privilege.

Social standards may vary somewhat from region to region. Nevertheless, there are capabilities that ought to be respected, protected, assured and promoted for everyone, and, for the most part, each of these has been recognized in the past 60 years as the content or substance of a human right. Permissible variation, then, would concern the *how* rather than the *what*, and in so far as there is substantive difference between

these capabilities as people in some regions enjoy them, compared with others, upward harmonization of social standards is called for. In stronger democracy this result is achieved by better sharing of influence over decision-making.

One further ambiguity remains to be cleared up. Consider this scenario:

- *Scenario 6: solidarity regained.* A country populated by good global citizens who want to preserve and enhance the capabilities of people in other countries have a government locked into foreign relations that have the opposite effects — invading some countries and impoverishing others. Citizens feel frustrated and incapable of changing this, until a dramatic national event galvanizes them to throw out the government and risk an independent foreign policy.

If 'better influence' over capabilities were understood narrowly to mean influence only over the capabilities within one's own country, then *solidarity regained* would not be a story of democratic victory.<sup>3</sup> As it is not clear to me why democracy should always be self-seeking, and never other-regarding or altruistic, I offer one more clarification:

- *Democratic solidarity with outsiders.* Influence is also better-shared when it enables one population to realize the desires they share to support the efforts of other populations to preserve or enhance their valuable capabilities and democratic functioning.

Notice that this pertains only to cases of genuine solidarity; that is, support by one people for another people, consistent with the right of peoples to self-determination. Cases of intervention need separate treatment, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

The ideas of better sharing of influence, stronger democracy, and democratic solidarity with outsiders are meant to clarify the idea of functioning more democratically. This is a first step towards further clarifying ideas of democratic capability and democratic deficit. Clarifying these latter ideas raises further difficulties, and it requires further empirical research as well; therefore, I will not attempt this clarification here. Let us see now whether the underlying idea of functioning more democratically can do any useful work in development contexts.

### **Does participation make development more democratic?**

Although participatory development is regarded by many as part of the current orthodoxy in development thinking (Henkel and Stirrat, 2001, p. 168; Parfitt, 2004, p. 537), the 15-year debate over it has not come to an end, and many criticisms are well-documented and deserve careful consideration (Williams, 2004). Within this debate, the capabilities approach has been used mainly to illuminate some of the virtues of

participatory approaches and to begin developing measures of success. Sabine Alkire's (2002) work is most noteworthy in this regard. However, not all implementations of participatory development are equally virtuous, and there are nagging questions about whether even exemplary cases of participation do not serve to subordinate local people to the agendas of national governments and international organizations (Rahnema, 1992; Ferguson, 1994; Kothari, 2001). The democratic-functioning approach can support a more complex and nuanced view of participation by sorting out which participatory schemes enable development to function more democratically, and, among these, which do so only incompletely. This enables us to recognize the democratic merits of participation without being blinded to its shortcomings, and conversely to recognize its shortcomings without losing sight of its merits.

### *Not all participation is democratic*

Alkire defines 'participation' by saying, "'Participation' refers to the process of discussion, information gathering, implementation, and evaluation by the group(s) directly affected by an activity," and "participation is a method of decision-making in which the participants who are directly affected by an action make the choice" (Alkire, 2002, pp. 129–130). So defined, it has four main virtues: (a) Participation is intrinsically valuable in so far as it enhances the participants' agency (Alkire, 2002, pp. 130–131); also, "being able to do something not only for oneself but also for other members of the society is one of the elementary freedoms which people have reason to value" (Drèze and Sen, 1995, p. 106), and participation can also have intrinsic value in so far as participants achieve friendship, sociability, and sense of community (Alkire, 2002, p. 131). (b) Participation is instrumentally valuable in so far as it causes the well-being freedom of participants and others to be enhanced. (c) Participation can influence value-formation in important ways, in so far as discussion makes participants better aware of effects that realization of particular values will have, not only on themselves but also on other people. Finally, (d) participation enables identity formation to be affected by people's own choices, rather than by inertia or the choices of more powerful others (Alkire, 2002, pp. 131–143).

