

The Ascendency and Mainstay of Participatory Economic and Social Development

By [Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir](#)

Global Research, February 23, 2021

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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Participatory community movements found a contemporary impetus in post-World War II reconstruction of Europe and decolonization, primarily in Africa. The approach of locally managed change, however, was highly distrusted during these initial years, during which the dominant view was that central-level policy makers are in a better position than the people to make highly productive decisions regarding development projects.

The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, passed under the leadership of President John Kennedy, marked an attempt to de-link U.S. development assistance from the nation’s military, political, and economic interests. The Act emphasized “maximum participation” on the part of the people in their own development.

Subsequent decades have shown that market-based models for growth, while generating higher levels of economic activity, also created dependency in developing nations as their economies became increasingly structured to meet the consumption needs of other countries. The participatory approach, which at this time was widely considered an alternative to achieve improved livelihoods, became more desirable by thought leaders and communities that felt that their futures had become a reflection of outside nations’ priorities rather than their own autonomous ones.

By the 1990s, this people’s driven methodology for sustainable community development became mainstream. The focus shifted toward designing the interactive activities to be conducted in order to help local groups in analyzing their past, opportunities, and visions for a better reality that they seek.

Over the past decade, there have been more nations seeking ways to institutionalize the participatory method for development. Local and national charters, programs and frameworks to advance the liberation of women, freedoms for the advancement of civil society organizations, constitutions, and in legally codified requirements are all intended to ultimately be upheld by elected officials and the general public. For countries who are also becoming increasingly amenable to decentralized management systems, their tasks are shifting from creating national policies that enact participatory principles to one of fulfilling these statutory requirements.

Thus, from generations past of participatory activism being distrusted by the mainstream

and its gradual growth due to dissatisfaction with market-based solutions imposed by wealthy countries, we have now reached a common understanding that public participation is a, if not the, primary factor of sustainable livelihoods. In most recent decades, participatory requirements have become embedded in institutions. In the decade to come, we face the awesome, grueling, and even existential challenge of finally fulfilling the participation of the people across localities and across nations of the world.

What will be vital in this regard is to constantly improve activities that enable people to act together toward goals that they have defined as a group. Those activities become conducive and efficacious when they are drawn from disciplines and contexts from around the world and adapted to specific situations.

The necessity is that communities gather to discuss their ideas and plans to reach consensus on projects related to agriculture, water, and other essentials of life. These plans are then backed by critical financial sources from all society sectors.

This timeline characterizes the past and present in broad terms. There were participatory pioneers in much earlier decades and centuries, and there are suppressants today, such as those nations that constrict civil organizations and bind women and girls to intolerable controls. These general trends and outlier experiences are informative so that we may be more precise in how we enact participatory movements in all places where they are needed.

Let us hope that the next ten years fulfill the participatory ideal that has been intensifying across all different outlets in order for their sustainable benefits, including prosperity, to be present in our lives.

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Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir is President of the High Atlas Foundation, which is an implementer of the USAID Farmer-to-Farmer Program in Morocco.

Featured image: Youth in northern Morocco participating in a community meeting (2020 by the High Atlas Foundation).

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