

Understanding Local Participation Amidst Challenges: Evidence from Lebanon in the Global South

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Abstract Scholars frame local participation as a continuum of tools, processes, and values, with outcomes primarily serving implementers or beneficiaries. Donors have adopted participation in their policies and are asking local partners in the Global South to implement participation in their work on the ground. Development management practitioners in the Global South have unique understanding and practice of local participation. This article analyzes the status of local participation in Lebanon using recent empirical data. We address Lebanese DM practitioners' perceptions of participation. They relate that participation is used in a limited way, as a tool at best. We also identify some of the underlying conditions: weak readiness and understanding; lack of coordinated efforts; and rhetorical use of the participation paradigm. The form of participation changes as these conditions change. We recommend modest expectations of citizen participation, investing efforts to develop organizational readiness, enhance cross-sector coordination, and secure more serious donor engagement.

Résumé Les chercheurs définissent la participation locale selon un éventail d'outils, de processus et de valeurs, dont les résultats sont essentiellement au service de ceux assurant leur mise en œuvre ou des bénéficiaires. Les donateurs ont adopté la participation au sein de leurs politiques et demandent à leurs partenaires locaux

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du Sud planétaire d'implémenter une participation dans leur travail sur le terrain. Les praticiens de la gestion du développement dans le Sud planétaire ont une compréhension et une pratiques uniques de la participation locale. Cet article analyse le statut de la participation locale au Liban en recourant à des données empiriques récentes. Nous nous intéressons aux perceptions des praticiens libanais de la GD concernant la participation. Ils indiquent que cette dernière est utilisée de manière limitée, au mieux comme un outil. Nous identifions également certaines des conditions sous-jacentes : la faiblesse de la préparation comme de la compréhension; l'absence d'efforts coordonnés et l'utilisation rhétorique du paradigme de la participation. La forme de la participation évolue en fonction des modifications de ces conditions. Nous recommandons des attentes modestes en matière de participation des citoyens, et la mise en œuvre d'efforts afin de développer une préparation organisationnelle, d'optimiser la coordination intersectorielle et d'obtenir un engagement plus sérieux des donateurs.

Zusammenfassung Wissenschaftler definieren lokale Partizipation als ein Spektrum aus Werkzeugen, Verfahren und Werten mit Folgen, die hauptsächlich den Realisierern oder Nutztragenden dienen. Spender haben die Partizipation in ihren Richtlinien aufgenommen und bitten lokale Partner im Globalen Süden das Partizipationsprinzip bei ihrer Arbeit vor Ort zu implementieren. Fachkräfte im Bereich des Entwicklungsmanagements im Globalen Süden haben ein besonderes Verständnis für die lokale Partizipation und ihre Praxis. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht den aktuellen Stand der lokalen Partizipation im Libanon unter Hinzunahme neuester empirischer Daten. Wir betrachten, wie libanesishe Fachkräfte im Bereich des Entwicklungsmanagements die Partizipation wahrnehmen. Sie berichten, dass das Partizipationsprinzip lediglich begrenzt angewandt wird, im besten Fall als ein Werkzeug. Zudem stellen wir einige der zugrunde liegenden Rahmenbedingungen heraus: geringe Bereitschaft und wenig Verständnis; fehlende Koordinierungsbemühungen und eine rhetorische Anwendung des Partizipationsparadigmas. Die Form der Partizipation ändert sich entsprechend den Rahmenbedingungen. Wir empfehlen, von einer geringen Bürgerbeteiligung auszugehen und Anstrengungen dahingehend zu unternehmen, die organisatorische Bereitschaft und sektorübergreifende Koordinierung zu fördern und ein ernsthafteres Spenderengagement zu bewirken.

Resumen Los académicos enmarcan la participación local como un espectro de herramientas, procesos y valores, con resultados que sirven fundamentalmente a los implementadores o beneficiarios. Los donantes han adoptado la participación en sus políticas y están pidiendo a los socios locales en el Sur Global que implementen la participación en su trabajo sobre el terreno. Los profesionales de la gestión del desarrollo en el Sur Global tienen una comprensión y práctica únicas de la participación local. El presente artículo analiza el estado de la participación local en Líbano utilizando datos empíricos recientes. Abordamos las percepciones de la participación de profesionales libaneses de la gestión del desarrollo. Relatan que la participación se utiliza de una forma limitada, en el mejor de los casos, como una herramienta. También identificamos algunas de las condiciones subyacentes:

comprensión y disposición débiles; falta de esfuerzos coordinados; y uso retórico del paradigma de la participación. La forma de participación cambia a medida que cambian estas condiciones. Recomendamos expectativas modestas con respecto a la participación ciudadana, invirtiendo esfuerzos para desarrollar la disposición organizativa, aumentar la coordinación intersectorial y garantizar un compromiso más serio de los donantes.

Keywords Development management · Participation · Local ownership · NGOs · Lebanon

Introduction

Sustainable development starts with self-development and human-capacity building, recognizing that humans have the freedom to act for themselves and determine their own goals and what they value most. Amidst that theorizing about development, local citizen–beneficiary participation is at the forefront; after all, “development happens mainly through homegrown efforts” (Easterly 2006, p. 29). Current debate in development advancing citizen–beneficiary participation is an outcome of social change and interdisciplinary research and practice. In particular, discourse analysis has helped in deconstructing the once-dominant DM epistemology of the Global North and imagining a “post-development” epistemology emerging through the historical and cultural discourses of women and the poor themselves in the Global South (Escobar 1995).

Citizen–beneficiary participation is critical in the developing countries of the Global South. Participation facilitates government and NGO efforts to develop human resources of all societal strata, despite resistance to administrative and institutional pluralism among government elites in some parts of the Global South (Esman 1991, p. 112). Along with enhancing state legitimacy, strong participation processes and values diversify NGOs’ cultural, communication, and organizational skills (Esman 1991; Riggs 1998; Nye 2004). Participation fosters interest in conflict resolution, as it bridges cultural distance and does not radically introduce or impose solutions or rush processes (Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith 2003). NGOs in the Global South are pulled in different directions by their own missions, home governments’ weaknesses, and donor agendas. Participation offers flexible responses to those challenges.

The Global South is a primary site for development, yet perspectives on development management (DM) from the southern hemisphere receive minor treatment in comparison to perspectives from the Global Northern DM donor and practitioner communities. AbouAssi’s (2010) survey on DM addresses the Global Southern perspective, targeting a random sample of Lebanese development practitioners, the majority of whom were from the NGO sector. The survey results indicate that local participation should be incorporated into practice by donors and government agencies. The survey demonstrates that past shortcomings of participatory development in Lebanon included insufficient local human and institutional capabilities and resources and cross-sector collaboration.

