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THE DESIRE FOR EQUALITY: THE FUNCTION OF THE PARTICIPATION AND PARTNERSHIP DISCOURSES IN DEVELOPMENT

Túžba po rovnosti: funkcia diskurzov participácie a partnerstva v rozvoji

TOMÁŠ IMRICH PROFANT

*Katedra medzinárodných politických vzťahov | Department of International Political Relations
Fakulta medzinárodných vzťahov | Faculty of International Relations
Ekonomická univerzita v Bratislave | University of Economics in Bratislava
Dolnozemska cesta 1, 852 35 Bratislava, Slovak Republic
E-mail: tomas.profant@euba.sk*

Annotation

The partnership and participation discourses are crucial development discourses that are at the intersection between an abstract development and a local democracy. The aim of this paper is to analyze one segment of the functions of the participation and partnership discourses and the relation between desire and these two discourses. The methodology of the analysis follows Foucault's Archaeology of Knowledge, in particular the rules of formation of a discourse using mostly secondary sources as the basis of reconstructing the analyzed discourses. The analysis focuses on the legitimizing, depoliticizing and hierarchizing functions and finds out that both terms – partnership and participation – legitimize projects conducted in their name. Similar to the term 'development' they contain a positive connotation while remaining rather empty. At the same time by focusing on technical solutions participation and partnership depoliticize unequal relations of power. Finally, despite its aim the partnership/participation discourse may actually undermine attempts at equality within development discourse. The desires connected to the discourse show that the participation and partnership may be the result of the lack in the liberal democracies.

Keywords

discourse, partnership, participation, development

Anotace

Diskurzy partnerstva a participácie sú kľúčové rozvojové diskurzy nachádzajúce sa na križovatke medzi abstraktným rozvojom a lokálnou demokraciou. Cieľom tohto príspevku je analyzovať jeden segment funkcií diskurzov participácie a partnerstva a vzťahu medzi túžbou a týmito dvoma diskurzami. Metodológia analýzy nasleduje Foucaultovu Archeológiu vedenia, konkrétne pravidlá formovania diskurzy využívajú najmä sekundárne zdroje ako základ pre rekonštrukciu diskurzov. Analýza sa zameriava na legitimizačnú, depolitizačnú a hierarchizačnú funkciu a zisťuje, že oba pojmy – partnerstvo a participácia – legitimizujú projekty vykonávané v ich mene. Podobne ako termín "rozvoj", obsahujú pozitívnu konotáciu, pričom ostávajú prázdny. Zároveň zameranie na technické riešenia participácie a partnerstva depolitizuje nerovné mocenské vzťahy.

Kľúčová slova

diskurz, partnerstvo, participácia, rozvoj

JEL Classification:O22, O38

1. Introduction, aim and the method

Development discourse has been formed by modernization theories since its inception, but a series of failures led to an invention of new development strategies, which created new development (sub)discourses around them. One such innovation included first the discourse of participation and later the discourse of partnership. Even though both were really reinventions rather than novelties, they aimed to rectify the problems connected to development projects at the local as well as national level. Whereas the partnership discourse focuses more at the national level and the participatory discourse at the local, regional and municipal level, it makes sense to analyze both as both of them rhetorically aim at an equal partnership with the recipients of aid.

The origin of the participatory discourse can be traced back to the colonial era. Already Joseph Oldham said that the success of any rural reconstruction scheme would ultimately rest on the education and participation of the whole community” (Hodge, 2007: 187). During the colonial period participation really meant the so called community development. Later during the 1960s and 1970s participation became more radical with liberation theology to finally become mainstream that was criticized already in the early 2000s as the new form of tyranny (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

The partnership discourse was a response to the failure of the Structural Adjustment Programs. A cooperation with the receiving governments was supposed to improve the way these programs were created and implemented and was supposed to lead to better outcomes. At the same time the passive other was no longer to be passive as s/he was to become a partner and as such would be equally responsible for the outcomes.

