

Beyond the Participatory Development Impasse

Pathways Forward to Sustainable Rural Development

Participatory development models remain influential within mainstream development institutions, despite substantial scholarly critique. This paper examines one case study of a rural development facilitator from Tamil Nadu, India, who adopted participatory strategies to promote transitions to ecological agriculture. It considers the challenges and frustrations she faced in adopting these strategies and their shortcomings in promoting meaningful, long-term transformations within communities. In particular, local power structures and neoliberal institutions that made up the local context made it difficult to achieve participatory development's stated objectives. The case illustrates potential pathways forward beyond the current participatory development impasse, suggesting a modified participatory development model, with a stronger emphasis on fostering cooperative economic relations.

INTRODUCTION

Since its initial propagation in the 1980s, 'participation' has become a buzzword in rural development circles. From the 1990s onwards, the language of 'participation' (though perhaps not the practice) became embedded within development NGOs, government departments, and transnational institutions (Pretty 1995). Participatory rural development models have emphasised the importance of directly allowing rural communities to partake in and lead the development efforts that are ostensibly for their benefit. Yet, participatory development has also attracted substantial criticism. Critics have noted that when development workers take a role of ostensibly 'facilitating' local participation and local 'leadership,' this often masks substantial inequalities between 'facilitators' and communities (Cooke and Kothari 2001) as well as inequalities *within* communities (Platteau 2004).

Although these critics have highlighted important issues, they offer little in the way of alternatives. In order to overcome this theoretical and practical impasse in participatory development, in this paper I explore the work of M. Revathi, a participatory development worker from Tamil Nadu (India), as an in-depth case study. Revathi's work highlights both the processes by which participatory strategies evolve and the reasons things tend to go awry. It reinforces several of the conclusions of previous studies regarding the shortcomings of participatory approaches and suggests ways that activists working on the ground are trying to overcome these shortcomings. I argue that Revathi's attempts to adopt new approaches may have important lessons for the development community at large, in particular her adoption of a strategy that focuses on *economic* empowerment and inter-community cooperation. By critically analysing her account and drawing also on the experiences of the farmers and landless labourers with whom she has worked, I highlight possible ways forward that may overcome the impasses in the participatory model, particularly those regarding the facilitator's role.

PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT AND ITS CRITICS

Pioneers of participatory development proposed it as a response to the failures of the centralised, expert-driven development system that had proliferated throughout the developing world in the post-colonial

period. Chambers (1997), for example, emphasised that hierarchical, centralised, top-down development models failed to engage directly with local needs and subsequently did not result in sustained benefits. For this reason, he insists that development interventions must enlist local knowledge and local participation in every phase of development projects. Locals 'plan, act, monitor and evaluate' development projects in alignment with their own needs and aspirations (Chambers 1997, 102).

The participatory development paradigm raised questions regarding the normative role of the development worker. In the traditional model, the development worker may have presented as a 'leader' and source of knowledge, reinforcing hierarchical relations in project implementation. In a more participatory model, the role and identity of the development worker is radically reconfigured. Chambers (1997, 103) is unambiguous on this point, stressing that:

Outsiders do not dominate and lecture; they facilitate, sit down, listen and learn. Outsiders do not transfer technology; they share methods which local people can use for their own appraisal, analysis, planning, action, monitoring and evaluation. Outsiders do not impose their own reality; they encourage and enable local people to express their own.

Essentially, the identity of the development worker shifts from being a 'leader' or 'expert' to a 'facilitator' and 'listener.' This more open-minded and receptive disposition, it is hoped, will encourage local people to take up leadership positions within development projects. This new approach was met with a great deal of enthusiasm in development literature. It pointed towards a model in which development workers could be far more confident that their interventions reflected local needs and aspirations – and hence would be more sustainable.