This study delves deeper into perspectives of Lebanese development managers, pursuing two research questions. First, how do Lebanese development managers perceive and use local participation? Second, what is needed to enhance the application of local participation, now and looking to the future? These two questions reflect a common problem: lack of understanding and agreement among development managers (NGOs, donors, and government officials) about the conditions and role for participation in the development process. In this context, we address the research questions, first by reviewing scholarly framings of local participation, particularly the continuum of tools, processes, and values (Brett 2003; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2006) and Michener's (1998) outcomes framework. Then, we provide brief background on development in Lebanon, summarize our case study methodology, and delve into findings from interviews and a focus group.

Frameworks of Participation

The epistemology of participation theory varies between economic rationality imposed by the Global North to critical theory as a response to colonialism. Arguments for participatory development call for development led by local people, who exercise agency in determining what they want to do and in doing it themselves (Scott 1998; Easterly 2006; Chambers 2007). Change should emerge more from within than from outside, more from below than from above, more through context-specific initiatives than in pre-packaged plans, and more by the 'metis'—the local individuals and groups with situational experience—than by the 'techné'—planners and other non-local experts with scientific or generic knowledge and skills (Scott 1998). Local participation challenges monopoly in development and plays an essential role in expanding local ownership. Local participation targets effort to meet community needs and promises to enhance potential for appropriateness of initiatives, equitable distribution of development benefits and sustainability of results.

Participation varies in two ways: the form it takes and the type of purported outcomes. The concept of participation can be operationalized in the continuum of tools, processes, and values (Brett 2003; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2006). The expected benefits or outcomes of participation are people-centered and planner-centered approaches (Michener 1998). We start with the continuum of tools, processes, and values.

A Participation Continuum

Scholars generally view participation through one of two lenses: an instrumental lens or a more holistic lens. In other words, participation is framed along a continuum from weak to strong participation (Brett 2003; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2006). The view through the instrumental lens is that participation is a weak, limited approach for sustainable development. Weak participation theorists hold that only informing and consulting users about improving project designs is necessary (Uphoff 2000). The weak participation paradigm is assumed to lead to efficient delivery of services.

In the practitioner literature, participation has been defined as “a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them” (World Bank 1996, p. 3). Mixed participation allows voice or expression of dis/satisfaction with societal-level goods or services, raising the quality of information needed to formulate policy. The middle-ground participation approach balances ‘metis’ with ‘techne’ or planners’ technical expertise with searchers’ local experience and endeavors. As it entails more collective action, participatory development probably lowers transaction costs to one actor in exchange for more power to other actors at the community level. As more needs are represented, there is more responsiveness to social and individual needs, fewer erroneous assumptions in development programs, more trust in the process and actors, and more opportunities for accountability and transparency (Cornwall et al. 2000; Chopra and Hohe 2004; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2006). Here participation takes the form of a management tool or a social process to improve performance in service delivery and effectiveness in programs by government, donors, NGOs, and private firms.

Through a more holistic lens, participation is synonymous with empowerment of citizen–beneficiaries in developing themselves and their society. The epistemological assumption of strong participation is a holistic, active approach for local capacity creation (e.g., Korten and Klaus 1984). Local empowerment merges the instrumentalist separation of planning-center ends and means. Strong participation privileges voice for the poor and builds citizen and community capacities through learning and skills development, fostering citizen agency and challenges traditional power relations. Influenced by Hirschman’s (1970) classic on citizen exit, voice, and loyalty, strong participation fosters people’s capabilities, self-esteem, and potential to negotiate for power with government and donor stakeholders. Strong participation leads to social mobilization and inclusivity; it buffers and absorbs local opposition or dismay, builds social capital through bridging between groups, generating a sense of unity and ownership and, at least, implying greater mutual trust through dialogue and interaction (Thomas 1999; Mohan and Stokke 2000; Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith 2003). In the active region of the continuum, participation is a value, beyond being framed as a tool or a process as a means to meta-level, donor-driven development objectives (Stiglitz 2002; Brinkerhoff 2008).

Theoretically, weak, mixed, and strong participation lead to good governance across sectors and improved delivery of services. Participation gives citizen–beneficiaries voice to express their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with government and NGOs. Brett (2003) concludes from analyzing several examples of weak and strong participation that in many if not most development project situations, weak participation is more realistic. The priority should be to strengthen government agencies so that they can, through their cooperation with NGOs at the local level, articulate public demands and interests, before aiming at the higher level goals of joint decision-making and empowerment roles for citizens. The strong participation approach is problematic, just as insufficient participation is controversial. While interest in sharing power might exist, citizenship education and other training take time and funding. The coordinating and convening roles of government are more demanding (Brinkerhoff 2008; AbouAssi 2010), and donor

commitment must be steadfast (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2010). Civic awareness and empowerment raise the potential for conflict with other stakeholders. In Lebanon, strong participation efforts are viewed by DM practitioners as laudable but politically difficult because of weak central and local government and strong sectarian-based, internal and external political pressures (AbouAssi 2010).

Participation Outcomes Approach

Michener (1998) observes more nuances in the value of participation methods. She distinguishes between planner-centered outcomes, people-centered outcomes, and combined outcomes. Planner-centered outcomes are increases in probability of success and joint decreases in cost. “If local people participate actively in project planning and implementation, they are more committed to its success” (p. 2016). Participation is used as a means to lower costs an organization incurred during implementation of projects. Participation makes it easier for an organization to defer or reduce project expenses if the local people are willing to cooperate, accept new ideas, contribute labor and in-kind services, and ready to share responsibility for project sustainability.

People-centered outcomes shift the focus from planners and development managers to beneficiaries (Michener 1998). Participation is seen as an end in itself and is assessed through empowerment and local capacity creation. Although DM practitioners are still going to benefit from the end results, the intention here is not to use participation to serve the interest of the organization or to facilitate implementation. Participation is not measured through returns to the organization or its projects and processes. The outcomes are the confidence in local potential, the collective consciousness, and the social capital built at the local level. Michener (1998) considers that a combination of the people-centered and planner-centered outcomes helps avoid paternalism and top-down designs and reduces the limitations of a unidimensional set of outcomes. However, participation in and of itself cannot achieve all the goals of its stakeholders simultaneously. As Michener (1998) states “complexities at the field level constrain the application of genuine people-centered participation.... Participatory frameworks [should be] more responsive to field-level realities” (p. 2116).

Along the participation continuum, effective human and institutional capacity building with a weak type of planner-centered participation should lead to experimentation with more people-centered processes (Brinkerhoff and Crosby 2002; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2006; Chambers 2007). Ideally, this is a natural progression from information-sharing to consultation, to coordination and then collaboration and joint decision-making, until citizens have the skills and experience to feel empowered, government has the institutional capacity to manage stakeholder conflict, and stakeholder confidence and trust in participation are established. At an initial stage, participation could be experimented with as a tool. If stakeholders perceive advantages, they could buy into it as a sustainable process. If processes such as empowerment continue to be perceived as effective, stakeholders could inculcate them as values in and of themselves.