Both partnership and participation were a response to the critique of aid conditionality. No longer was aid to be understood as a one way endeavour of the donor. Participating subjects or partners were to have a say in the way ‘aid’ was distributed and aid was to become cooperation.

Overall, during the 1980s the time has come for yet another discursive change in the development discourse. This was the urgent need for the emergence of the participation and partnership in development. As already said, these new approaches immediately started to create discourses around them and it is these discourses that require academic (and public) attention.

The aim of this contribution is to analyze one segment of the partnership and participation discourses based on Foucault’s Archaeology of knowledge. The paper will focus on the legitimizing function, depoliticizing function and the potential for a hierarchizing function in these two discourses using mainly secondary sources as the resource that will enable me to reconstruct this part of the participation and partnership discourses.

The method used will be an analysis of the secondary data, which will be transformed into the methodological format of Foucault’s rules of formation. This format will enable me to fulfil the aim of the paper – to analyze the function of discourses under examination.

The particular notion of the function “that the discourse under study must carry out in a field of non-discursive practices” (Foucault, 2002: 75) can be found within the way strategies are formed in Foucault’s rules of formation of a discourse. Such a function is crucial for understanding the way discourses influence practices inside and outside of their discursive realm.

The formation of strategies include also the concept of desire connected to a discourse. Simply put, a discourse can be used to satisfy its subject. What is the relation between a desire and the partnership and participation in development? First I will analyze the function of the examined discourses and then the connection between desire and these discourses.

2. Results: The functions of the participation and partnership discourses

2.1 The legitimizing function

The participatory/partnership discourse just like other development discourses has a function in the field of non-discursive practices. One can decipher again the legitimizing and depoliticizing function. The discourse also serves as a response to the urgent need that preceded its emergence.

As already said, participation and partnership “are a response to apparent development failure” (Crewe and Harrison, 2002: 160). This response is connected to the legitimizing effect of the participation/partnership discourse. Participation is in general understood as a “good thing” (Cleaver, 1999: 598) and this is also visible in the wide acceptance of the idea of participation also among its critics. According to White, it is a “catch-all term” (White, 1996: 7, 14). The word gains a similar function to the term “development”. Participatory implies democratic or more democratic than before and that simply means good and better. And if “development” has to admit failures, a new adjective a new approach makes the signifier “development” slide to yet another element of “development” that has not been tried before (even if participation has been here for much longer). This time the signifier is the participating partner. As long as s/he is participating at the project, this new method – whose righteousness is assumed because how could participating people ever be wrong – secures successful outcomes. Just as if governance is good the results have to be good or if women participate then things should work out

because they are *the* element of “development” that has been neglected, etc. The invocation of participation thus implies a pro-people by people project that is good by definition. The function of the discourse is thus to legitimize the practice.

Again, similar to the term “development” that can be characterized as an equivocal or quasi-empty signifier, both terms partnership and participation are very loosely used and part of their attractiveness lies in their “slipperiness” (Crewe and Harrison, 2002: 73). The same argument is made by Stirrat and Henkel (1997: 75), “partnership is a peculiarly ambiguous concept.” On the one hand it implies a denial of individual identity as we share everything and an NGO can thus identify with the local world, on the other it allows an NGO to claim certain authenticity as an NGO “is of the people and for the people” (ibid.). Both partners are of the same nature (as they share everything) and partnership implies cooperation between partners – an automatic alignment and agreement. Thus, “the language of partnership helps with the problem of legitimacy” (Crewe and Harrison, 2002: 73).

