



Power, Politics, and Performance: Community Participation in South African Public Works Programs

Michelle Adato, John Hoddinott, and Lawrence Haddad

Following South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, the new government launched public works programs that shared four objectives: to create jobs to respond to extremely high levels of poverty and unemployment; to build or rehabilitate infrastructure in poor, underserved areas, or improve the natural environment; to provide job training that would enable workers to find post-project employment; and, finally, to build the capacity of communities to control their own development processes through community participation in public works projects.

The long national struggle for democracy, combined with exposure to democracy in foreign institutions and in trade unions and civic associations within South Africa, infused the country's new leadership and many of its constituencies with a broad democratic agenda—from “one-person one-vote,” to control of local development projects by elected community-based organizations. At the same time, South Africa's history of political conflict, including extreme racial and class polarization and violent political strife, meant that attempts to create democratic institutions would not be easily or wholly achieved. A national public works program, which distributed resources to reduce poverty while building capacity and promoting participation by local institutions, would be no exception: it involved actors who had only recently emerged from the apartheid system in which they had experienced a vast political, economic, social, and cultural divide.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Through a study of seven public works programs implemented in Western Cape Province, this report examines the benefits and challenges of pursuing community participation, together with the effects of participation on meeting the other objectives of the programs. Although aspects of South Africa's experience are unique to its political economy, the study's findings reveal insights, dilemmas, and possibilities of considerable relevance in the wider context

of participatory or “community-driven” development programs, which have increasingly become integral to the development agenda throughout the world.

The extent to which public works programs achieve their objectives depends on institutions at several levels, and their performance based on access to information; the incentives they face; and the requirements of a changing political, social, and economic environment. This study looks at key policy processes and institutions, their agents, and their interrelationships in the implementation of public works projects. This includes the intended and actual responsibilities of community-based committees; the value added by community participation in project selection, design, and management, and the problems introduced; the effects of community participation on project performance; and the factors that prevent community-based committees from acting in the capacity intended in policy documents. Key to understanding these constraints is the relationship of community organizations to other project-level actors in government and the private sector, and the changes in professional identity, institutional practices, and local politics necessary for communities to receive the type of opportunities envisioned.

KEY FINDINGS

The report integrates quantitative and qualitative data from a survey of 101 public works projects, with in-depth qualitative data from eight project-level case studies. The quantitative analysis examines the outcomes of different forms of participation on job creation, labor intensity, efficiency in transferring income to the poor, and other variables. It finds that even after accounting for the endogeneity of participation, *de facto* participation has a statistically significant, positive effect on the project budget share spent on labor, the log number of days of work created, and the log number of training days undertaken. It increases women's share of employment and is associated with a reduction in the

ratio of the project wage to local unskilled wages. It also reduces the cost of creating employment and of transferring income to the poor. The magnitudes of these impacts are sizeable and robust to a variety of model specifications and the inclusion of other covariates.

The case studies indicate the ways in which different forms of participation added value to projects by enabling beneficiary communities to influence the choices of priority assets and project design features, which increased safety and convenience and affected the number of jobs created in the short and long term. They also demonstrate the importance of regular communication with communities to build a sense of local ownership, increasing cooperation and the maintenance of assets. The case studies also show how community participation introduces politics, conflict, and lengthier decisionmaking processes—as well as how lack of participation can result in even more conflict and delays further down the line, when time becomes more expensive.

The study finds a wide gap between ideas for community-driven projects embodied in national government programs, and the beliefs and practices of professional public and private providers at provincial and local levels. Although consensus on the importance of community participation has been voiced, there is also profound ambivalence about it, as well as widely different ideas about what it means and where it is appropriate. Community-based committees were involved in some way in almost all the projects, but their roles were often limited to community and worker liaison functions. Private-sector and local government project managers excluded community committees from participating in management tasks because of their views on efficiency and specialization; their lack of identification with the programs' capacity building and empowerment objectives, which were

set at the national level; and ambiguities about the roles of different stakeholders. Community committee members often did not have sufficient skills and were not trained.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

One policy implication might be to reduce the role of communities to opportunities for communication and some consultation. Local government, if downwardly accountable to poor constituents, could manage public works projects. An alternative policy implication is that government should increase its commitment to improving structures and processes for community participation for the value that it adds. Participation does not have to be all or nothing, and its best forms are likely to vary under different circumstances. Where trade-offs between the achievement of different program objectives are required, these must be weighed in light of national and local priorities. If participation and local empowerment remain important objectives, policymakers and program designers must creatively explore institutional arrangements and methods for increasing local capacities. But new policy proposals alone are unlikely to effect significant change. This would require involving influential government, private-sector, and community stakeholders in the process; identifying common ground; and securing the commitment necessary for agreements to be carried out and monitored. Politics, conflicts of interest, struggles over resources, and processes of consultation and consensus-building are part of the landscape of community-driven development. If participatory development remains on South Africa's development agenda, all actors must commit to realizing this objective, including generating sufficient resources, creativity, and patience to see the process through.

Copyright © 2005 International Food Policy Research Institute. All rights reserved.

INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE • 2033 K STREET, NW • WASHINGTON, DC 20006-1002 USA

T: +1-202-862-5600 • F: +1-202-467-4439 • ifpri@cgiar.org • www.ifpri.org

IFPRI is supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

Download or order online: <http://www.ifpri.org/pubs/pubs.htm#rreport>

To order by post, please fill out and send this coupon to Publication Services at IFPRI.

Please send me a copy of Research Report 143:

Power, Politics, and Performance: Community Participation in South African Public Works Programs, by Michelle Adato, John Hoddinott, and Lawrence Haddad.

Name/Title _____

Organization _____

Address _____

If your order is not received within 2 weeks (USA) or 6 weeks (outside USA) please let us know.