Benefits of Cross-Sector Working Relationships

When participation is used as a tool, the organization is focusing on the efficiency of its own operations. Information-sharing and consultations are used to enhance effectiveness and cut costs. This is a basic job that the organization can conduct with minimum or no interorganizational coordination. However, if donor, citizen, and government stakeholders demand that participation be a process of development, more coordination is necessary. Coordination refers to “formal, institutionalized relationships among existing networks of organizations” (Gray 1989, p. 15, citing Mulford and Rogers 1982, p. 13), including information-sharing, resource-sharing, and joint action at the organizational level (Honadle and Cooper 1989).

With appropriate coordination, participation increases the quality of information needed to formulate sustainable policy and avoid duplication and overlap of programs and initiatives. Recent discourse in the broader fields of public administration (King and Stivers 1998; Denhardt and Denhardt 2007) and public management (Feldman et al. 2009) confirms the added value to policy of local citizen participation coupled with interorganizational coordination. Indeed, government cannot deliver public services without them (King and Stivers 1998).

Furthermore, Brinkerhoff et al. (2007a, b) caution NGOs against working at cross purposes with the private sector and government as results will be limited if not negative. The authors argue for relations of ‘comparative advantage’ based on the limitations of the public and the private sector and that can be realized through an effective division of labor among the three sectors. Complementary contributions are the imperative of active cooperation and coordination (Brinkerhoff et al. 2007a, b). Understanding this imperative transforms cooperation into a participatory relationship involving mutual understanding and commitment and shared goals and responsibilities (Brinkerhoff 2002). A participatory relationship is inclusive and empowering for all stakeholders.

Benefits of Donor Involvement

NGOs are driven toward institutionalization, bureaucratization, and professionalization, reflecting donor priorities and practices. Professionalization is recognizable as standardization, monitoring and reporting, and participatory approaches (Mawdsley et al. 2002; Wallace et al. 2006). Integrating participatory approaches into professionalization of NGOs’ organizational development is intended to increase managerial and policy expertise, and transparency, and efficient appropriation of funding. However, participation is not necessarily more than a tool to satisfy a donor criterion.

For participation to move away from an instrumental to a process-oriented approach (Harmon 2006) in development, the donor has to become more involved as one of the actors participating in the process and coordinating work and agendas with other national and local actors. Since coordination becomes a pressing matter, participation here is not just an NGO’s management tool for complying with a donor requirement. Participation becomes a donor strategy of involvement at the local level. This is reflected in both the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and

the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action. These donors' initiatives assign top priority to "[d]eveloping countries [to] set their own strategies [...] through wider [host country] participation in development policy formulation, stronger leadership on aid co-ordination and more use of country systems for aid delivery."

When donors place "consolidated resources at the disposal of local institutions that decide on and own the uses to which they are put" (Edwards et al. 1999, p. 123), the development process becomes an equal partnership of mutual responsibility, learning, and benefit. NGOs assume responsibility and take the initiative in designing and presenting their agenda and preferences, expecting full support and commitment from donors (Ottaway 2000; Doornbos 2003). This scenario privileges full voice of beneficiaries and their representatives and underscores accountability to mission and local needs. The practice of participation becomes the value of ownership in and of itself.

A Proposed Model of Participation

We proceed to propose a model that incorporates integrates Michener's (1998) people- and planners-centered outcomes approaches to participation, and [with] the continuum of tools, processes, and values (Brett 2003; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2006). The discussion above leads us to claim that each element of this model (depicted in Fig. 1) has certain conditions for success and for failure.

The foregoing conceptual framework of participation has some explanatory and predictive power. However, limitations emerge in the framework's application to specific situations because obstacles and stimulants to citizen participation vary widely. In specific, there is a lack of agreement among development managers about the meaning and application of participation. Empirical research will enhance understanding about how to surmount the obstacles and support the stimulants. With the following case study of perspectives on participation held by practitioners from Lebanon we hope to make a contribution.

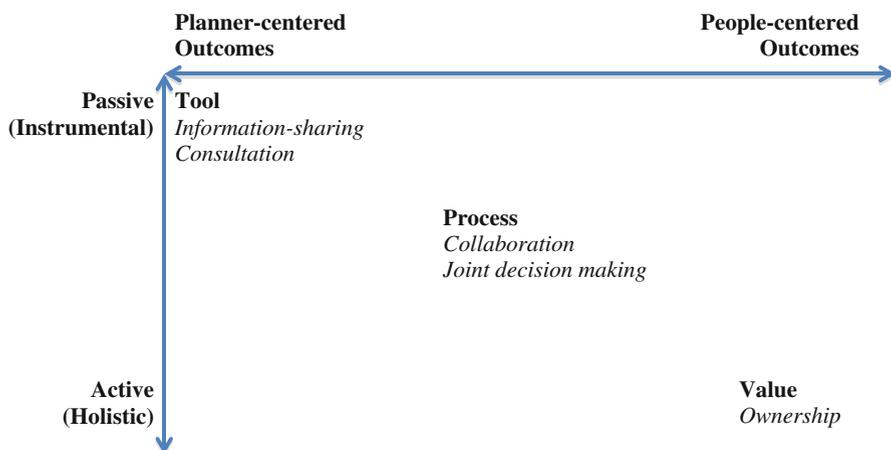


Fig. 1 Participation along a tool–process–value continuum

Case Study of Lebanese NGO Executives

In this study, we build on research carried out in 2008 to examine perspectives of Lebanese NGOs on DM (AbouAssi 2010). Using Lebanon as a case is suitable. First, Lebanon is a small, formerly colonized country that maintains a fragile democracy and a developing economy. The socio-politics of the nation allow wide space for active citizen participation in public life, through elections, associations and other civic activities. The country's struggling economy increases reliance on external sources of revenues (including foreign assistance, remittances, loans, and treasury bonds); for example, the foreign currency debt is around US\$ 21 billion in 2010 (Republic of Lebanon 2010). Most foreign assistance, especially from the US government and the EU, is channeled through NGOs. This foreign assistance is conditioned on certain requirements, e.g., enhanced participation.

Second, Lebanon has a vibrant and dynamic civil society. The number of registered NGOs is around 5,000, serving the national population of approximately four million. NGOs are active in all aspects and domains of public life. During the country's civil war (1975–1990), when the public sector was shattered, NGOs assumed primary responsibility for most service provision (AbouAssi 2006, p. 23).