Further, the critique of Robert Chambers’ empiricism should be mentioned again. “Taking ‘what is’ and ‘what is done’ as given is not conducive to questioning and critique” (Kapoor, 2002: 102). A cursory review of the participatory literature “reveals a huge volume of work on techniques” (Cleaver, 1999: 600). The assumption that the participatory approach is practice driven and is based on what actually happens in the field rather than on particular ontological and epistemological assumptions legitimizes these assumptions as there is no reason to question them. One can only attempt to do this (as Kapoor does) after admitting that indeed any practice of “development” is the result of such assumptions and the empirical event that one can analyze can be inherently wrong due to these assumptions. It might be the case that the theory behind participation is the problem and not the actual misapplied practical guides to what to do in the field. The perspective that participation is only empirical and contains e.g. only field-oriented codes of conduct makes deeper analysis redundant. This way the roots of the participatory approach and its discourse are exempt from critical inquiry and thus legitimized.

2.2 The depoliticizing function

Quite a few authors mention depoliticization as an important function of both participation and partnership. The main problem is that the focus on technical solutions “can (...) obscure the politics of participation. A quota for the inclusion of poor women on the executive board for example, seems to provide the answer. But of course, simply being there does not ensure that those women have a real say” (White, 1996: 7). The discourse of participation excludes the politics as an issue as the mere act of participating is supposed to secure equality in decision making (see also Mosse, 1994).

Moreover, according to Mosse the Kribhco Indo-British Rainfed Farming Project that he studied “generated a wealth of information on crops, soils, erosion, agro-inputs, and so forth, (but) the PRAs (Participatory Rural Appraisals) failed to generate information on issues such as encroachment, or relations with the forest department or police, known to be key issues in the area, but perceived as beyond the remit of the project” (ibid.: 516). Political issues are not taken account of as they do not fit the framework of a “development” and in this case of a participatory project. Participation can happen, but not only can it depoliticize within a project, it also depoliticizes the political surroundings of a project.

From a larger perspective, a similar claim can be made about partnership. According to Mercer (2003: 743) “the performance of partnership in the interest of ‘good governance’ (...) serves to legitimize the continued (structural) adjustment.”

Furthermore, knowledge is in the participatory discourse conceptualized as a fixed commodity that people have. However, according to Kothari (2001: 141) “knowledge is culturally, socially and politically produced and is continuously reformulated as a powerful normative construct.” One therefore cannot isolate it from power relations, but it is embedded in them. The participatory approach is capable of unearthing the material realities of who gets what, “but not necessarily the processes by which this happens or the ways in which the knowledge produced through participatory techniques is a normalized one that reflects and articulates wider power relations in society” (ibid.). These wider – political – power relations thus get to be depoliticized through the particular understanding of knowledge as something that one possesses within the participatory discourse.

Moreover, “participative methods of inquiry simplify the nature of power and are thus in danger of encouraging a reassertion of power and social control not only by certain individuals and groups, but also of particular bodies of knowledge” (ibid.: 142). Not only does the participatory discourse depoliticize “visible” power relations, but particular bodies of knowledge as carriers of power are not recognized due to a simplified understanding of power typical for the participatory approach.

In general, there are thus two problems with depoliticization and the participatory approach. On the one hand, wider structural relations are excluded by focusing on the local. “Important and malign structural forces outside the cognisance and/or influence of participants are ignored and sustained” (Cooke, 2004: 42). One of the conclusion for Cooke is that for example not working for the World Bank “would prevent a lot of harm” (ibid.: 43). On the other hand, even when local relations of power are recognized to a certain extent and the last are put first, the simplified notion of power results in the reproduction of these as for example when women cloth their ideas in men’s language (Kapoor, 2002: 113, Mosse, 1994: 515). The participatory approach thus depoliticizes at both levels – the local and the global/national.

The work of Robert Chambers has one more depoliticizing effect. In his work he calls for the reversals of position. The first are supposed to be put last and vice versa. No matter how appealing this may seem, it is problematic. “What Chambers appears to be saying is that the tools to reverse the inequalities and power differentials that characterize ‘underdevelopment’ are themselves those reversals” (Henkel and Stirrat, 2001: 177). His approach is much closer to arousing social change through personal agency than through political changes of structures. The way forward is through personal conversion. According to him, it is the personal attitudes that have to be changed such as “ego, ambition, family-first motivation and the illusion of impotence” (Chambers in ibid.). Such an approach adds to the depoliticizing effect of participation as already the intent of participation formulated in the discourse avoids politics.