While this approach almost reached 'common sense' status within mainstream development institutions throughout the course of the 1990s, it also attracted considerable scholarly critique. Critics pointed to the inability of participatory development to live up to its own standard. Cooke and Kothari (2001) note the remarkable naiveté of participatory development workers regarding the power relations between communities and themselves as 'facilitators.' As Mosse (2001) notes, despite the stated commitment to allowing communities to make their own decisions, facilitators are rarely passive

participants in the process – their input often blends imperceptibly with what is constructed as ‘local knowledge’ and the unequal power relations almost invariably result in the facilitator’s objectives being enacted. This may occur in subtle ways. For example, the very process of encouraging communities to list their problems can create the sense that they are ‘under-developed,’ reproducing and amplifying the normativity of ‘development’ as a desirable condition (Green 2010). From this perspective, participatory development strategies tend to lead to similar outcomes to traditional approaches, while the logic and process of participation obscure the power dynamics at play.

The participatory development model has also been criticised for overlooking broader, institutional power. Participatory interventions generally seek to find local solutions to problems that are embedded in much larger power structures (Cooke 2004; Green, 2000). In this context, some scholars have argued that only grassroots political empowerment of the marginalised will enable effective opposition to institutionalised disadvantage (Engberg-Pedersen and Webster 2002). In most cases, participatory development initiatives are poorly positioned to deliver these forms of empowerment, as they are embedded within a neoliberal development establishment that reproduces disempowerment.

A further issue is that participatory development is easily hijacked by local elites. Platteau (2004) outlines how, in many cases, elites are able to capture the resources offered by development projects and use them for their own private interests, whilst using the language of the ‘common good.’ Elites are able to do this, because they are generally better equipped with the skills required to deal with external resources and are better able to speak the technical language of development agencies. This ‘elite capture’ is often perceived to be legitimate by the wider community, given the prevalence of clientelistic political representation in many developing countries, whereby elites act as gatekeepers between the wider community and the benefits of development.

Elite capture may come as a result of corner-cutting by development organisations. To facilitate participation most efficiently, development organisations often attempt to work through existing ‘community-based organisations’ (Dill 2009). These groups may be already dominated by local elites who maintain patron-client relations with the local poor, resulting in development projects that reproduce dependency and unequal power relations (de Wit and Berner 2009).

As Platteau (2004) notes, development organisations will often skip the more difficult work of empowerment and instead simply facilitate the formation of groups who ‘elect’ a leader. In most cases, elites are far better positioned to take up these leadership positions.

While the studies mentioned above point to failures of participatory approaches to achieve their own standards, some scholars go further, suggesting *inherent* problems with the concept of participation. These studies have looked to local reactions to participatory projects, and found a considerable disconnect between participatory development goals and local expectations. In some cases, local people, particularly the marginalised, may find public participation to be highly intimidating and shirk away (Masaki 2010). Others see unpaid participation as exploitative and condescending, and would prefer more conventional forms of development assistance (Welker 2012). Others still may feel sceptical about the prospect that any local project can solve problems that have trans-local origins (Vincent 2004). All of this suggests that there is no simple overlap between participation and empowerment and that often the more ‘empowered’ decision may be to reject the offer to participate (see Hayward et al 2004).

While there is now a substantial body of literature critiquing participatory development and the role of facilitators, the literature offers little in the way of alternatives. Often it is unclear whether scholars are advocating amendments to the participatory development framework or an all-out rejection. If the latter, it is rarely clear what they would suggest as an alternative framework. Perhaps due to this lack of a clearly articulated alternative, the assumptions of participatory development have remained unchallenged within development institutions, despite the widespread scholarly recognition that these principles are, to some extent, flawed. In this context, this paper gestures towards a reformed approach to participatory development, suggesting more curtailed participatory strategies that avoid some of the dilemmas that previous research has identified.

CASE STUDY, REGIONAL CONTEXT, AND METHODOLOGY

This paper explores possible alternatives through a case study of one facilitator, Revathi, and her attempts to use participatory strategies in sustainable rural development in her home-state of Tamil Nadu,

India. As Flyvbjerg (2006) notes, the special methodological contribution of case studies lies in their capacity to *falsify* established theories. By providing evidence that goes against core assumptions of dominant paradigms, a well-selected case study can drive debate forward. This is particularly true of what Flyvbjerg terms ‘critical case studies,’ which are selected on the grounds that they are *most likely* to confirm the assumptions of dominant theories – since, if such a case is shown *not* to confirm these assumptions, it is highly unlikely that those assumptions will hold up for other cases (2006). As shall be shown below, Revathi’s long-term commitment to the spirit of participatory development and her willingness to support communities even at times when she lacked institutional funding make her efforts among the *most likely* to lead to successful models of participatory development. The fact that even in this case, many of the assumptions of participatory development were found not to hold true, suggests that they are unlikely to be confirmed in other instances. One further value in this focus on a single case study is that it allowed in-depth data to be collected by multiple methods – and this data made it possible to demonstrate the reasons *why* the participatory development model failed to live up to its potential.

