Helping communities to help themselves

- Evaluating the potential of participation in a Participatory Rural Appraisal in Kenya

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss and analyse participatory methods in development programs. The concept of participation has changed during the last decades in the development discourse towards an empowering approach. In participatory programs participation is considered as a means to empower communities. We find the potential for these programs depend on whether they can ensure an empowering participation. In our analysis of a Participatory Rural Appraisal in Kenya we have stated the obstacles of participation at the community level found in excluding and discriminating power structures, and in a lack of capabilities among the community members. To foster the conditions favouring participation, good governance and the provisions of social services, measurements are required from additional actors within the civil society. The possibilities of the participatory programs rely on joint efforts of the organisations implementing program and the civil society to address the prevailing limitations of participation.

*Key words:* Participatory Rural Appraisal, World Neighbours, Kenya, Civil society, Capabilities, Power structures
# Table of contents

1 **Introduction** .................................................................................................................. 2  
   1.1 Purpose ....................................................................................................................... 2  
   1.2 Method and Material ............................................................................................... 3  
   1.3 Theoretical introduction ......................................................................................... 4  
   1.4 Assumptions and limitations ................................................................................. 4  
   1.5 Disposition .............................................................................................................. 5  

2 **Participation and development** .................................................................................. 6  
   2.1 Participation in the development discourse .......................................................... 6  
   2.2 Participation from an empowering approach ....................................................... 7  
      2.2.1 Why an empowering approach? ....................................................................... 7  
      2.2.2 Forms of participation .................................................................................... 8  
      2.2.3 Forms of participation with an empowering approach .................................. 9  
   2.3 Two perspectives on limitations of participation ................................................. 10  
      2.3.1 A power structure perspective .................................................................... 10  
      2.3.2 An actor perspective ..................................................................................... 11  

3 **Participatory Rural Appraisal in Kenya** .................................................................. 14  
   3.1 Participation within the Participatory Rural Appraisal ........................................ 14  
   3.2 Evaluating the limitations of participation .......................................................... 15  
      3.2.1 Power structures restraining participation .................................................. 15  
      3.2.2 A lack of capabilities restraining participation ............................................. 17  
   3.3 The potential of the Participatory Rural Appraisal ............................................. 18  
      3.3.1 Addressing power structures ....................................................................... 19  
      3.3.2 The work of capability building .................................................................. 20  

4 **The civil society and participation** .......................................................................... 22  
   4.1 Why take into account the civil society ............................................................... 22  
   4.2 The dual role of civil society ................................................................................ 23  
      4.2.1 Challenging power structures ..................................................................... 23  
      4.2.2 Providing social services ............................................................................ 24  

5 **Conclusions** ............................................................................................................. 25  

6 **References** ............................................................................................................... 27
1 Introduction

A development method capable of providing sustainable economic, political and social progress has been requested by governmental and non-governmental organisations for a long time. The last few decades increased trust has been put in participatory assessments. Participation is valued both as a means in itself and as an instrument to achieve empowerment at both the community and individual level. ‘Help communities to help themselves’ (www.wn.org) is an impressive slogan, but what are the possibilities for it to be realized, and what preconditions are required? The answer to these questions calls for an evaluation of the settings in the programs and their implications on the practice of participation. High hopes have been placed in the achievement of participation but the method makes great demands upon both the participants and the communities at large. The question is whether the programs can come up to these expectations or if they are simply a temporary trend.

1.1 Purpose

Our paper is an empirical study, which means that we are examining the reality based on how it is rather than how it should be. We are aware, though, of the problems of conducting a fully objective analysis, as all studies due to methodological choices include elements of subjectivity. We also acknowledge the limitations of drawing any universal solutions from the findings of a single case study. However with our constructive ambitions we aim for our findings to be applicable to a broader context. Our purpose is to examine the possibilities and limitations of the participatory programs based on their practised form of participation. Our point of departure is that the success of the programs rely on ensuring an empowering form of participation. Addressing in particular the program of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) we aim to evaluate the obstacles to realise an empowering participation. We assume the problems of participation in the PRA program are not unique but rather reflect the power structures presence in all social contexts when people are brought together to collaborate. Thereby we find our results to be applicable at higher abstraction levels to also explain the restrains and potential in other programs favouring participation.

The question we aim to answer is:

- What are the possibilities and limitations for reaching an empowering participation in Participatory Rural Appraisal?
Earlier research of development methods within the field of political science has mainly been conducted by development agencies. The aim our paper is thereby to complement previous research by providing a more independent study. We hope that by deepening the knowledge about the limitations within participatory programs will contribute in a constructive way to the work of finding solutions to the restrictions.

1.2 Method and Material

As an empirical study, this paper seeks to establish the causal relationship between concepts in an effort to explain the occurrence of the observed phenomena. In our study the focus is on the phenomena of participation and its observed relationship with empowerment. We have performed an interpretational single-country study where existing theories have been applied in order to examine the specific case (Landman 2005:15, 34-35).

We have conducted a literary study based on published articles, reports and books. Our primary material is composed by e-mail correspondence with the nongovernmental organisation World Neighbours. Other important sources of information have been the home pages of the World Neighbours (WN), the World Bank and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). Our dependence on mainly secondary sources calls for a critical approach of the reliability and tendentiousness of the material. Both the World Neighbours and the World Bank are involved in participatory programs and have interests of their own. As we can not ensure the authenticity of the material from these organisations we have instead based our analysis on reports from IDS. The limited availability of material has hindered us from obtaining information about the latest progress in the area.

The restricted access of material has resulted in the methodological choice of conducting an illustrative case study. With an illustrative character our analysis is not restricted to information about the selected case but also allows us to include experiences from other PRA programs. Another reason to conduct an illustrative case study is to increase the reliability. A limitation of a single case study is that the findings are less reliable and less applicable to other cases. To make our findings more applicable we have chosen an illustrative form for our study which can generate hypothesis to be tested on a larger selection of countries (ibid:34).