One of the distinctive features of Lebanese NGOs is their ability to secure funding from various sources without any government interference or control. With outdated laws on tax exemptions for philanthropy, many local organizations have flexibility to diversify and tap different sources for funding. Although some government agencies provide limited financial support to NGOs (AbouAssi 2006), the major sources of funding for Lebanese NGOs are membership fees and international donors who prefer to work with NGOs rather than the government, “which is often thought to be a drain on funds” (p. 50).

Lebanese NGOs face some management issues. Human and technological resources continue to be insufficient. Only 56.5 % of NGOs recruit paid staff, with the average number of staff in an organization standing at ten; others rely on the voluntary work of their members and founders (AbouAssi 2006). On another front, networking among NGOs is weak, and interorganizational communication and coordination are inadequate; competition and individualism are the norm (AbouAssi 2006). Finally, the nature of the NGO–government relationship is generally characterized by limited dialogue, considerable distrust, and lack of collaboration, although some government agencies provide some financial support to NGOs (AbouAssi 2006). This is manifested in hesitance or unclear perception among NGOs in identifying the government role in development (AbouAssi 2010).

Methodology

This study relies on qualitative data collected in ten interviews and one focus group with NGO representatives. Although the number of interviewed organizations is limited, the sample is diverse and, to a certain extent, represents the NGO sector. It includes small, medium, and large organizations operating in the sectors of rural development, environment, women's rights, people with disabilities, and good governance. All the organizations are local (i.e., Lebanese) functioning nationwide.

The sample does not include community-based organizations. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing opportunity for open-ended discourse. Each interview lasted an average of 1.5 h.

One focus group was also organized after the interviews. The purpose of the focus group was to exchange ideas about present and future DM practice in Lebanon, get expert opinion, and discuss preliminary results of the interviews. The focus group included 12 pre-selected experts and practitioners in DM, representing only themselves. (None of them were interviewees.) Participants had been involved in development for more than 15 years in Lebanon, each with a different role and bringing in different expertise, e.g., consultancies, needs assessment, monitoring and evaluation, training. The focus group lasted 2.5 h, guided by a summary of the topic, interviews findings, and a set of questions, all distributed in advance.

Our interpretive methodology relies on abductive reasoning (e.g., Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Blaikie 2000; Mason 2002; Maxwell 2005; Vaara and Monin 2010). Using an abductive approach avoids twin pitfalls in qualitative research discussed in Maxwell (2005, pp. 45–46), that theory can dominate other sources of explanation, or can be neglected as a practical beginning point for research design. Existing theory should be used to inform, but not impose on, the interpretive process (Maxwell, p. 46). Abduction allows for a continuous, iterative comparison of emergent findings to existing theory and practice and is situated within the interpretive tradition (Mason 2002, p. 180, citing Blaikie 2000, p. 25). In the present case, the interview and focus group data are compared with the literatures of the participation continuum and planner/people-centered outcomes. To analyze the data, we follow Campbell's (1966) pattern matching, commonly used in qualitative research. Pattern matching is an analytical method used to link theoretical and observed patterns to reach conclusions. The theoretical pattern is the continuum framework of participation in development presented above. The observed or operational patterns were generated during the interviews and the focus group.

Examining Patterns of Participation

Interview responses and focus group discussion indicate three main conditions for sustainable local participation in Lebanon: local readiness, coordination, and donor role. The data also indicate that these conditions are interdependent. The emergence of these interdependencies partially addresses our research questions, in that NGO practitioners recognize the objectives, potential effectiveness, and limits of participation. After explaining these findings, we analyze them through the literature to tease out the deeper meaning of these interdependent issues in the case of Lebanese DM.

Local Readiness

The process of defining and describing development problems should involve all actors in the local community, according to focus group discussants. Beneficiaries, with support from NGOs, should be able to identify needs and work toward

satisfying them; beneficiaries know best what suits them. NGOs provide technical expertise. Only then can development initiatives be considered efficient and sustainable. This perception of participation was prevalent in the focus group, which included experts in the field. Three characteristics point to the necessary condition of local readiness for development.

Lack of a Clear Understanding

In general, participants in this study said that local participation is not anchored securely in DM practice in Lebanon. Many Lebanese NGOs have a limited understanding of participation. For example, one interviewee asked to explain participation, romanticized it as the involvement of the NGO's stakeholders. However, this NGO manager broadly defined stakeholders as the people the NGO interacts with while implementing a specific local project. These people are not only beneficiaries. Involvement is interpreted through the benefits stakeholders receive from that project. The benefits are either from the goals of the project or from economic opportunities (employment and service/goods delivery) the project provides. As another interviewee commented, "The priority is for the people and businesses in our region. This is how we understand participation, real participation." Another interviewee cited evidence of a lack of understanding of sustainable participation: "how can an NGO claim its beneficiaries are participating when the mechanism in place is online on its website and most of its beneficiaries are poor people in remote areas?"

Limited Application

Participation is also not systematically or wholeheartedly used, according to the majority of interviewees and focus group discussants. More often, NGOs sporadically implement some form of participation, e.g., during periods of crisis. During the 2006 war between Hizbullah and Israel, when NGOs were concerned to directly engage beneficiaries, NGOs had to launch initiatives in close contact with local communities and beneficiaries to ensure their buy-in, as a focus group discussant points out. In other cases, use of participation depends on the nature of the project. "If we are working on education, participation is limited to schools; in other projects we do not necessarily use participation due to the type of activities we are implementing," explained an interviewed NGO manager.

Limited Capacity

Finally, there is organizational capacity. Effective participation requires people with expertise and knowledge of the local environment in order to put the right plans in place and ensure locally generated and "owned" development. According to participants in this study, Lebanese NGOs do not currently have adequate local human resources. Strong local capabilities in the NGO sector are either marginalized from the decision-making process or over-relied on mainly in grant proposal writing and fundraising stages. Instead of NGOs utilizing local experts' skills and

connections or providing them career incentives, highly skilled local experts become attracted to donor agencies or international organizations because of better salaries and career opportunities. Another reason for weak organizational capacity is the lack of strategic planning. A focus group discussant offered this assessment:

We are not involving the recipients in our thinking and planning processes and the reason is simple. NGOs do not really conduct assessments of past experience and forecast future needs and directions; they revisit what they are working on and make small incremental changes based on shifting political interests and situational needs.

According to some participants in this study, participation is appropriate for small NGOs working at the village or neighborhood level. These organizations “have a moral obligation to the local people based on close personal connections; they won’t be able to avoid people’s complaints. People know each other and would follow up closely and hold the person the responsibility if the work does not go well,” a focus group discussant recounted. “Big NGOs execute a project without involving or caring for the local people. A big NGO can easily exit the region and have no ties or contacts with the local people again.”