I use Revathi’s accounts and experiences to guide much of the narrative in this article. This not only provides an over-arching coherence to the article, but her experiences prove tremendously insightful in relation to the core themes I wish to explore. Most studies have critiqued participatory development by drawing on the experiences of rural communities or of international aid workers, but those actually doing the groundwork of facilitation have not been studied in as much detail. This may be a significant oversight. As Ghosh (2009) outlines, development workers often have backgrounds as social activists and, consequently, have commitments towards certain principles of justice and empowerment. Nonetheless, they often face competing claims from donors, who may attempt to direct their work towards other objectives and thus feel caught in-between. This proved true of Revathi. While her strong ideological commitments to empowering the poor through ecological agriculture initially attracted her towards participatory development models, her frustrations with the institutional context in which she found herself embedded ultimately led her to forge alternative strategies.

Revathi has made use of participatory development strategies to promote what she terms ‘ecological agriculture.’ Ecological agriculture

involves not only the elimination of synthetic chemical inputs and sustainable resource management, but also attempted to establish self-contained ecosystems on the farm itself. Local participation and local knowledge are recognised as particularly important in promoting such sustainable models of agriculture. Pretty (1995) claims that sustainable agricultural development cannot be imposed using top-down models, as occurred with the Green Revolution. Sustainability itself is a contested concept and forging an effective approach requires mediation of diverse interests through encouraging participation from all relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, as Uphoff (2002) notes, ecological farming techniques require substantial knowledge of local ecological conditions. Only through involving local people in the design, implementation and evaluation of development projects, can this local knowledge be effectively utilised to ensure positive outcomes are sustained. Participatory processes encourage rural communities to develop social and human capital, building their capacity to cooperate to maximise the use of local knowledge for mutual benefit (Pretty 2002). Accumulated social capital then becomes the basis for the diffusion of innovation within local farming systems (Shaw et al 2011).

Although Revathi has acted as a facilitator for ecological farming in a variety of locations, this paper focuses on her initiatives in the Cauvery River Delta, on the central coast of Tamil Nadu, in southern India. Ecological agriculture is a radical venture in this region, as many farmers there have taken a chemically intensive approach to agriculture for several decades. Due to its extensive irrigation systems and rich alluvial soils, the Cauvery Delta was one of a select few regions targeted for Green Revolution development strategies in the 1960s and 1970s, under the Intensive Agricultural Districts Program of the Government of India (Frankel 1971). This involved the promotion of High-Yielding Variety (HYV) rice seeds and chemical inputs.

The implementation of the Green Revolution in the Cauvery Delta generated significant social tensions that remain relevant to this day. The region was already mired in high levels of class and caste inequality. Traditionally, rural society in Tamil Nadu has been structured by a relatively rigid caste hierarchy, within which agricultural labour is among the least valued activities (Alexander 1975). Furthermore, as Frankel (1971) outlines, the region had, and continues to have, a high population density, with large numbers of

smallholding farmers and landless labourers. This poor majority were sidelined by the Green Revolution technologies, which provided disproportionate benefits to larger landholders with greater capital to invest. Furthermore, despite increased demand for labour resulting from the more intensive farming practices, an influx of migrant labour from poorer neighbouring districts resulted in a stagnation of local wages. Consequently, landless labourers, who made up a majority of families in the region, received no increased monetary benefit. Thus, in various ways, Green Revolution technologies served to amplify existing social inequality.