Our starting point in empirical observations suggests an inductive study (ibid:15). To explain our empirical findings and to be able to draw more general conclusions we have used a method of collecting material, defining concepts and setting the theoretical framework to be applied in the analysis. To further analyse the restrictions of participation within the program we apply two perspectives.

As an inductive study evolves from the reality the selection of the case is important. Our selected case is not randomly, but cautiously selected. We have chosen to examine the PRA due the participatory methods increased popularity. The PRA programs do not follow a regular manual and can differ with context.
We have therefore chosen a case based on its ability to represent the major aims and working methods. Our selected case study is a PRA program implemented in the eastern district of Kenya, Makuemi by the NGO World Neighbours. The project has been going on for a longer period which increases the possibilities for evaluation. The working method of the project can not only represent the PRA in Kenya, but represent the PRA in Sub-Saharan Africa. As Sub-Saharan Africa is the poorest region of the world and in the most urgent need of development we find it particularly interesting to study the potential of the participatory programs in this region.

1.3 Theoretical introduction

The hypothesis of our study suggests that the limitations on participation within the participatory programs can be described by applying two perspectives, a structure and an actor perspective. The perspectives provides us with an increased understanding of the factors affecting the conditions of participation, which is needed in order to evaluate the possibilities and limitations of the PRA program. The structure perspective describes how societal structures affect actors’ chances of influence and participation. We analyse power structures from Thomson’s theories of societal structures arguing that structures composed by norms and organisational principles set the framework for human activity physically, institutionally and organisationally (Rindefjäll 2005:47). Structures set the framework for a person’s freedom of action but her ability to participate in practice also depends on her capabilities. By applying economist and Nobel prize winner, Amayarta Sen’s capability approach we can distinguish the actors possibilities of obtaining skills based on her economic and social situation (Sen 1999:20). We refer to Sen’s theory as an actor perspective as it regards the ability to participate to emerge from the actor’s capabilities. The approach is also concerned with structures as the provisions of capabilities depends on the socio-political system. The actor and the structure perspective complement each other and cannot be fully distinguished.

1.4 Assumptions and limitations

To avoid a circular discussion with empowerment as both the cause and the outcome of participation we have limited our study to concern strictly participation as a mean to empowerment. Empowerment is a complex concept which calls for a study on its own. Instead we are more concerned with what form of participation a participatory program is required to ensure to engender community empowerment. We acknowledge that empowerment could be achieved successively along with extended participation. Our assumption is thus
that participation is a means to reach empowerment and we are thereby more concerned about the limitations and possibilities of ensuring empowering participation rather than the outcomes from the process of participation.

1.5 Disposition

With chapter one coming to an end, this thesis is divided into four additional parts. In chapter two we begin by discussing the increased recognition of participation within development programs. We set the framework for our analysis by defining the concept of participation from an empowering approach by describing the two perspectives of power structures and capabilities. In our analysis in the third chapter we evaluate the forms of participation that have been practised in our selected PRA program. We apply our two perspectives to further discuss the limitations on participation and the possibilities of program to address these obstacles. In the fourth chapter we introduce the idea of how other actors within civil society can improve the conditions for participation. In the fifth and concluding chapter we highlight the results of our analysis and actualise them in a broader contemporary context.
2 Participation and development

Participatory methods have gained recognition among development agencies as well as governmental and non-governmental organisations. Why has the participatory method gained popularity? What is the method expected to contribute to? A discussion about the possibilities and limitations of participatory methods calls for a closer definition of the concept of participation. In this chapter we will therefore introduce our methodical framework. We will argue for participation from an empowering perspective introducing the term empowering participation. Two perspectives will be applied to evaluate the obstacles of achieving this form of participation.

2.1 Participation in the development discourse

The popularity of participatory poverty assessments has greatly increased during the last decade, and a growing number of development agents is adopting some form of participatory methodology. The term participation has over the decades shifted in meaning. In the 1970’s many international agencies stated in their programs the view of “popular participation” as an important component of rural development and basic needs strategies (Ruggeri Laderchi 2002: 3). In the 1980’s it became associated with discourses of grassroots self-reliance and self-help, giving a more important role to NGOs. The 1990’s saw participation being advocated from grassroots projects to interventions on larger scale concerning social, economic as well as political life. Participation came then to be seen as a tool towards important policy objectives such as “empowerment” and “good governance” (ibid.).

The increased focus on NGOs has also resulted in a convergence of practices also among stately programs and governmental organisations such as the World Bank. The World Bank has shifted its practices from a focus on identifying beneficiaries and making projects more efficient, to adapting to the working methods of many self-development organisations of developing people’s self awareness. Broad-based participation by individuals in poverty has experienced an increased importance in the World Bank development programs. An empowering approach has developed which describes the treatment of poor people as co-producers:

Inclusion of poor people and other traditionally excluded groups in priority setting and decision making is critical to ensure that limited public resources build on local knowledge and priorities, and to build commitment to change (Worldbank.2002:15).

The empowering approach has also affected the development of participatory methods. Participatory Rural Appraisal is a participatory program focusing on
community empowerment that has been used since the end of 1980s (Ruggeri 2002:3) The method is based on the idea of including local people and to let them evaluate their situation followed by planning and taking action. The concept seems to vary a lot from different countries and also from the cultures where it is put into practice. For instance in Kenya PRA is viewed as a way to do community where its function depends on the cultural context, which explains its diversity (Pathways to participation:1).

2.2 Participation from an empowering approach

Participation has gained recognition within the development programs. But what are the prospect for these programs to succeed with their aim of community empowerment? We will argue for the success of the programs to depend on what kind of participation the programs are practising. To reach empowerment through participation calls for an empowering form of participation. In this section we will address empowering participation and its implications on the forms of participation.

2.2.1 Why an empowering approach?

Participation can either be valued from an instrumental or an empowering approach. The instrumental approach claims that involving citizens in policy-making and implementation will make more effective achievement of policy goals (Abers 2000:5). The empowering approach on the other hand also values the process of participation as an important end in itself (Stewart, Wang 2003:6). The approach states that participation is not only a matter of transferring public responsibilities but also about improving the capacity of ordinary people to understand and decide about issues affecting their lives. Participation contributes to the political development of individuals and fosters social consciousness and political community (Abers 2000:5).