If participation is to have these effects, it must be defined somewhat narrowly. By contrast, some authors combine participation in effective decision-making with numerous weaker forms of participation, yielding a continuum of grades of participation. The following is one example:

1. Passive participation ... being told what is going to happen ...
2. Participation in information giving
3. Participation by consultation ... by being consulted, and external people listen to their views. ... Such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision making ...

4. Participation for material incentives ... for example labour, in exchange for food, cash, or other material incentives. ...
5. Functional participation ... to meet predetermined objectives ... after major decisions have been made. ...
6. Interactive participation ... joint analysis, which leads to action plans and the formation of new local institutions or the strengthening of existing ones. ... These groups take control over local decisions, and so people have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
7. Self-mobilization ... taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used. ... may or may not challenge existing inequitable distributions of wealth and power. (Gaventa, 1998, p. 157, based on Pretty, 1994).

Clearly grades 1–4 will have little impact on participants' agency, value formation, or identify formation, although participation through material exchange may enhance well-being freedom, if only in the short term. Therefore the kind of participation that can be expected to have these desirable effects must be defined as “a method of decision-making in which the participants who are directly affected by an action *make the choice*” (Alkire, 2002, p. 130; emphasis added), thus limiting its scope to grades 5–7 in the foregoing scheme.

The upshot of Alkire's definition is to use ‘participation’ to capture the best instances, excluding schemes that might qualify as ‘participation’ in a broader sense but would lack the virtues of stakeholder decision-making. What does the democratic-functioning approach add to this? It offers a further reason for valuing stakeholder decision-making; it indicates a shortcoming that can afflict even these sorts of participatory schemes; and it indicates more modest democratic merits that can be found in weaker participatory schemes, outside Alkire's definition.

The further reason for valuing the schemes that fit Alkire's definition is that they have the virtue of making development *function more democratically*. There is no better way to influence decision-makers than to become one of them. This clearly satisfies the criteria for better sharing of influence, as long as decision-making succeeds at enhancing valuable capabilities. Nevertheless, two shortcomings can arise. One is that decision-making may remain ineffective if adequate resources are not at hand. Another is that, if decision-making is skewed by power relations among the stakeholders, there may be little chance of achieving the egalitarian outcomes of *stronger democracy*. On the scale of democratic merit, stakeholder decision-making schemes meeting Alkire's definition may generally occupy the upper end, but they are on the same scale after all; they do not occupy a scale all their own. Indeed, there have been complex participatory schemes, where, in the same region, those

decision-making bodies that are very inclusive of stakeholders lack power and resources to do much for them, while those bodies with power and resources are not very inclusive. For instance:

Decentralization and participation projects currently practiced in the Sahelian countries do not necessarily devolve central state powers or create truly community institutions. Many apparent decentralization efforts re-centralize with one hand what they devolve with the other. ... when local structures have an iota of representivity, no powers are devolved to them, and when local structures have powers, they are not representative. (Ribot, 2000, p. 31)

That is, the decision-making that people can influence is ineffective, and the effective decision-making is not open to their influence. Either way, forest management is not functioning more democratically through these participatory schemes. Similarly, the non-governmental organizations called “brief-case NGOs” (Peters, 2000, p. 8), which spring up to capture development funds by pretending to offer projects that are community-based, may fail on all counts: affording no one else influence or a direct role in decision-making, and possibly affecting the well-being of no one but the entrepreneur.

### *Participation and local domination*

One criticism that is often made of participatory development schemes is that they sometimes reproduce social inequalities within communities. Hence some stakeholders will end up having greater voice and influence than others. Often it is women who are marginalized in this way. “In one smallholder project in The Gambia, difficulties arose when land allocation committees failed to ensure access by poor women to newly cleared swampland. This was because the committees, designed to give women full representation, were gradually co-opted by the men who did the clearing work” (Alamgir, 1989, p. 16). Resolving this inequity required intervention, rather than a hands-off approach to community decision-making. In this way, as Cornwall has observed, adducing numerous further cases, “the very projects that appear so transformative can turn out to be supportive of a status quo that is highly inequitable for *women*” (2003, p. 1329). Moreover, even in cases where women achieve formal representation on decision-making bodies, having a voice may be far less than equivalent to having influence, and even where influence is achieved it may end up being used by some women against others (Cornwall, 2003, pp. 1329–1330), or, in other cases, it can be met with a damaging male backlash (Cornwall, 2003, p. 1334).