It is not only participation, but also partnership that depoliticizes unequal power relations. “The language of ‘partnership’ (...) is oddly blind to the unequal basis on which such aid partnerships are formed” (Crewe and Harrison, 2002: 22). This in reality may seem to be the function of the discourse. An aquaculture project in Zambia studied by Crewe and Harrison reveals the difference between the rhetoric and the actual positions of the partners. According to them: “although the language of cooperation permeates all planning documentation, this disguises both real and incipient conflict” (ibid.: 80). Cooperation during the project is assumed, but actually discussion between various collaborators “took place in Mansa, but from unequal positions” (ibid.). The authors go on to explore various conflicts that existed within the project and that were disguised by the discourse of partnership. It therefore seems that the function of the discourse is precisely to hide the real and incipient conflict behind the partnership rhetoric.

The depoliticizing function is more particularly visible in relation to the Other. According to Dahl, the contractual discourse of partnership prepares “for the donor’s future blameless withdrawal in contrast to for example if the relationship had been constructed as one of friendship” (Dahl, 2001: 14). As the partnership discourse is related to sustainability, effectiveness and efficiency of the projects, it is the partner who is supposed to gain more responsibility for the projects. S/he is a partner (or owner) of the project and therefore also (partly) responsible for the outcome. “The supposed lack of sustainability is often attributed to partners’ organizational and institutional capacity and aid-dependence” (Eriksson Baaz, 2005: 7). As Crewe and Harrison (2002: 70) echo Dahl: “The partners of aid agencies are expected to achieve self-reliance through capacity building.” They call this “a more instrumental purpose” (ibid.) that partnership has served. The new rhetoric of equal partners allows the donors to attribute any failure to the partner as at least equally, if not fully, responsible. In the colonial discourse it was the lazy native who was responsible for any failure in the colonial policies. Today it is the partner. At the same time the partnership discourse again depoliticizes the relationship as one can look for other explanations to failure than those of unequal power relations. The lack of capacity on the side of the partner to implement a project sounds better as an explanation of a failure to a donor than for example an explanation that the donor failed to understand that wider politics influence the outcome or that the particular project is not really desired by the people and they therefore did not participate.

Crewe and Harrison mention two more functions. The partnership discourse for the World Bank is understood as a “global partnership” and includes cooperation with the NGOs. “Arguably, employing, funding, and consulting with NGOs could of course result in a much diminished critique of the World Bank by its NGO partners” (Crewe and Harrison, 2002: 71). That some NGOs in the development cooperation work more as governmental agencies than as non-governmental organization is nothing new. The term GONGOs (Government organized NGOs) or QUANGOs (Quasi NGOS, for a more detailed account see Reinalda, 2001) could better express their relation to the government. Such a relationship then makes it difficult for these actors to criticize their governments or other donors such as the World Bank. For the Czech Republic Ondřej Horký notes that the dependency of the “development” constituency on the financial sources from public budgets has weakened “the critical function of the civil society” (Horký, 2010: 40).

There is one more function to be mentioned related to cuts in the financial sources for the “development” cooperation. “Some would argue that the rhetoric of partnership arises partly as a justification for rationale for

these cuts” (Baylies in Crewe and Harrison, 2002: 77). If partners are supposed to take over the responsibility for “development” as partners they might also contribute materially as well.