The empowering view on participation treats poor people as co-producers, with authority and control over decisions and resources devolved to the lowest appropriate level. The world bank defines empowerment as ‘…Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. (World bank 2002:12)

The form of participation applied in the participatory program is social participation. Social participation is closely related to the empowering approach as it concerns self-help activities and includes empowerment at the individual level (Rindefjäll 2005:45). It is described by Viveros as a ‘responsible and determined intervention by organised groups that effect their daily lives and their immediate environment’ (ibid.). Social participation differs form differs from civic and political which more concerned about control over the political system
and reaching political power (ibid.). The definitions of participation can though be considered to be interconnected as a functional social participation requires elements of political and civic engagement.

For participation to be motivated and to have any real impact requires participation to be considered from an empowering approach. The empowering aspect has gained recognition by the participatory programs. In our continued discussion we will thus argue for participation from an empowering approach which will have implications on the forms of participation.

2.2.2 Forms of participation

The different forms of participation decide who is to be included and to what extent. At a minimum participation implies individuals and groups to be involved in some way in the decision making process. The level of engagement can be classified in four different levels of intensity: (1) information-sharing (2) consultation (3) joint decision-making and (4) initiation and control by stakeholders (Stewart, Wang 2003:6). The first level of participation, information sharing, involves very limited decision making powers, while the fourth denotes a high degree of citizen control over decision-making. Consultation exists when participants are able to express opinions, but are not guaranteed impact on the final outcome. Joint decision-making invites participants to negotiate on the content of a strategy (ibid.).

In terms of inclusiveness participation is assessed in terms of its ‘depth’ and ‘breadth’. At best a participatory process would be both ‘deep’ and ‘wide’, although this can be difficult to achieve in practice (Stewart, Wang 2003:8). A deeper participation with a considerable amount of decision-making power often requires a limited number of participants. A broad-based process involving a wide range of participants is often limited to a shallow level of participation (ibid.). The problems of achieving the ideal implies thereby a trade-off between a broader and deeper participation.

Another important distinction between the forms of participation is whether it is direct or indirect. Direct participation refers to those means by which people try to influence government policies by interacting with policy-makers face to face. An example of direct participation is when interest groups lobby politicians about their views. Indirect participation consists of those ‘political activities which are aimed at influencing the selection of government representatives and the policies they are likely to pursue’ (Walt 1994:19). An indirect system implies a form representation which in development programs can take place by selecting representatives from membership-based groups and associations (World Bank 2002:16). Critics against the representational system says it precludes the evolution of a participating public. Defenders on the other hand find the representational system to be necessary in a modern society where no person can be presented at all the decision-making bodies (Young 2002:124).
2.2.3 Forms of participation with an empowering approach

From an empowering approach certain forms of participation is promoted. Regarding the intensity of participation the empowering approach suggests the citizens to be involved in the discussions of policies rather than merely in the implementation of pre-designed programs (Abers 2003:7). The approach thereby suggests participation at the higher intensity levels.

Concerning inclusiveness the approach finds the broader form of participation the better. Participation should increase the control held by most citizens especially members for economically and socially disadvantaged groups (ibid.). Even if a broader participation is favoured from an empowering approach the full participation by all residents is not seen as an requirement for empowerment. The idea of full participation is both impractical and potentially coercive (ibid.). Instead of insisting that all people discuss all issues, ‘all policy arenas should simply be open to the control of those who want to participate’ (ibid.). It will ensure that the decision-making process is accessible and that all people have the opportunity to participate.

The promotion of a broad but at the same time deeper and more restricted form of participation calls for a certain level of representative participation. Even if a representative system can have advantages it also sets high requirements on a functional institutional system. A lack of inclusiveness tends to produce decisions favouring the well organised but not the disadvantaged (Pierre 2000:158). Even if elements of representation could be reasonable we find it important to further stress the need of ensuring a non-biased system. To guarantee the interest of all groups to be taken into account a minimum general level of participation could be requested. If a group is excluded even from the lower levels of participation it is doubtful that their interests will be represented and that they will enjoy the same benefits as the groups included in the policy process. We thereby find it necessary that a broader form of co-operation precedes a more intensive and less inclusive form of participation.

The approach suggests an empowering participation which stresses both on inclusive and intensive forms of participation which also has elements of both direct and indirect participation. The forms of participation are though related as the fulfilment of one of them has implications on the others. A more intensive form of participation calls for a representative system, as it requires a smaller group of participants. But as stated a deeper participation relies on an initial broader and a more shallow participation. The empowering participation describes the form of participation which is needed to lead to empowerment at individual and community level. Acknowledging the importance of the empowering participation in theory is simple compared to the work of realising it in practice.
2.3 Two perspectives on limitations of participation

We have now stated the importance of empowering participation the next step is to evaluate the possibilities and limitations for it to be achieved in practice. The realisation of empowering participation within participatory programs relates to both social and political factors. These restraining factors affect by whom and at what level participation is conducted. To better understand the abilities and possibilities of participation both the actor and the settings of participation needs to be taken into account. The constraints can be viewed form two perspectives, one focusing on power structures and one actor centred. The two perspectives will compose the theoretical framework which will be further applied in our analysis of the restrictions of participation.

2.3.1 A power structure perspective

Power structures exist in all aspects of society and work either to limit or enable participation. We are however distinguishing between the informal and formal character of power structures. By formal we refer to institutions at community and national level, whereas informal relates to societal power relations among the community members. Our concept of power structures is based on the definition of power as a person’s ability to promote social change to which participation is an important instrument (Rindefjäll 2005:46). Thomson’s theories of social structures indicates how these structures in the forms of norms and organisational principles, set the framework for human activity, physically, institutionally and organisationally (ibid.). The structures are both enabling and limiting as an actors position in system decides her space for action (ibid.) A structural perspective of power doesn’t mean that it is the structures themselves but rather the relations between the people which are powerful. The structures are explained to depend on the social context, ‘structural constraints are real but they are mediated through political arrangements that enable a prevailing coalition to govern a community’ (Dowding 1996:29). Power structures can vary in different contexts, as can the community actor’s choices of how to respond to variations in the setting.