However, the only interviewed NGOs that apply some form of participatory approaches are medium- and large-sized. Participation is used to facilitate the work of the organization in both cases. An interviewee representing the medium-sized NGO reported that the organization adopts a more structured participatory approach, where units of youth volunteers are formed to work on projects the NGO implements at the local level. A manager in the large-sized NGO referred to the Participatory Rural Appraisal the organization conducts with the local community:

We gather people at the local level to gather information about negative and positive situations and possible solutions. This is how we start to envision possible projects to implement in this village. They are based on what is proposed by most of the villagers; this is different from a prefabricated project that they do not understand. Such a project would definitely fail.

The three characteristics of the condition of local readiness—a lack of clear understanding of participation, limited application of participation, and limited capacity—are interactive. They also affect interactions with other development actors, e.g., interorganizational coordination.

Coordination Among Actors

Development is complex and requires both the participation and humility of all the actors. Participants in this study generally agreed that there is a lot of duplication in project implementation. “You can see the same project being implemented in the same region by different organizations with funding from different donors. There is a huge waste of resources, whether financial or human,” one interviewee explained. Two characteristics provide evidence that interorganizational coordination is necessary for sustainable local participation in development.

NGO Competition

Competition among NGOs indicates that it is not clear whether all of the various actors—including NGOs and government—comprehend the coordination imperative. The majority of participants in this study agreed that there is weak, if any, coordination among NGOs. A focus group discussant elaborated, “there is competition over resources, leadership roles, and giving of credit for work accomplished. Some NGOs intentionally repeat already-implemented projects driven by the interest to show that they can do a better job.” An NGO member reflected on this observation: “NGOs should know that the time for competition is over. You are competitive when you produce results. NGOs that prove themselves are successful. We are ready to coordinate with those organizations.”

There are certain attempts at coordination among NGOs. However, they have not been effective; when funds are available, coordinating mechanisms become fragmented and each NGO starts working on its own. Instead of networking, they compete with others for resources. Networking between NGOs may yield better results but experiences are not encouraging, as several NGOs representatives affirm during interviews. Very few NGOs find any benefit from joining networking bodies. Several in the study have belonged to such bodies but have not been actively involved or are on the verge of dropping out. One interviewee considered them venues to meet for the sake of meeting; “they are a waste of our time and resources; we do not do anything or discuss any serious matter. But we are still members because we do not want to be out of the loop.” A focus group member remarked that “networks among NGOs is more theorizing; the concept itself is hollow in practice. Do not ask about the *work* in a network. What you will be left with is the *net*.”

Engagement with Government

Furthermore, dialogue between government and NGOs is seasonal and perfunctory, as there is a lack of cross-sector confidence and trust, according to focus group members. For example, the government approaches NGOs to help prepare national reports required by international organizations. NGOs also approach government for funding and support of activities. When asked about coordination with the government, a representative of an environmental NGO complained, “the government itself needs to coordinate its own activities first before seeking to work with us.” There are efforts to address the challenge of coordination, but “these attempts are limited to specific sub-groups, don’t involve everyone, and are usually reactive in the sense that they take place in the middle of the process, when problems have already arisen, instead of from the start,” according to one disconcerted focus group member.

The hurdles to participation set up by government agencies in Lebanon are difficult for NGOs to surmount. One focus group member’s depiction of the Lebanese scenario:

Some actors tend to monopolize development; they consider themselves as the primary actor in a certain area and have the right to set priorities and activities.

Such a perception negates the need to involve others. Let us take the local authorities as an example of those stakeholders. Local governments are elected bodies and represent the people; the whole argument for their establishment is to ensure better and balanced development by bringing decision-making process closer to the citizens. Are they integrally involved in or excluded from the development process?

Role of Donors

Last, but not least, is the condition for participatory development of the donor's role. This condition emerged from two patterns in the interview and focus group data.

Donor Requirement

In general, Lebanese NGO managers do not recognize participation as a part of their organizational mission, but rather primarily as a donor requirement in development projects. Local participation is a catchy development concept generated by internal reviews of assistance programs in international and multilateral donor organizations, as mentioned by one focus group member. Expressing a similar perspective, another focus group member commented:

We were receptive and started to implement these concepts by attending to the needs of local communities and working with and involving the grassroots. The underlying assumptions were that these paradigms improve management and enhance success, since we are working on a better plan of identified objectives and goals for a longer period. Much of the credit, therefore, should be given to international donors who impose these paradigms as project requirements; some of them even organize training to promote these concepts and educate local recipient organizations.

However, this favorable view of the role of donors in promoting participation is not widely shared, as the last characteristic discussed here indicates.

Lack of Donor Commitment

We observed in the focus group discussion a conviction that donors do not communicate clear requirements or guidelines for engaging the entire span of the community. Whether they do depends on the sector and the country mission personnel. Even when a thorough participatory approach is undertaken in needs assessment, strategies are developed by people other than those conducting the assessment or framing political interests. A focus group member vividly illustrated how foreign government aid policy and implementation in Lebanon impede engagement with local citizens:

We also need to remember that there are so many levels within development assistance: the program level and the strategy level are two examples. Participatory approaches might be used at the program level but much less at

the strategy level because it does not make sense to involve recipients in deciding our development goals when these goals are tied to our diplomatic goals. When we are still struggling with the question of what is development and is it for development goals or for diplomatic goals or a combination of both, then you cannot really involve the people at the local level. Most of the time it is a combination of the two purposes, and in these cases, development is very difficult and participatory methods are obsolete when the goals are already set.

In another focus group discussant's words, "the engagement of the local people is limited to one level of entry and becomes diluted in the process." The main concern for DM lies not in donor requirements as much as in donor behavior. "They preach something and do something else" an interviewee commented about donors. Donors claim they do consultations and involve local partners and government agencies in planning their strategies. However, few NGO managers participating in the study confirmed participating in these consultations and describe them as a procedural requirement more than a conviction of the importance and benefits of NGO participation and involvement. "Sometimes we spend more time meeting with delegations sent by different donors to assess needs and discuss future priorities than doing our work, and at the end, we find out that what we ask for is less important than what they ask us about," clarified an interviewee.

Because donors hold the keys to many development resources, their level of direct effort in and commitment to citizen–beneficiary participation is critical. If donors enforce strong requirements consistently, NGOs have no choice but to comply. Strong requirements and steadfast commitment require strong local capacity and coordination among actors, demonstrating that the conditions are interdependent.

Figure 2 displays the seven characteristics and three conditions explained above. We recognize that other conditions are necessary for effective participatory development, both in Lebanon and throughout the Global South, but these are the most salient in this case.