The democratic functioning approach acknowledges the complexity of these cases. As long as their outcomes are actually to enhance valuable capabilities, and if this occurs at least through the influence of some



members of the community, then at least *in a weak sense* the life of the community has been made somewhat more democratic. On the other hand, to the extent that others remain excluded from this influence, democratization remains incomplete. And if the outcomes privilege those who have seized the lion's share of influence, then to that extent the ideal of stronger democracy remains distant. This may highlight a lack of democratic functioning for the community's women, or for poor women in particular. When one dysfunctionality is reduced, others may be revealed, or even exacerbated; for instance, by male backlash. These backlash cases also illustrate the flexibility of the democratic-functioning approach: it is not a criterion that applies just to structures, it also applies to the politics, to particular ways in which those structures may operate. Even if women gain greater voice, their influence may be temporary, and eventually the political process may turn out be damaging to their well-being. The normative conclusion to draw is not that it was wrong to seek voice, for that would have been to avoid one shortfall in democratic functioning by accepting another. The normative conclusion is rather the obvious one, that women ought to enjoy political activity and influence without having to pay for this with beatings and a higher divorce rate (Cornwall, 2003, p. 1334).

It is sometimes argued that participation schemes are inevitably dominated by socially and economically more powerful groups within communities, who thereby seize the greater share of benefits. Consequently, the argument goes, because this is inevitable, it should not be regarded as a failing. Writing of the Eastern India Rainfed Farming Project, Sanjay Kumar and Stuart Corbridge have asserted:

... the Project is a success in conventional (here 'farming systems') terms. Better-off villagers are making good use of Project seeds, and there is broad support for the check dams and irrigation schemes that have benefited more landed social groups. But ... there is little to suggest that the Project is doing much directly to improve the livelihoods of the poor and the poorest. By this standard the Project is 'failing' .... But this 'failure is in large part a consequence of the definition of 'success' that has been imposed on the Project. ... Just as it would be absurd to judge DFID [the UK Department for International Development] against its commitment to halve world poverty by 2015, so it would be unhelpful to conclude that the EIRFP has failed as a development project. (Kumar and Corbridge, 2002, p. 96)

From the perspective of democratic functioning, we would see cases like this differently: we would see some success in communities functioning more democratically, at least in a weak sense, yet we would also see residual shortfalls in democratic functioning specific to the poorest members of those communities. It does not follow from this that these projects should not have proceeded at all, for that would be to use one

democratic dysfunctionality of this community (excluding the poor) as an excuse for inaction against the broader democratic dysfunctionality of the community as a whole. Where Kumar and Corbridge go wrong is in thinking that the failings of the project are insignificant compared with its successes. Again, the more reasonable conclusion would be that the business of reducing democratic dysfunctionality in these communities remains unfinished. The democratic-functioning approach will criticize participatory schemes for the dysfunctions that they leave untouched, but it will not view these as grounds for opposing participatory development altogether.

### *Participation below and domination from above*

A further line of criticism is that whatever decision-making can be done by stakeholders in participatory schemes, the wider range of options has already been set by institutional agendas of local states and donor organizations. Hence participation merely gives an appearance of local autonomy to a process that more fundamentally is being 'teleguided' from afar (Rahnema, 1992, p. 116). Moreover, if local stakeholders have been made to believe that they are responsible for a project, then they can be blamed if this and similar projects fail to achieve significant improvements in people's lives (Williams, 2004, p. 565). The most widely published version of this argument is inspired by a reading of Michel Foucault, which claims that, by infecting communities with foreign knowledge systems, participatory activities disrupt, displace, and disable local knowledge systems and thus undermine local communities' capabilities of authentic action. This opens up a rich line of questioning:

Did the new participatory approaches actually lead to any substantial change in the nature of development, or did they serve only as band-aid operations to give a new lease of life to an ageing institution? Did (or can) such methods as dialogical interaction, conscientization and participatory action research really succeed in halting the processes of domination, manipulation and colonization of the mind? Can they really help bring about new forms of knowledge, power, action and know-how, needed to create a different type of society? Or is the new participatory myth like a Trojan horse which may end up by substituting a subtle kind of teleguided and masterly organized participation for the old types of intransitive or culturally defined participation, proper to vernacular societies? (Rahnema, 1992, pp. 124–125)

While I find that this approach rests on multiple errors about the nature of knowledge, power, and normative criticism — indeed, leaving no room at all for legitimate normative criticism — addressing these issues adequately would take us too far afield. Instead, I will merely note that the

democratic-functioning approach articulates some rather different questions about whether local participation is sufficiently autonomous.