As our study is aimed to describe the participation in communities we are primarily interested in power structures at local level, but as they are affected by the surrounding political and social context we also have to take into account the structures at the national level. A factor affecting the formal power structures is the political system. Liberal democracies are characterised by stable institutions and the encouragement of participation by providing multiple channels of influence. Authorial states have systems of low accountability and poses constraints on the exercise of participation (Walt 1994:20,23). The political system sets the framework for political participation but also effects social and civil participation through its impact on the quality of governance. Studies have displayed how poor governance has a deterring effect on participation: ‘Poor
people do not participate in activities when they know their participation will make no difference due to lack of mechanisms for holding providers accountable’ (World Bank 2002:16). Institutions characterised by transparency and accountability is vital for participation to be meaningful for the citizens.

Governance is also related to the political culture. The political culture affects people’s participation and belief in government and change. Non-democratic political cultures and practises of the government is said to undermine the chances of institutional change and to limit the chances for participation (Grugel 2002:180,190). A non-democratic political culture often results into wide systematic corruption. Corruption undermines belief in the system and hence participation: ‘The failure to develop a participative and inclusive approach is part of a general breakdown in accountability’ (Gyimah-Boadi 2004:125).

Poor governance also results in systematic inequalities present in the informal structures. The capacity of actors to exercise control largely depends on their location in the societal system (Rindefjäll 2005:47). A biased system can thereby result in groups being discouraged from participating. Social structures are biased privileging some groups over others which results in structural inequalities of wealth and opportunities. The World Bank states how poor people are generally excluded from participation in state institutions which leads poor people to conclude: ‘Nobody hears the poor. It is the rich who are being heard’ (World Bank 2002:16). The privileged groups will work to maintain the prevailing structures while disadvantaged aim to bring about structural changes (Rindefjäll 2005:48). The informal hierarchies and traditional power structures can be considered to cause systematic discrimination against certain groups in the community.

Even if the formal and informal structures have restricting effects on citizens’ practice of participation they are not static by nature but can be challenged. Citizens who are disadvantaged because of their location in the societal system may challenge institutional and societal practices and norms to accomplish change at different levels (2005:49). Even if structures by nature are dynamic they will not change without an active role of the citizens. To better understand the nature of participation it is therefore important to also include an actor perspective.

2.3.2 An actor perspective

The structural perspective describes how citizens depending on where they find themselves in the societal structure are given different opportunities to participate and to practice influence. But a structural perspective is not sufficient as a person’s ability to act also depends on her skills and access to resources. An actor perspective based on a capability approach is hence needed. It adds a new dimension on participation, although it can not be completely distinguished from the structure perspective. The World Bank describes how access to services and opportunities is determined not by individual characteristics but by social structures (World Bank 2002:21). The possibility for citizens to obtain skills is
therefore not only depending on the single actor but also on structures, both formal systems of distribution and informal social relations.

Socio-economic inequality is considered as a basic limitation on participation. Inequalities in distribution of income are reflected in political life and it is even argued that without economic equality political equality is impossible (Abers 2000:117). Poverty has an exclusionary aspect which results into the discrimination disadvantaged experience within a community (Grinspun 2001:28). The connection between poverty and freedom, and in particular freedom to participate, has further been explored in the capability approach promoted by the rewarded economist Amyarta Sen. Sen defines poverty as lack of capabilities, which relates to the entitlement failure poor people experience. According to the approach income transformed into health, education and literacy provide people with the capacity to get empowered. The lack of human capital in the form of illiteracy is partly due to economic restrains hindering poor from affording education. Without education the inequalities will increase and the poor will be even more disadvantaged: ‘…better basic education and health improve the quality of life directly; they also increase a person’s ability to earn income and to be free of income-poverty’ (Sen 1999:90). Capabilities illustrate the potential people have to achieve ways of being and doing (1999:74). Sen’s argumentation shows the important aspect of how deprivations in capabilities cause a circle of poverty. The lack of capabilities reduces the possibilities for the poor to empower themselves. Poverty does not only reduce the quality of life it also limits their chances of changing their situation.

People’s choice to or not to participate depends not only on their abilities but also on the costs and benefits related to participation. The cost faced by people from disadvantaged groups are not only material. Besides economic resources participation also requires free time, health and educational skills (Abers 2000:9,117). Both costs and benefits have to do with individual characteristics as well as with group membership and social institutions (2000:119). The experience from participatory experiment is not so much the problem of everybody not participating, but that members of certain groups are structurally disadvantage because the costs of participating are too high for them (2000:117). Reducing the costs for participation is important to ensure participation on more equal terms.

Social roles are also decisive for people’s possibilities to participate. Even if the poor have the time and financial resources to participate they are constrained by a lacking self-confidence. To participate they also have to overcome socialised feelings of inefficacy and learn the skills of defending their opinions (2000:119).

By combining our two perspectives increases the understanding of the factors causing limitations on participation. The capability approach explains how a person can be constrained from participation due to her social and economic situation. The ability to obtain the necessary skills for participation is determined by structures. Formal and informal power structures within a community affect a citizen’s ways of influence by cementing social relations and hierarchies. Within structures participation can be deterred by governance failures resulting in bias.
systems and low accountability. Applying our perspectives shows on the factors limiting participation which is important when trying to understand the obstacles participatory programs may face. For the participatory programs to achieve their aims of empowering communities it is important to address the settings in favour of participation. In our theoretical discussion we addressed how the realisation of empowerment depends on a certain form of participation to be applied. This empowering participation calls for a broad-based and at the same time deeper form of participation giving the citizens possibility to affect policy-making. Our theoretical explanation of two different perspectives illustrates that when put into practice participation has several the political and socioeconomic obstacles.