In summary, first, the figure shows that a lack of a clear or uniform understanding of the meaning of participation, limited and sporadic application of participation, and limited local capacity create the condition of local readiness. Second, competition among NGOs diverts their attention from coordination and networking. This and a lack of government engagement with NGOs indicate a need for coordination among all actors in development. The third condition is the importance of the donor role in local participation. It is indicated by two characteristics: that participation is considered a donor requirement but not an intrinsic goal of most NGOs; and that the donor role is characterized by a lack of serious commitment to participation in practice. A weak donor role hinders participation as well as productive NGO–donor relations. Finally, the figure's vertical, two-way arrows between local readiness, coordination, and donor role indicate the three conditions affect each other.

The findings show that participation in Lebanon is predominantly a managerial tool. Although participation remains planner-centered, there are slight indications of participatory processes, albeit not by small NGOs. In the discussion below, we abductively relate these findings to the tools–processes–values literature and

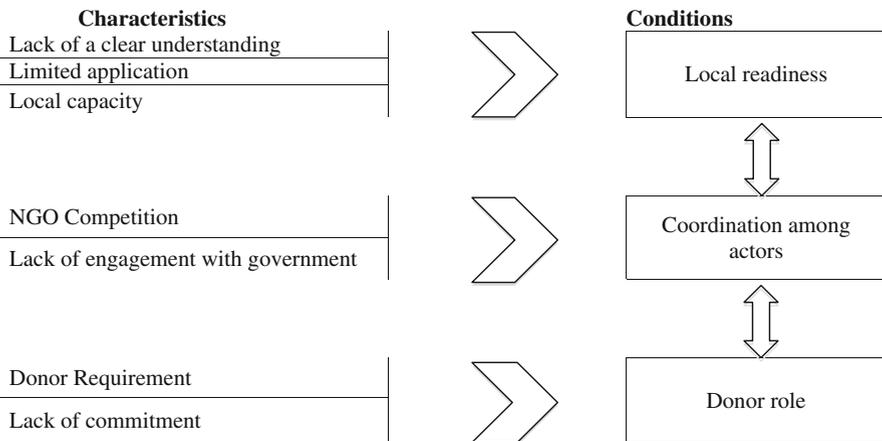


Fig. 2 Characteristics and conditions of participation

socio-economic conditions in Lebanon. We tease out possibilities of stepped-up local participation that would increase the likelihood of blending planner-centered and people-center outcomes into participatory processes.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Local participation experience in Lebanon is unique because development is hindered by sectarian conflict and a fragile democracy while facilitated by a vibrant civil society. The Lebanese experience with participation tests and informs theory and provides context for analyzing participation in other nations in the Global South. In this section, we discuss the conditions of readiness, coordination, and donor role, further develop the tools–processes–values framework of the participation continuum, and explore implications for other developing countries.

The contrast, between the strong participation approach and DM reality in Lebanon illustrates the tool, process, and value dimensions. The value dimension emphasizes beneficiary-driven development, where responsiveness, adaptability, and feasibility take precedence over technical correctness and expediency (Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2006). The process dimension highlights the importance of each step in development to serve the intended results, treating the process as a means and as an end (Brinkerhoff 2008). Despite the interest of the study participants in more citizen–beneficiary focused development, they understand participation mainly as a tool for planner-centered outcomes, confirming Michener (1998) and serving the interest of NGOs and the requirements of donors.

Limits of Readiness and Commitment: Searching for Metis

Interviewees and focus group members provided ample evidence that they value participation. Yet, their experience is that participation is not systematically

integrated into DM practice in Lebanon. This is not surprising given the financial and human resources, political will, and cross-sector cooperation and coordination they require (e.g., Esman 1991; King and Stivers 1998; Denhardt and Denhardt 2007; Feldman et al. 2009). Assessing the status of DM in Lebanon, AbouAssi (2010) underscores the negative implications of the current deficiencies in DM education. Some DM managers in Lebanon are not undergoing sufficient training in participation and its management. This has resulted in confusion about what participation means and how it should be applied and led the Lebanese practitioners to lag behind and surrender to knowledge that is fed by donor and international organizations without much local input. For local participation to become stronger, efforts should be invested in developing practical knowledge and organizational learning and expanding venues for education and exchange of information and experiences (Thomas 1999; AbouAssi 2010).

A vexing question for DM globally is one we sense in the findings regards the societal level to which development efforts should be devolved: how local is local? This question directly speaks to a need for local organization capacity to implement participatory approaches more than big, national NGO capacity. If development is a global process, local ownership implies devolving responsibilities from the Global North to the Global South, allowing Southern-based development managers to be in charge, deciding on needs, objectives, strategies, and implementation.

There are other pertinent questions about local participation. How do development actors learn what level of devolution ensures its sustainability? When should development be devolved to the grassroots or community level? How much devolution will be tolerated by government and donors? Will citizens tolerate a lack of input into development interventions affecting their quality of life? In Lebanon, the persistence of these questions suggests that participation is mostly practiced at a mezzo level, with little involvement from higher authorities or local beneficiaries. Also, NGOs only sporadically implement participatory approaches. When they do, the interest is to collect information or seek consultation (e.g., needs assessment or appraisals). Organizations seldom devolve other facets of their operation to the microlevel (community/village). The core of any development initiative remains in the hand of the NGO.

Another issue to ponder is organizational and human capacity. There was general agreement among focus group members that NGOs with well-trained staff and well-defined and distributed tasks and responsibilities enhance their chances to achieve more sustainable results (e.g., Esman 1991; Scott 1998; Sen 1999; Easterly 2006; Brinkerhoff 2008). However, they commented that the reality seems to be a preference for NGO professionals to join government or other donor agencies that have an upper hand in development.

The misdirection of human capital illustrates Easterly's (2006) call for a greater role for locally based searchers, or metis. For more holistic development, the greater Lebanese DM community should ensure that NGO personnel are actively and rigorously participating in the process of development and not passively receiving ideas and implementing the agenda of others. A central role for NGOs cannot be guaranteed if capacity development is only joined to and conditioned on aid effectiveness without addressing the processes and conditions (Brinkerhoff 2008).

Increasing the number of trained civil servants hired through a merit-based process (as opposed to inexperienced clients of patrons) and paying them a living wage are steps to address corruption and patronage. They also reinforce local ownership of poverty reduction interventions and other development projects.

These findings resonate with the perception of participation as a tool. In development projects, where NGOs are intermediaries for citizens and assume responsibilities on their behalf, participation with planner-centered outcomes is most suitable. DM should then focus efforts on instituting the information-sharing form of participation from government/donor to citizen/beneficiary and addressing its shortfalls to achieve sustainable results. In that scenario, engaging in a stronger form of participation, e.g., joint-decision making or empowerment, might weaken project implementation, due to a lack of local citizen–beneficiary participation and institutionalized coordination (Brett 2003).