2.3 The hierarchizing function?

Can one speak of a hierarchizing function of the participation/partnership discourse? Obviously, its aim is the contrary – to put us and them on an equal footing. However, Noxolo’s analysis shows that even here, Britain is represented as the dominant partner. But e.g. Crewe and Harrison criticize the partnership language for not paying attention to the unequal relations thus admitting that on the rhetorical level the discourse cares about these relations. In my opinion both positions are correct. There are instances of hierarchization, but one cannot understand this as the function of this discourse. There are too many attempts to equalize the position of the partners at least within the discourse.

Foucault speaks about non-discursive practices influencing the discourse. An important practice influenced the change of discourse. The critique of racialized representations in the development discourse led to the need to change the discourse to more equal representations. This need has been served by the partnership discourse. The postcolonial critique has been accommodated. On the one hand the participation/partnership discourse responded to general problems with the “development” failure, but also to a more particular critique of unequal representations. Generations of anthropologists, Anouar Abdel-Malek (1963) and Edward Said (1979) have finally managed to get their ideas into the mainstream. Probably one should see the Ethiopian famine and its representations as the turning point in bringing this critique to the mainstream, but still the work of the critical authors has not been in vain. No matter how instrumental than the discourse actually has been in actually making the partner accountable for his or her alleged failures again, the apparatus accepted the meaningfulness of the radical critique.

Yet, the apparatus is capable of blunting the critique in order to keep the main structure of the discourse intact. We thus see less radical critiques of the development discourse (Cornwall and Eade, 2010) that at times even reproduces the cultural racism of the development discourse (Osaghae 2010) and concludes that disengagement is not an option (Eade, 2010). A clearer continuity with the colonial origin of racist representations in the partnership discourse is to be found among the NGO employees working in the field. Eriksson Baaz (2005) shows that the stereotypes remain in the minds of the Northern “developers” despite the effort to promote the anti-racist representations and practices not only in the official documents but also among the subjects themselves. According to Baaz “the long-standing critique of Eurocentrism (...) has also impacted on the (development) industry” (ibid.: 150). She offers a story from a preparatory course for “development” workers and claims that a questioning attitude regarding the Self as being “the light of the learning” was “reflected in most interviews”. The critique of Eurocentrism really has an impact on the discourse. “While the partnership discourse has a strong instrumentalist dimension linked to sustainability, it also has a moral dimension articulating the need to challenge the paternalism of development aid” (ibid.: 153). But this explicit moral dimension articulated by the workers had also an implicit side. “This was expressed in comments such as ‘you could say that this is a culturally imperialist view point, but...’ (Interview 34) or ‘you might think that this sounds racist, but...’ (Interview 37). Yet this dimension was evident above all in the many hesitations and reversals in the interviews – efforts to avoid terminology which could be read as expressions of Eurocentrism or racism” (ibid.:154). On the one hand the workings of the anti-racist discourse are obvious here, as it influences the development discourse that adopts the rhetoric of partnership. The point that comes out of Baaz’s book is that many NGO workers are Eurocentric and it gets worse if they meet the Other in person in the field (ibid.: 173). Thus, even though certain powers outside the development discourse have influenced this discourse that has led to the creation of the discourse of participation/partnership, this has been instrumentalized to keep the Other accountable and at the same time these powers were not strong enough to actually counter the hierarchy created by the hundreds of years of colonial and development discourses.

3. The desire for equality

Finally, Foucault speaks about “the position of desire in relation to discourse” (Foucault, 2002: 76). There are desires at play in Žižekian sense in the practice of participation on the side of the Self. The notion of desire is according to Žižek based on the distinction between reality that is for us the wholeness and perfect harmony and the Real that denotes the impossibility of wholeness, a fundamental lack. We desire fullness and escape the incomplete Real to the perfect reality of a perfect car or ideal democracy. Ideology then is the misrecognition of the perfect harmony at the societal level (Kapoor, 2008: 61–62). In this sense participatory development is ideological. “It is promoted as benevolent, but forecloses various complicities and desires” (ibid.: 62).