Reaching the end of our theoretical discussion we have defined participation from an empowering approach and introduced the perspectives for evaluating the limitations on participation. With our theoretical framework clearly stated we now have the instrument to conduct the analysis of our empirical case.
3 Participatory Rural Appraisal in Kenya

In the following section we will examine the forms of participation in a PRA program conducted by the NGO World Neighbours in eastern Kenya. To our case study we will apply our two perspectives, the structure and the actor concentrated, to evaluate the limitations and possibilities on participation within these programs. We are aiming to examine whether the program can address the limitations and thus realise participation from an empowering approach. The possibilities of the program to achieve community empowerment are related to the ability to adjust these persisting restraints.

The theoretical framework will now serve as the tool for our empirical analysis. Our analysis is in the form of a case study but aside from increasing the understanding of the actual case we also attempt to find conclusions applicable to other PRA programs.

3.1 Participation within the Participatory Rural Appraisal

The PRA program we have chosen to evaluate is situated in the Kenyan district Makuemi. The program was initiated by the NGO World Neighbours (WN) in the early 1990s. The World Neighbour is a global NGO active in 45 countries. The NGO promotes PRA programs behind the slogan “World Neighbours help communities help themselves” (www.wn.org). The working method of the WN is to let the project last for a period of 10 years until the program is sustainable on its own. The project in Makuemi was finished in the beginning of 2000. It was conducted in the sub-location Nzuuni and involved seven villages with a total population of 7,400 (Muthengi et al. 2001:5). When the program was first introduced the Makuemi district it was classified as one of the poorest areas in Kenya. By the end of the project the situation in the region had improved both socially and economically.

The WN-projects concern social participation, whereas community members mobilise themselves together to solve their problems and successively reach empowerment (www.wn.org). The organisational emphasis is on the importance of strengthening community institutions so that they can meet their self-defined needs such as community based health care programs, food security, clean water access, community mobilization, asset development, and natural resource management (www.wn.org). WN’s Area Representative of Eastern Africa, Chris
Macoloo, underlines the importance of a broad based form of participation and including the marginalized people (World Neighbours 06-05-13). The program promotes participation to reach the aim of community empowerment. We find the suggested form of participation within these programs to resemble with our empowering participation. The question however attempts to determine if this form of participation has been realized within the project.

3.2 Evaluating the limitations of participation

The aims of participation within the World Neighbours’ PRA program in Makuemi have in theory been highly set but realizing them in practice has been problematic. The ambition of an empowering participation has failed and neither a sufficiently broad nor a deep form of participation have been realised. Broad based participation has been prevented by lacking efforts of addressing constraints experienced by the marginalised. This primarily concerns first of all the poorest people who seldom get access to participate (Muthengi et al. 2001:22-23). A deeper form of participation has been restricted by traditional top-down manners. Within the program demands have been expressed for a balance between both widespread and deep participation. A balance is also needed between direct and indirect forms, whereas the representative system is thought to provide continuity in participation (2001:24).

Participation in the WN’s PRA program does not ensure the required form of participation for community empowerment. The obstacles preventing this form of participation are linked to the social and political context. Relating to our theoretical discussion we will evaluate participation in the WN program based on how it fulfils the requirements regarding intensity, inclusiveness and direct or indirect forms of participation. To better understand the experienced limitations on participation we will in our analysis apply the power structure and the actor perspective.

3.2.1 Power structures restraining participation

The prevailing power structures affect the form of participation practised within the PRA programs. In this section we will address both formal and informal structures. The formal power structures within institutions have been addressed by an increased co-operation between the official administration and local officials at community level. Through the collaboration the channels of influence have increased as representatives from the community have been invited to a joined decision making with government officials (Muthengi et al. 2001:6). The contact with the government is established with the Village Development Committee where the Assistant Chief is the head director. Together with other elected the Assistance Chief represents the community (ibid.). The task of the representatives is to respond to the village inhabitants’ requests and to report back information to
their village (2001:10). The representative system has realised a deeper form of participation but at the expense of a broader. The system though, has showed on defaults. Poor channels of information between the Committee and the other community members hinder the benefits of PRA to become widespread (ibid.). The World Neighbours’ Area Representative in Eastern Africa explains that some of the problems of participation are caused by how the external agencies (e.g. NGOs) introduce the program into the community. How the program is organized decides who is to be involved and at what level. For the program to be successful the area representative also argues for the importance of the local leaders connected with the program to be trusted and have the confidence of the community members (World Neighbours 06-05-13).

Even if a certain level of representation can be necessary there is a risk of the PRA losing its essence if the representative participatory elements are too dominant. Gaining empowerment requires a certain level of actual participation (2001:23). Power structures resulting in systematic inequalities undermine the representative system by impeding certain groups to gain representation. As long as there are power structures excluding certain groups the aim of empowering all the community members will remain merely a far reached ambition.

The problem of achieving empowering participation within the community is related to both power structures at local level and with the national political context. The institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa are characterised by a weak democratic culture with a lack of experience of the values and norms of democracy. Kenya has during the last decades experienced a strengthened democratisation process and is classified by the NGO Freedom house as partly free democracy (www.freedomhouse.org). Despite the latest democratic progress the Kenyan democracy is still weak and the political system cannot ensure the ways of participation of a liberal democracy. The problems of governance at national level are also present at local community level. The World Neighbours’ program has experienced how poor governance resulting in a lack of trust and corruption reduces the spirit and will to participate and co-operate (Muthengi et al. 2001:27). These incongruities cause a negative synergy that counteracts participation. When people feel that participation has little effect, a broad-based participation is prevented. The inclusiveness within the WN project is thereby hampered by poor governance in the community institutions.

The formal power structures also impede participation to reach higher intensity. In the participatory assessments the appointed Assistant Chief, who often gains his position based on traditional hierarchies rather than his qualities, is considered to have too much control over the development initiatives and in decision-making. The lack of delegation of power is expressed by a community member saying: ‘We can’t do anything without the chief’ (2001:30).