Subsequent developments in the Cauvery Delta have only increased social polarisation and the precariousness of the rural poor. The liberalisation of Tamil Nadu's economy has brought mixed blessings to the predominantly rural delta region. While liberalisation accelerated rural industrialisation, providing diversified employment opportunities for rural labour (Djurfeldt et al 2008), it also led to a removal of subsidies for agricultural inputs and deregulation of the rural banking sector (Harriss-White and Janakaram 1997). The net effect of these policies has been increased precariousness of agriculture as an economic activity. Additionally, the damming of the Cauvery river upstream has greatly reduced the availability of water for irrigation in the region, further undermining production. As agriculture becomes less viable, small-holding farmers and labourers are increasingly looking to the non-agricultural sector for employment (Harriss, Jeyarajan and Nagaraj 2010), leading to high rates of rural out-migration (Djurfeldt et al 2008).

On top of these issues, the Cauvery Delta was badly affected by the 2004 South Asian tsunami. On December 26th 2004, a 9.3 magnitude earthquake occurred off the coast of Sumatra, triggering a tsunami that had impacts on coastal communities across South Asia. While Sumatra was the worst affected, there were also huge amounts of damage in other parts of South-East Asia, India, and Sri Lanka. In India, Tamil Nadu was the worst affected state, with 7,923 recorded deaths in the immediate aftermath, 6,023 of which were in the district of Nagapattinam, in the Cauvery Delta (Arya, Mandal and Muley 2006). The tsunami created tremendous damage to fishing and agriculture. Whilst substantial funds were mobilised in response to the tsunami by governments, NGOs and multilateral agencies, there was little coordination between these groups, leading to a somewhat chaotic disaster response (Achuthan 2009).

The tsunami and subsequent salinization of land in the region led to farmers selling their land at extremely low prices to developers, further accelerating the exodus from agriculture.

Revathi became well-known for using ecological techniques to restore lands affected by the tsunami. Yet, she has gone beyond disaster response, and attempted to encourage farmers to continue to use these techniques to develop sustainable livelihood options. Given the factors described above, the Cauvery Delta is a challenging terrain for promoting ecological agriculture. Despite a sizeable number of organisations promoting chemical-free farming (see Alvarez 2009, 261–297), the shift away from agriculture in the region, particularly post-tsunami, poses logistical challenges. Activists are faced with the double challenge of developing sustainable models and sustaining agriculture *per se*. In this context, it becomes particularly important to demonstrate that sustainable agricultural methods can provide viable livelihood opportunities for smallholding farmers and landless labourers, alike. This has been one of Revathi's enduring challenges.

The data presented in this paper was collected over the course of two periods of fieldwork. The first was in February of 2010. I stayed at Revathi's demonstration farm in the Cauvery Delta and, through participant observation, was able to collect data on her work in reaching out to the local community. Interviews provided the backbone of my research – providing both Revathi and her rural beneficiaries with an opportunity to evaluate the impact of the development models that had been pursued.¹ I conducted extensive, in-depth interviews with Revathi, exploring several facets of her work. I also conducted interviews with her staff on the farm (predominantly from labouring and smallholding families in the Cauvery Delta), and a focus group with members of the local community who were practicing ecological farming. The second fieldtrip occurred in December 2014. The follow-up field trip was conducted to determine whether Revathi's initial results had been sustained over time and whether her views on participation had shifted. On this occasion, I conducted a further series of in-depth interviews with Revathi, following up on themes explored during the first fieldtrip. I found that with further experience working in the development sector, many of Revathi's perspectives had shifted, and this provided greater insights into the challenges and shortcomings of the participatory development framework. During the second fieldtrip, I also hired an independent translator, and conducted seven interviews with members of Revathi's target

communities (5 smallholding farmers, one landless labourer and 1 large landholder) in the Cauvery Delta – including those who were practicing ecological farming and those who were not. This provided an important opportunity to cross-check Revathi's claims and assess the long-term impact of her work as facilitator.

In what follows, I tell Revathi's story in chronological fashion. I begin by highlighting the reasons that Revathi adopted participatory models to promote ecological agriculture and then why, after several years of involvement, she became disillusioned with aspects of these models. I then reflect on the experiences of some of Revathi's target communities to assess the long term impact of Revathi's work in the Cauvery Delta. Considering the findings of the case study alongside the findings of wider literature, I conclude by considering possible amendments to the participatory development model that may make its impacts more effective, equitable and sustainable.