What are these desires and fantasies? As we are now aware of the ethical problems connected with trusteeship we attempt at the self-effacement of ourselves. The figure of Participatory Rural Appraisal “facilitator” is promoted

as benevolent and neutral at the same time. The alleged neutrality enables us to disregard his or her powerful role as the manager of the whole participatory process. We are ashamed of being in charge of the Other's empowerment and therefore acknowledge it and present ourselves as neutral, but the result of course is not neutrality on the side of the manager-facilitator, but self-glorification.

This is connected to our awareness of the lack in liberal democracies. Critics have pointed out the rising democratic deficit in our societies and have demand a more participatory democracy. This desire is channeled in our own societies for example through public protests but we also transfer it to the global South. "We ask more of marginalized Third World communities than we do of ourselves" (ibid.: 65). How participatory really are our own institutions, asks Kapoor.

The third fantasy is that of consensus. Participatory "development" aims at reaching consensus in the community. However, such a consensus is a fantasy that avoids the messiness of the Real. The projects are in this sense self-delusional, democracy is pluralistic and a consensus is something impossible. The result is a danger of an inadequate participation when a meaningful deliberation does not take place or when decisions are taken after the programming design and goals have already been set. The micro-power processes are thus disregarded as the fantasy of consensus takes over the acceptance of the never perfect Real that we experience in daily politics (ibid.: 66-67).

Finally, participation serves our desire of control. As it is public, it enables self-policing, what Foucault calls Panopticism. The members of the community play their predefined roles, such as the village leader or a woman and of course there is the facilitator. As we wish the participation to work in a perfect manner, it is necessary to discipline the people to avoid conflicts and the panoptic, self-disciplining character of the practice of participation enables this. We thus also serve our voyeuristic desires as we can watch the process unfold.

Thus, desire on the side of the Self is very much part of participation. The disavowal of this desire is then "a technology of power, as a result of which participation can easily turn into its opposite – coercion, exclusion, panopticism, disciplinarity" (ibid.: 71). At the same time the Other is again treated as an object and not subject of "development". And the result often is that participation becomes a "euphemism for global neo-liberal capitalism" (ibid.). In sum, our desires prevent a meaningful participation from occurring.

4. Conclusions

Discourses govern our societies. An analysis of a discourse is necessary if we are to understand our political direction. This includes the subdiscourses of the development discourse – the partnership and the participation discourses. The aim of this chapter was to follow the methodology of Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* and analyse the formation of strategies within these two discourses in particular the function these discourses have in the field of non-discursive practices.

The analyses show the legitimizing function of the terms participation and partnership akin to the term 'development'. Both terms are positive enabling 'development' to go on with its own reinvention through participation and partnership. These terms are simply positive and as such by their nature legitimize whatever happens that is denoted by them. The analyses also show that the partnership and participation discourses have a depoliticizing function. The depoliticization is based on the focus on technical solutions to political problems. 'Development' projects may use a simplistic participatory procedure and thereby depoliticize or may collect a substantial amount of exact data and still ignore unequal relations of power between participants.

Partnership on the other hand can ignore the unequal nature of the partners within 'development' cooperation. They may be rhetorically represented as equal, but the inequality is based on the financial difference. One is still a donor and another a recipient. Of equal importance is the inclusion of NGOs within the discourse of partnership. These can be a powerful instrument of the government rather than of the non-governmental part of the society. Hierarchy is clearly attacked by both discourses. Yet the discourse as well as the identities keep the hierarchy despite the aim of the discourse. The Other can still be represented in a hierarchical way through problematic stereotypes and the Self can still consider him or herself as a superior.

Finally, the issue of desire becomes clear in the attempt to reach a consensus in a community. A futile attempt betraying our desire projected onto the Other. Overall, the function of the participation and the partnership discourses as well as their relation to a desire show the problematic nature of these discourses and the need to critically engage in the efforts to equalize (material) relations of power instead of expecting such relations to simply appear at will.

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