The participatory programs are further hindered by power structures at a national level due to their low priority on the national agenda. The low priority is an expression of how government officers are still hanging on to top-down manners (ibid.). The achievement of a fuller form of participation relies not only on encouraging the community members to take action it also demands the leaders at the top to loosen their power in order to favour the participatory methods.
Regarding the informal societal structures the WN-project has experienced how traditional power relations assign people power according to a certain order (2001:20). The Area Representative of World Neighbours states that one of the main obstacles for participation is power structures causing social exclusion of certain members of the community (World Neighbours 06-05-13). The power relations set the norms establishing the superiority of the elderly versus the young, men versus women and the poor versus the even poorer (Muthengi et al. 2001:15). Hence it prevents people from participating on equal terms. The most marginalised groups, youth and women, are more vulnerable to the reinforcement of traditional power structures (www.ids.ac.uk/particip). The marginalisation of these groups severely reduces the overall participation as both women and youth represents half of the population. The structural discrimination thereby obstructs people from participating and causes an unequal access to the benefits of PRA (Muthengi et al. 2001:24).

Our power structure perspective has made it evident that both formal and informal structures are important factors in explaining the experienced limitations of participation within the WN project.

3.2.2 A lack of capabilities restraining participation

Power relations and institutional arrangements cause significant constraints on participation, but the limitations within the World Neighbours project can not fully be explained without adding an actor perspective. Even though structures can facilitate community participation the citizens can still be prevented from participating due to individual constrains such as a lack of skill. Structures are also present in the actor perspective as structures set the frames for an individual’s actions and her ability to obtain capabilities.

Poverty causes economic and social deficiency and can hence be distinguished as a current constrain on individuals’ participation. The Area Representative for WN in Eastern Africa states that absolute poverty is a major reason preventing community members from participation (World Neighbours 06-05-13). The poorest people are explained to not even reach the lowest intensity of participation due to poor access to information about community activities. Expenses both time wise and materially in workshops and other participatory projects stop disadvantaged from attending (Muthengi et al. 2001:25). The problem is further explained by the WN representative saying: ‘The poor may want to participate in development programs but their contribution (materially and in time) may be quite a sacrifice on their part. Hence they tend to shy away’ (World Neighbours 06-05-13). Poverty brings about the structural perspective as the poor are structurally discriminated from building capabilities when they are restricted from accessing education and health services (Muthengi et al. 2001:25). Without the capabilities they can not profit from the benefits of participating and hence not gain empowerment. Much of the benefits from the PRA program rely on the individual to actually participate (2001:22-23).
Moving to a higher intensity level of participation, from consultation to participation in joined decision-making, the requirement for skills and knowledge of participants raises. A lack of local knowledge and schooling excludes poor people from participating. Community members have stated that people are often left out from decision-making within the WN program because of their lack of understanding of the issues (2001:23). Without important local knowledge the value of participatory action in a community decreases. Marginalised people are less capable to evaluate the prospects of projects which often results in them being involved in unprofitable projects. The experiences from the project illustrate how lacking knowledge and poor education constrain community members to participate on good and equal conditions (Ruggeri, 2002:13). The broad-based participation is further hindered as a lack of knowledge decreased the interest for participating (Muthengi et al. 2001:23).

To compensate for the limited breadth of participation the WN has increasingly concentrated on reaching higher intensity of participation through a specific ‘leadership group’. This kind of ‘representative’ participation can also derive from the fact that some community members finds it more effective and convenient for the chief to take the final decision as they themselves lack important knowledge (ibid.). This mentality states a lacking self-confidence among the community members which negatively affect their participation. Restrictions of citizen’s participation are hence not only related to how participation in general is valued but also how the citizens value their own capacity.

With our actor perspective we have proved the importance of capabilities for citizens to participate. Poverty deprives capabilities by causing a lack of education and poor self-confidence which limit a broad-based participation. Applying the power structure and an actor perspective increases the understanding of the factors limiting participation within the WN program. This understanding serves as an important base for attempts to address these underlying problems.

3.3 The potential of the Participatory Rural Appraisal

Our analysis has so far stressed on the limitations of participation within the PRA program in Makuemi, after this rather critical evaluation we now think it is time to disclose the potential within the program. The goal of the project, as with PRA programs in general, is to reach community empowerment. We find the potential of the PRA to achieve this goal to depend on the form of participation practiced in the program and whether an empowering participation can be achieved or not. The realization of an empowering participation relies on the program to address disfavouring power structures within the community and the lack of capabilities among the citizens.

We will thus continue our analysis by discussing how the Makuemi PRA program has succeeded to improve the conditions for participation. The areas of
progress and the persisting limitations will be evaluated from our two perspectives.

3.3.1 Addressing power structures

The World Neighbours program has partly succeeded to address formal and informal structures within the community. Concerning the formal structures the program has experienced improvements in governance and in the practice of participation by transferring some power from the government level to the community members. The shift in power relations has been conducted by including leaders of the community in the PRA program from the beginning and successively transferring their power (Muthengi et al. 2001:13). Leadership training has been another working method. The training has brought about improvements in the relationship between the Village Development Committee and the community members (2001:14). Along with an improved leadership and better governance in the formal institutions a broader participation has been favoured (2001:19). The prevailing non-democratic political culture has called for the WN to address behaviours and attitudes which to some extent has fostered attitudes towards participation and inclusion (2001:11). The project has to a certain degree succeed to improve the formal structures in institution but strengthening governance and changing the political culture at local levels also requires actions to be taken in a broader national context.

Regarding the informal structures an increased notion of human rights connected with the right to refuse and to question has resulted in better confidence among the members of the communities. Increased self-confidence is vital for challenging the leaders and to break down traditional hierarchic power structures (2001:15-17). The importance of self-confidence connects an actor and structure perspectives as both are needed to promote changes favouring participation.

To address the problem of hierarchies limiting a broader based participation. The program has initiated arrangements such as workshops, theatre, discussion sessions and role plays. Thanks to these forums numerous people have been able to attend and discuss important issues (2001:5, 9). A group which has been systematically exposed to discrimination and is in need for targeted measures is the women. Within the WN program gender issues has been stressed through discussion groups and workshops. Experience from the project has shown that when women are allowed to participate and gain more influence in questions concerning reproductive health, living conditions are in general improved (2001:18). The increased awareness of benefits from including women in the program has had results on their level of participation. Hence even if deceased gender disparities is uplifting the goal of gender equality is still far out of reach as gender structures are deeply rooted.