All NGOs—small and large, operating locally or nationally—should become forums for shaping participation as a cultural value, channeling voices of citizens. In this process, participation becomes a value or end in itself. The constraints on NGOs and citizens coalescing toward joint ownership return us to the purpose of citizen participation to strengthen local knowledge and institutions. This form of participation is coupled with less hierarchy, more flexibility, and situational analysis of local context, all implying citizen engagement (Esman 1991; Burkey 1993; Denhardt and Denhardt 2007). Local participation requires skilled practitioners and engaged citizens, or searchers with the metis of practical skills, common sense, and experience (Scott 1998).

To Coordinate or Not to Coordinate

Participation requires coordination among NGOs and also with government (Honadle and Cooper 1989; Brinkerhoff et al. 2007a, b). If participation is implemented without ensuring coordination among and between implementing agencies, the whole purpose of participation would be defeated. Coordination is increasingly important moving away from planner-centered participation tools toward people-centered participation processes and values, because more people, organizations, and networks are involved. Flatter, more dispersed communication and other participation-related activities are more difficult to manage and require greater coordination than vertical, top-down approaches. Participation, especially based on planner-centered outcomes (Michener 1998), as is the case in Lebanon, is argued to lead to better efficiency. Lack of coordination among NGOs would dilute efficiency due to the overlap of efforts and waste of resources. Brinkerhoff et al. (2007a, b) forewarn against working in competition and isolation from other entities whether within the same sector or cross-sector. Each actor in development, including the government as a facilitator, has certain comparative advantage to be recognized and complemented, not denied or undermined (Brinkerhoff et al. 2007a, b; Denhardt and Denhardt 2007). As the findings demonstrate and other research indicates, coordination among actors is lacking at all levels; at best, it is inadequate (AbouAssi 2010). This kind of nominal interaction does not qualify as effective

interorganizational coordination (Honadle and Cooper 1989) or process consultation (Cooke 1997).

We recognize that committing to and coordinating citizen participation across sectors is difficult in the Lebanese context because of conflicting institutional agendas (Brinkerhoff and Coston 1999; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff 2006). As government and donors set their agendas, NGOs often cater their programs and activities accordingly, to secure the funding they need to stay in business. However, NGOs that are more attuned to external donors' interests and concerns than to local development needs is not a promising scenario for people-centered development in Lebanon or anywhere else (Michener 1998).

Although coordination incurs start-up costs, it promises expanded reach, more desirable results, and reduction in operating costs in the long run. Emphasizing coordination also encourages some NGOs to get out of their comfort zones of limited and repetitive service delivery domains to expand their base of operation and increase benefits. Other NGOs will be encouraged to consider specialization rather than the pursuit of a general set of loosely coupled objectives. These objectives will be picked up by other organizations. Engaging in networks and other joint efforts reduces competition and duplication of work. NGOs need to demonstrate openness and readiness to work with the government hand-in-hand and acceptance of the comparative advantages of the other sectors in society (Brinkerhoff et al. 2007a, b).

Prioritizing cross-sector coordination will help strengthen organizational confidence and streamline development initiatives. Coordination is built on openness and mutual benefit and responsibilities. As cross-sector coordination increases, participation becomes stronger, involving citizens and as well as organizations themselves. It becomes more than just a tool used by an organization to get things done. Although the focus might still be on planner-centered outcomes, the spillover effects are wider and not limited to a specific organization or project. Participation is rather a means to coordinate efforts and move things along, as in a process.

As it intensifies, coordination does not only allow participation to become a process used to formulate policies and implement strategies but also transforms relations into true partnerships where each actor recognizes and accepts the comparative advantages of the others (Brinkerhoff et al. 2007a, b). We refer here to a participatory relationship of mutual commitment and shared goals and responsibilities (Brinkerhoff 2002). Here, government assumes a role as a facilitator and broker among sectors and communities (Denhardt and Denhardt 2007). The larger roles and achievements of various actors reflect how participation fosters greater citizen engagement (Denhardt and Denhardt 2007; Feldman et al. 2009).

Donor Demands, Rhetoric, and Practices

Interview and focus group participants emphasized that Lebanon's mounting development needs require continuous support from external actors (Sachs 2005). This raises several red flags. First, as participants in this study indicated, the trend toward local ownership and participation is not local (e.g., World Bank 1996; Brinkerhoff and Crosby 2002; Easterly 2006; Feldman et al. 2009). Once again,

NGOs are at the receiving end. Funding is conditioned on the application of some form of local participation, which makes participation more of a practical tool to meet a specific requirement and to comply with the donor motive toward professionalization (Mawdsley et al. 2002; Wallace et al. 2006). The extent to which NGOs apply participation in their activities is thus dictated by conditions on the funding they receive and the training donors might provide. Participation is not then a local decision.

Second, foreign aid strategizing (or policy making) and programming are separated hierarchically. The donor country's national interests are a given, and only a nominal amount of local citizen engagement is possible at the implementation level. Participation practices, e.g., those promoted by The World Bank, conflict with donor country interests, and aid recipients are caught in the conflict. Even if NGOs learn from local citizens, where is the political space in the hierarchy of foreign aid for learning to trickle up to the diplomatic-donor level? The top-down way country-level consultations are carried out, and their limited results, demonstrate that participatory approaches are not taken seriously by donors (Edwards et al. 1999; Doornbos 2003). Theory and practice show that when donors commit to a bottom-up, demand-led approach to development, development becomes more transformative (Edwards et al. 1999). The donor thinks and behaves as a partner, balancing institutional agendas and local interests. Beneficiaries and their representatives are willingly and purposively granted the voice and the capacity for ownership, underscoring participation as a value and a means and an end in itself.

A Model of Varying Conditions of Participation

In the previous section, we discussed the characteristics of local participation in Lebanon. Theory is cautionary about how participation can be coordinated and achieved. Development managers need training in participation tools and processes. International governmental organizations work to broker a shared understanding with national government development officials, donor agents, and local NGOs about appropriate participation processes, tools, and values. Theory also signals that situational assessment is required to identify processes and tools that are realistic for and responsive to local and national political economy and culture, as well as regional, international, and global political context.

Analysis here leads us to understand that the instrumental nature of international development assistance limits participation to being a tool. Acknowledging that there are other important conditions, we expand on the model presented in Fig. 1 to account for the findings. In Fig. 3, we focus on the level of readiness, the degree of coordination, and the donor role as varying conditions of participation.