The first question is whether an attempt at participatory development achieves a forum for collective action for stakeholders. Some schemes that are purported to be participatory do this poorly: levels 1–4 in the Gaventa/Pretty hierarchy, briefcase-non-governmental organizations, and similar instances of elite capture. In these schemes there is no collective political decision-making in which to be included. Others do better. The democratic-functioning approach entails no preference among modern versus traditional forms of decision-making. Some fora for collective political action blend modern and traditional elements; for instance, the legislative assembly of the new Canadian territory of Nunavut, which is structured as a non-partisan consensus government, in keeping with traditional values of the majority Innu people (White, 2001; O'Brien, 2003). Democratic functioning is not necessarily diminished by reliance on traditional arrangements. Instead, we judge the rise or fall in a people's democratic functioning according to its influence on capabilities that the people have reason to value, and on how well-shared that influence is.

And so the second question is what influence such decision-making has on people's well-being, especially on prospects for reducing capability shortfalls. If the Foucauldian critics are wary of ethnocentrism regarding people's well-being, so is the capabilities approach, which expresses this wariness by insisting that the capabilities that matter are those that people have reason to value.

The third question, of course, is whether the influence that stakeholders have, through a participatory scheme, over these capabilities, is well-shared. The concern here is the one highlighted by Cooke and Kothari, that group dynamics lead to participatory decisions that reinforce the interests of groups that are already powerful (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). However, it is possible to navigate this concern without taking Foucault on board. The democratic functioning approach does so simply by recognizing that a democratic dysfunctionality persists when the marginalization of women or other social groups is reinforced by participatory decision-making.

These questions can be posed again regarding non-local decision-making over development policy and finance. In relation to national governments and international organizations, the democratic capability of communities is extremely weak (Linklater, 1999; Porter, 2001; Nielsen, 2003). Social movements are at present the primary form of public-sphere action by which local communities can influence development institutions or national governments, and their increasing occurrence testifies to an underlying lack of influence over conditions and plans dramatically affecting people's well-being (United Nations Development Programme, 2002, ch. 5). The claim that participatory development is powerless to address *this* democratic dysfunctionality seems obviously true. But these are not solid grounds for opposing the implementation of participatory

development, for a number of reasons. First, *with* participatory development in an undemocratic system of national/international institutions, we have one *less* democratic shortfall than we would have *without* participatory development. Second, some types of participation afford greater autonomy of decision-making to local communities than others do. Some critical questions here are how dependent the local community is for resources and what degree of initiative it is able to take in seeking resources from national and international sources. Recall that the top level in the Gaventa/Pretty scale of participation schemes is “self-mobilization ... taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used” (Gaventa, 1998, p. 157). Third, participatory schemes can promote and enhance practical “political capabilities” that “provide the set of navigational skills needed to move through political space, and the tools to re-shape these spaces where this is possible” (Cornwall, 2002; Williams, 2004). Therefore the weakness of local people’s ability to influence national and international institutions should be expressed as a criticism of national and international politics and political structures, and it is misplaced when it is made as a criticism of participatory development.

## **Conclusion**

Both for development and in other political contexts, we have much to gain by clarifying what is involved in making political life function more democratically. I have argued that it involves better sharing of influence over decision-making to preserve and enhance the capabilities that we have reason to value. This approach supports a complex and judicious view of some primary merits and shortcomings of participatory development schemes. While endorsing participation for the democratic dysfunctions that it removes, the approach remains critical of those that persist, both within these schemes and in their external relations with national and international institutions. It gives reason to recognize as a merit of participation that it makes development more democratic, and, as a fault, that it may not always make development democratic enough.

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## Notes

1. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this formulation.
2. I introduce this only as an illustration. In fact, the broader and vaguer idea of rule or decision-making by the many might be more plausible as the core concept of democracy.
3. I thank Frances Stewart for raising this problem.

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