When discussing the progress of participation within the program it is inevitable not to take into account the positive effect from the process of participation. The conditions for participation have successively shown to improve along the way. Participation has generated into a greater acceptance
within the community for projects and as more people discover the benefits from co-operation trust and accountability has further increased (2001:15). With improved governance participation is strengthened as more people find it meaningful to participate. The process of participation thereby seems to help adjust the limitations. Even if the initial conditions for an empowering form of participation are poor, these can be improved partly by the contributions from the participatory process.

The analysis has shown that power structures in the communities have been altered. Structures have a dynamic element even if changes take time, as it has been expressed within the WN project: ‘Previous systems don’t change over night’ (2001:22). With the dynamic elements of structures and the process of participation the conditions for participation could be expected to improve successively. Despite the dynamic elements structures are also deeply rooted which poses limitations on what the process can establish on its own. Strong measures are required to overcome these formal and informal structural limitations. Changing unequal institutional relations is explained to depend on measures to improve governance including laws, procedures and behaviour of public officials. It also depends crucially on the presence of well-informed and well-organized citizens and poor people (World Bank 2002:19). To promote the structural changes seems therefore to demand efforts beyond the working field of an NGO implementing participatory programs.

3.3.2 The work of capability building

As we have already stated it is not only structures that causes restrain on participation, deprivation of capabilities is also distinguished as major limitation on participation. The PRA in Makuemi is explained to have succeeded in some areas to extend the capabilities of community members. Evaluations have shown that in the Nzuuni village within the Makuemi district, WN has ‘greatly’ contributed to move towards the development goals of poverty reduction (Muthengi et al. 2001:10). It has been achieved by addressing important factors such as improving food supply and practices in farming and agriculture, as well as enhancing the accessibility and quality of health services and drugs assets. Concerning health a remarkable progress has been noticed in the work of HIV prevention as the number of infected has declined (2001:13). An enhanced health situation is envisaged as a corner stone in capability building.

Infrastructure and access to health care have both direct and indirect effects on people’s ability to participate (2001:12). Advanced infrastructure is explained to have expanded these possibilities. Even if these enhancements can be considered as rather basic they are in fact vital for the ability and willingness to participate.

Extending local knowledge is explained to have increased the interest of engagement among the community members and in particular among the underprivileged groups (2001:14). It has been conducted as the community members have gained increased understanding and insight in the community
activities. The effort has resulted in changed attitudes towards participation along with discovering its benefits (ibid.). An extended notion of individual rights is explained to contribute with increased self-confidence among community members which further encourages people to participate (2001:15).

Similar to the discussions of power structures it is unavoidable to not take into account the possible positive effects from the process of participation to address the limitations of participation. Participation at initially low intensity can engender deeper forms of participation. Since our empowering approach is not only concerned about reaching deeper forms of participation but also to establish breadth we are though cautious of the required conditions for being included from the beginning. If certain community members are lacking the capabilities for even participate at the lower levels they will not be able to take advantage from the further process of participation. Hence the process of participation may facilitate more intensive forms of participation but it fails to ensure increased inclusiveness.

The progress of providing capabilities stresses on the possibilities of the PRA program to improve the conditions for participation. Capabilities are strengthened both by targeted interventions and by the process of participation. But our evaluation has also illustrated restraints on firstly what the process of participation can achieve, and secondly the ability of the single NGO to directly correct the limitations. The form of participation that can be reached within a PRA program is not only affected by power structures and the capabilities of the actors within the community it also relates to a broader political and social context. There are therefore limitations to what a single NGO can do to facilitate participation as it requires the fulfilment of other preconditioned political and social factors. For NGOs as the World Neighbours to realise an empowering participation within their PRA programs calls for achievements of additional actors. Considering the reliance of other actors we thus find it important to include the civil society in our further analysis.
4 The civil society and participation

Our analysis of the Participatory Rural Appraisal program in Makuemi conducted by the World Neighbours has illustrated the problems on limitation on participation a participatory method can experience. To adjust the constraints on participation from unequal power structures and the actor’s lack of capabilities demand efforts beyond the WN’s ability as a single NGO. The goal of the PRA programmes of reaching community empowerment by ensuring an empowering participation demands further achievements of additional actors. In this final analysis we are therefore evaluating the possibilities for the civil society at large to improve the conditions for participation.

4.1 Why take into account the civil society

The definition of civil society is unambiguous and differs between scholars. Civil society is basically recognised to fill the autonomous space between family and the state where individual freedom and voluntary associations take place. According to a general definition the civil society is composed by associations, NGOs, the public sphere and the ‘good society’ (Edwards 2004:73). The civil society has also been recognised as citizens’ collective act to provoke and demand their interests towards the state (Elgström, Hydén 2002:159). In a Sub-Saharan African context with undemocratic power structures and governance failures the actions of civil society is described to have important effects on the political life (Nyamu-Musembi, Musyoki 2004:3). The civil society is ascribed an important function of promoting democracy both due to its educational and pluralistic function. It could also be considered as an important counterweight to the state (Engström, Hydén 2002:159). In developing countries associations and NGOs are explained to have an additional significant instrumental role in distributing social services besides the state (Edwards 2004:21). Improvements of the socioeconomic conditions within communities are thereby dependent on the provisions of the civil society.

For achieving social change the collaboration between different organisations and actors within the civil society is explained to be very fruitful (2004:26). Through collaboration even small scale participation programs initiated by local NGOs can have effects. If small scale actions spread across the country the wide spread pressure will affect policy-makings at the top. (Nyamu-Musembi, Musyoki 2004:3).