As the upper left of Fig. 3 depicts, the tool form of participation is weak and planner-centered. It is basically characterized by lack in organizational readiness, constrained by narrow interest in efficiency, limited in coordination, and initiated as an external criterion of performance evaluation. Participation becomes a process when the attention shifts away from limited interest in planner-centered outcomes and instrumental results, to focus on a broader picture of development. This shift, represented in the center of the figure, requires development in organizational

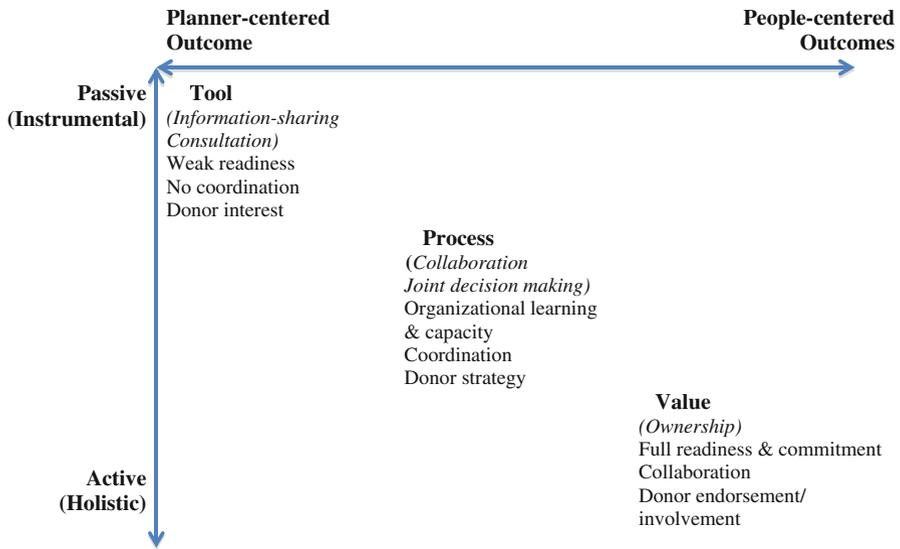


Fig. 3 Varying conditions of participation along the tool–process–value continuum

learning and capacity, better coordination, and a donor’s strategic approach to participation. The ultimate form of participation is a holistic approach to development, as in the lower right of the figure. Citizen–beneficiaries are the target as well as the agent of change and empowerment. Participation evolves into a cultural value conditioned by full readiness and commitment of local actors, mutual engagement in collaborative efforts, and donor endorsement through both policy and practice. Development managers struggle to achieve local participation amidst these complexities. That there is no one best way underscores the relevance of flexible, dialogic, and collaborative processes reinforced by cultural valuation of, and managerial tools for, participation.

Development managers, especially those working in the NGO sector, can encourage local ownership and adapt to donor and citizen demands for participation using a dialogic, collaborative approach to governance (Denhardt and Denhardt 2007; Bevir 2010). Development managers can focus on cross-sector dialogue using Facebook, text-messaging, and other accessible social media technologies to engage youth and adults. Donor governments and agencies may be able to contribute infrastructure or equipment for wider access to social media. Convened through social networking, meetings online and face-to-face are sources of local ideas and practical solutions. Expanded venues for participation unite the metis of citizens with the techne of planners, donors, and policy makers. Increased government–NGO–citizen dialogue fosters a culture of transparency and citizen engagement in the governance of development (Francis and James 2003).

NGOs in general and those in Lebanon specifically should continue to try their utmost, within external constraints and local capacity, to engage target groups and discuss with them needs, work plans, and expected results. Expanding coordination

on program formulation and design allows citizen–beneficiary stakeholders a seat at the development table so that their priorities and purposes are ultimately served and they feel ownership of the development process. Local ownership facilitates implementing agencies' performance by expediting communication as well as reducing operational costs and local opposition. Local ownership also means that NGOs share responsibilities and problem-solving with their citizen-partners. Here, local ownership is also a management tool that enhances effectiveness of the development programs and sustainability of results.

Conclusion

This study offers practical and theoretical contributions to the understanding of participation in social development programs by providing one national perspective from the Global South. The study echoes the voices of NGOs practitioners on the issues of local participation. It explains how DM in Lebanon is challenged from within by uncertainty about participation, the lack of capacity and coordination, and the absence of updated behavioral norms. This study does not claim to evaluate participatory practices used by all NGOs in Lebanon. However, the present empirical evidence indicates that a sample of development managers in Lebanon considers local citizen participation to be a tool for sustainable development. They relate that participation is not fully comprehended or valued sufficiently across sectors to be systematically integrated into DM practice.

The theoretical contribution of the study is to expose varying conditions of participation along the continuum of tool, process, and values. Participation requires organizational readiness through sufficient capacity and cross-sector cooperation and coordination. Citizen participation also raises the potential for donor–beneficiary conflict. We recommend assessing the application of participation against these conditions. Consequently, conditions for and benefits of local participation in Lebanon are limited. As for other nations of the Global South, we recommend additional case study research as well as comparative study to sharpen understanding of the conditions necessary for, and limitations and advantages of, participation.

Evidence reflects the ongoing debate about participation as a tool, process, or value and consequently whether development should be narrowly considered as service provision and material support to beneficiaries or should work to build individual, institutional, and political capacity. While DM researchers focus on the conceptual issues, the devil lies in the practical details. The strong participation approach assumes development should be more inclusive and locally driven. Development should yield citizens' empowerment. Rhetorically, participation is hailed as a value focusing on the people and local ownership and empowerment.

In response to the research question about how DM practitioners in the Global South perceive the need for and objectives of participation, Lebanese NGO managers understand it as a tool, although some reference has been made to considering its worthiness as a value in and of itself. Looking at participation not as a value so much as an instrument for managing policy reform is emphasized in the

middle-ground approach to participation. Participation is used for efficiency and effectiveness in development initiatives, far from consistently being considered for the people-centered goals of empowerment and expanded freedom and capabilities. Participation as a tool has planner-centered outcomes that increase probability of quantifiable aid effectiveness and decrease costs of implementation.

Participation advocates throughout the Global South should recognize local constraints and be “realistically ambitious” and hopeful. Everyone in the development community should be humble about the objectives and expectations of participation as well as promises to citizens and beneficiaries. If participation is being used as a tool, it should be given time to mature and move slowly and deliberately into a process that is integrated into overall developmental efforts in the Global South.

Integration requires other changes. Participation should be institutionalized structurally rather than just being ad hoc and project based. Efforts are necessary to build local capacity and strengthen commitment to cooperation and coordination within and across sectors. It is imperative to have all development managers, whether indigenous to Lebanon, another southern state or to a northern-based state, reading from the same page and sharing the same understanding, not giving lip service to participation rhetoric. Globally, commitment to participation requires changing some bureaucratic norms and organizational cultures in donor agencies, national governments, and implementing NGOs.

This study suggests future research on the forms and degrees of participation as values, tools, and processes that correspond to local context. We suggest separately surveying government and NGO officials and the publics of other countries on the conditions of participation that are suitable to local context. As one reviewer noted, future research should also devote attention to whether local participation is more appropriate from some types of development projects or others. Additional country studies, as well as comparative efforts, would provide a more comprehensive picture to help address if, and how, framing and using participation more systematically as a tool, process, or value might have a beneficial impact on development.

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