

The danger of standardization in participatory development

By Naima Sawaya



Tiznit is a mid-sized town that borders the ocean whereas Ashbarou is a tiny village in the desert-like region outside of Marrakech.

As the Western world became interested in global poverty following World War II, the question of development [became](#) increasingly relevant to theorists. Later in the twentieth century, the idea of participatory development emerged as a practice which [centers](#) community-based dialogue as a prelude to and an integral component of developmental projects. Theorists such as Paulo Friere [argued](#) that the foundation of humanity was, above all else, the capacity to make decisions. Therefore, any attempt to supersede human's decision-making capacity, as had been done in previous developmental practices, was effectively a [violation](#) against humanity. Through theories such as this, participatory development has come to dominate the development field as an ethical and practical superior to other forms of developmental policy.

And as participatory development has become increasingly [accepted](#) as an effective and humane strategy, calls to [expand](#) this practice have quickly followed. These calls have been compounded by the increasingly catastrophic natural [disasters induced](#) by climate change which require extensive humanitarian relief. Humanitarian relief is often considered to be immediate in nature but the most successful forms of this relief are ones which address both the immediacy of need and also work to build a more sustainable future. Unsurprisingly, participatory development's methodology is consistent with this need to balance the immediacy of need with the sustainability of projects.

While the benefits of participatory development do undoubtedly demand a larger number of local organizations able to engage in this work, calls for expansion should be wary of any and all attempts to systematize or

standardize what must inherently be a locally specific practice. In fact, any attempt at broadscale standardization or even organizational expansion runs the risk of undermining what makes participatory development so radical and sustainable in the first place.

Theorists tend to [draw](#) a distinction between two subcategories of participatory development which while separate in theory are often realistically intertwined — organic and induced participation. Organic participation is that which emerges from within a community. It is much rarer than its counterpart because it often requires extensive capacity [building](#). In contrast, induced participation is what many organizations, including the High Atlas [Foundation](#), practice. Induced participation is that which [emerges](#) as a result of an external resources intended to facilitate community-based participation and eventually organic participation.

For example, HAF's IMAGINE Workshops which introduce psychosocial facilitators into local communities are a form of induced participation which [aspires](#) to build women's capacity to mobilize themselves. In these four-day workshops, highly [trained](#) facilitators work to earn the trust of local women as a preliminary step to choosing a development-based project. Facilitators rely upon a rights-based approach which [centers](#) the visionary power of imagination and encourages women to imagine new avenues for economic and social engagement.

The interaction between organic and induced participation perfectly embodies the potential pitfalls of any attempt at standardization — both forms of participation aspire to treat local challenges as contextually specific and as distinct from any other locality, even neighboring ones. This relentless adherence to local specificities is the driving force for participatory development's ability to enact profound social and economic change.

However, in an attempt to promote scale today, participatory development risks homogenizing its practices. Consider developmental handbooks. To their credit, many handbooks for participatory development — which could be seen as a prelude to standardization — have carefully avoided giving specific directions and instead rely upon broader [steps](#) applicable to multiple contexts.

These broader steps do demand careful preparation and the pursuit of a deep regional knowledge before any projects are initiated. But even the provision of steps, especially for scale, suggests that there is one formula which should be adopted by all organizations undertaking participatory development irrespective of local concerns. More generally, this is the danger of any attempt at standardization — standardization implicitly prioritizes efficiency and scale over regional specifics.

Consider the women's cooperatives which HAF has supported in [Tiznit](#) and [Ashbarou](#). In large part thanks to the empowerment induced by a participatory development style, Tiznit now has a thriving argan and couscous cooperative, and Ashbarou's cooperative produces artisanal rugs. Now that both are fairly well established, there are many outward similarities between the cooperatives — they have both enabled women to be income producers in their households; they have both found a productive niche within the local economy; and they both continue to aspire to more.

However, the outward similarities which might lend a policymaker to recommend systematizing the successful process actually bely the fundamentally different circumstances with which these cooperatives contend. Tiznit is a mid-sized town that borders the ocean whereas Ashbarou is a tiny village in the desert-like region outside of Marrakech. And the geographic differences are just the tip of the iceberg — irrigation strategies for agriculture differ, the regions rely upon distinct revenue sources, and women experience different forms of intersectional disempowerment.

While there is no foolproof way to guard against the procedural systemization which could imperil the success of development projects, participatory development organizations can take certain precautions. For example, a staff which is diverse across linguistic, geographic, ethnic, and gender dimensions can increase the organization's proximity to and awareness of affected communities. As such, there will be a greater wealth of perspectives within an organization which could, in turn, implicitly challenge any attempt at standardization.

The aspiration to standardize induced participation strategies is undoubtedly a laudable one founded in a desire to reproduce the extensive and enduring benefits of this form of development. However, from what I have observed in Morocco, the potential of participatory development resides not in its capacity to be scaled but rather in its relentless insistence upon the local, an insistence which can and should defy any broader attempts at standardization.

Naima Sawaya is an intern at the High Atlas Foundation and a student at the University of Virginia.