Even if the civil society has many functions there are also restrictions for what it can contribute with. One problem concerns establishing cooperation between
different NGOs due to varied working methods and strategies. Another limitation relates to the democratic defaults and unconstructive aims within the associations (Edwards 2004:47). African countries in particular experience low levels of institutional development which makes it difficult even for pro-democracy NGOs to incorporate the values they are promoting within their own organisation (Gyimah-Boadi 2004:111). Further limitations on the function of civil society are constituted by the dependency of the state. Governments tend to restrict what civil society can achieve through constraints on recognition, limited financial support and political restraints (World Bank 2002:14). But despite the weaknesses of the civil society the dynamic and transitional nature of the sector gives reason for some optimism for its continued function to contribute to sustainable development and democracy building (Gyimah-Boadi 2004:115).

4.2 The dual role of civil society

The functions of the civil society are both indirectly and directly connected to participation. NGOs such as the World Neighbours can directly strengthen participation through implementing participatory assessments. The civil society at large can have indirect effects by improving the surrounding conditions for participation. From the functions of the civil society we identify a dual role of promoting participation which is closely related to our two perspectives. The monitoring and democracy promoting role involves adjusting limitations of participation due to power structures. The role of the civil society to provide services addresses the obstacles emerging from the actor’s capability perspective. We will thereby discuss how the civil society indirectly can contribute to overcome the limitations on participation from these two perspectives.

4.2.1 Challenging power structures

The civil society can have noticeable effects on power structures. Studies have illustrated the ability of the civil society to affect the political culture which is an important factor in shaping power structures. The role of the civil society to foster a democratic culture will facilitate further participation (Engström, Hydén 2002:161). The civil society is further thought to favour participation through promoting more equal power relations (Edwards 2004:47).

Changing power structures in institutions to support empowerment of poor people means changing the relationship between the state and poor people (World Bank 2002:19). Since governments and community leaders are a part of this relationship there are limitations for what changes they are willing to conduct within this hierarchic pattern. Considering these governmental limitations grassroots mobilisation accomplished by action within the civil society gains increased importance to counteract power structures.
The work of addressing power structures and the practise of governments are expected to be further strengthening by the collaboration of actors within the civil society (Nyamu-Musembi, Musyoki 2004:7). The joint action can contribute to changes both at local and national level. Associations organised around issue such as human rights, environmental issues and women’s rights are explained to have positive effects on strengthening democracy (Engström, Hydén 2002:17). In Kenya the join actions have functioned to support the communities to engage with government in claiming their rights (Nyamu-Musembi, Musyoki 2004:10). Organisations within civil society have provided with civic education including anti-corruption, advocacy and democracy which has contributed to promote the rights of participation (2004:18). Organisation and collaboration within civil society can thereby be ascribed to positively affect traditional authorial rule and power structures towards a more participatory friendly approach (2004:11).

### 4.2.2 Providing social services

Associations and NGOs within the civil society have an important role in complementing the participatory programs by providing community members with extended capabilities. If the PRA program is left to provide the community on its own with capabilities less resources remain to the implementation of the participatory assessments. Civil society has a critical role to play in supporting poor people’s capabilities (World Bank 2002:13). The function of NGOs to support and supply education and health services for marginalised people is important to extend the inclusiveness in participatory assessments (Nyamu-Musembi, Musyoki 2004:10). Capability building services will thus strengthen the participatory elements. The extended learning about rights from advocacy groups is explained to engender self-confidence and additionally encourage participation which will benefit participatory programs (2004:7).

The interconnection between the structure and actor perspective is further stated by the relation between the provision of social services and institutional reforms. Investing in both individual capabilities and the collective capacity to organize is vital for the poor to be able to participate effectively in society. This form of participation is essential to strengthen the demand side for better governance and state reform (World Bank 2002:13).

The civil society has proved to have a central role to facilitate and improve the conditions for participation. The civil society indirectly effect participation through providing community members with the necessary capabilities and by putting pressure on prevailing power structures. A collaboration within the civil society is important for small scale projects to emerge into the broader movements needed to initiate changes on the conditions of participation. The civil society has thereby shown to have an important role to address the surrounding settings for participation in participatory programs.
5 Conclusions

The aim of our paper is to evaluate the limitations and possibilities within the participatory program Participatory Rural Appraisal. We have argued that the fulfilment of the goal of PRA to empower communities depends on whether it can ensure an empowering participation within the program. We have defined the empowering participation as participation characterized by both inclusiveness and intensity. To reach inclusiveness power structures need to favour broad-based participation and individuals have to be provided with the necessary capabilities for participation. The requirement of ensuring participation at higher intensity calls for a representative system. For the representative system to make sure that the interests of all the community members is taken into account and that the benefits are equally divided the system has to be open, not biased. Empowering participation sets high requirements on both social and political conditions, which makes it hard to realise. The limitations on participation can further be explained by applying a structure and actor perspective.

In our analysis we preformed a case study of the PRA program in the district Makueni in Kenya implemented by the NGO World Neighbours. The analysis stated that participation within the program has experienced limitations and is thereby not ensured an empowering form. By applying the two perspectives the impact from unequal power structures and lacking capabilities on participation became evident. It was also illustrated how efforts within the program to some extent have been able to adjust these limitations. Problems of participation at national level are though reinforced at local level which makes it hard to address certain issues at community basis. Governance failures and weak democratic culture are reflected in power structures at community level and cause limitations of participation. Poor distribution of health and educational services results in lacking capabilities, which also pose constraints on participation. These constraints can not be addressed by a NGO on it own but demand achievements from additional actors. In our further analysis we stated the important role the civil society to foster participation. The civil society’s function of promoting governance and providing social services relates well to our two perspectives on limitations on participation. Civil society can contribute to adjust the settings for participation which are also present within the participatory programs.

Our conclusion is that the possibilities and limitations for reaching empowering participation in participatory programs are linked to how the organization responsible for the programs and the civil society at large succeeds to address the prevailing restrictions on participation. As the achievements of the participatory programs depend on the surrounding political and social context they are not a perfect solution for community empowerment. We believe that participatory methods are not a temporary trend and as a long term project have
the potential to lead to greater empowerment. For these programs to reach their full potential more constructive studies are required to find ways that different organisations within civil society can co-ordinate new approaches and ensure that governments take responsibility over their socio-economic and political role in the participatory process.
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