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Participation in development: Learning from past and present Korean practices

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ABSTRACT

The keyword of the post 2015 global development discourse is sustainability and the issue of governance remains a key means of implementation. This study is a plea for (local community) 'participation', which cannot be over-emphasised as the very core of the necessary governance for sustainable development. Participation, perceived as having an intrinsic and instrumental value, is now commonly understood as an essential component in any development process - at least in Western development discourse. The essence of a participatory approach is to recognise that people whose lives are to be changed by development interventions should have a say in what these changes are to be, and how they will take place. The simple presence in village development committees and serving as a rubber stamp would not change power dynamics within and outside the community, risking engagement rather being 'tokenism' than genuine 'participation'.

This study delivers findings from the author's two recent researches; one theme that runs through the two researches is that people's (genuine) participation makes a difference, from the past till present era. Both studies apply an extensive case study methodology involving archive and documentary analysis as well as interviews with villagers concerned by the author visiting the fields.

The first research regards the Korean rural development experiences during 1970s. Based on a contrasting case of two 'successful' villages during *Saemaul Undong* (Korean rural modernization movement) of the 1970s, it examines (potentials of) power dynamics and pays attentions to the gap in the nature and type of village governance of the two villages, which in turn is closely related to the leadership of village as a group of local leaders, and its internal dynamics and accountability. If the first research is about the Korean development experience of the past, the second research is about its present on-going practices now as an international donor country helping local communities in development worlds. The latter offers a reflection from the case of LotusWorld, a Korean Civil Society Organization and its two projects in Siem Reap, Cambodia. While the participatory approach requires time, consistency, trust, and most of all, mutual understanding of what 'participation' means

among parties involved, the study reveals that its adoption still lags behind, particularly in the pre-planning stages.

Summing up from the two previous researches, this paper concludes that only when people participate voluntarily and willingly, power relations can become more equitable, allowing participatory development to result in sustainable achievements. In sum, sustainable community development can be achieved when an accountable leadership meets bottom-up village participation. Important implications of the study are as follows. Firstly, a keyword for sustainable development should remain community participation and its tolerance of power changes. Leadership accountability is part of it. Second, South Korea as an emerging donor country, supporting and dispatching an increasing number of its CSOs or NGOs to developing worlds, in addition to its increasing Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget, should make it sure that local community participation is one of the core values of its development cooperation.