M. REVATHI: ENTRY TO ECOLOGICAL FARMING AND THE FACILITATOR'S ROLE

Prior to her involvement in activism, Revathi was a middle school science teacher in Coimbatore, a city in Western Tamil Nadu. Although involved in environmental politics since her student days, her interest in ecological farming began with her participation in a study of bird mortality, which she conducted with the Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, a research and education centre based in Coimbatore. The project collected the bodies of birds from across India for post-mortem analysis and found high traces of pesticides such as endosulfan in the birds' heart muscles, which had led to heart attacks and other diseases. Concerned for potential effects of endosulfan on both bird and *human* health, Revathi began to explore the reasons for farmers' pesticide use. She did this by interviewing the parents and family members of her students from the nearby countryside.

Revathi's research with farmers was the starting point for her work as a facilitator of ecological farming. She found that farmers were frustrated with the increasing cost of chemical inputs and their resulting indebtedness. Yet, farmers also felt hopeless and lacked awareness of viable alternatives. Revathi thus began travelling around Tamil Nadu and engaging with people who were practicing chemical-

free farming, in the hope that this would provide a model for others. Having seen these farmers' results, Revathi became convinced that farming without chemicals and utilising ecological techniques could provide viable livelihood options. Nonetheless, when she took this information to chemical farmers, they remained sceptical. She quickly recognised that, as an urban outsider, farmers were incredulous as to whether she could really understand their position. She concluded that ecological farming would be more authoritative if it were part of a farmers' 'movement,' which practicing ecological farmers could lead.

This would be the beginning of an ongoing interest in 'movements' as a method of organising. For Revathi, a 'movement' implied a grassroots association of farmers that would be, in the first instance, a platform for knowledge sharing. By becoming connected with each other and sharing their experiences with different techniques, farmers would be better positioned for success. Through such a movement, chemical farmers who were curious about alternatives could visit chemical-free farms and see the potential of alternative techniques. She also asserted that, by coming together, farmers would have a stronger 'voice' to argue for the effectiveness and importance of their techniques to farming communities, media and policy makers. In this sense, Revathi's conception of a 'movement' closely resembles that described by Dwyer (2011) as 'grassroots movements:' collective platforms that allow poor communities to collaborate to develop their own solutions to pressing social challenges.

Despite hundreds of practicing ecological farmers in Tamil Nadu, Revathi found little evidence of any 'movement' linking them together. After enquiring with farmers, she found the foremost reason for this was a lack of time. Ecological farming is generally more labour-intensive than its chemical equivalents and, consequently, farmers could not spend time away from their farms to promote the cause collectively. Revathi was still convinced of the merits of a farmer-led movement, but felt that by drawing on her skills in writing, teaching, and communication, she might play a role in linking busy ecological farmers with chemical farmers who were interested in alternatives. Thus, in early 2004, she left her job as school teacher and registered as a society, with the primary objective of distributing materials and demonstrating ecological techniques to farmers. She claims that even at this early stage, she had only intended to play a 'supportive' role in this initiative, as she explained in interview:

It should be a farmers' movement. I wouldn't take an active role in that. I mean, everyday work is done by me, but I wouldn't take a position in that, like president, or managing trustee, or any named position. All the roles are taken up by farmers.

As this statement demonstrates, Revathi was, from the outset, concerned about being perceived to occupy a leadership role. Rather, she hoped to facilitate a movement that farmers would recognise as their own. Furthermore, given the indebtedness and poverty of many farming communities, she recognised she needed to articulate the socio-economic benefits of ecological farming, rather than simply focus on environment:

R: If you talk simply environment, nothing is going to happen. Environment issues like bird watching or nature walking, they are all having some impact, but this problem [of the threat to livelihoods] has a huge potential to operate. This is very important because this is involved with food security and our farmers' lives. And basically environmental balance also.

Author: But you felt environment wasn't enough to mobilise people?

R: No, it won't work out because most of the people were concentrating on economics only. More than environmental ideology. They are very much worried about economics. Whether organic farming will help them to retrieve from their problems. That was their question. They are not concerned about ecology.

Revathi thus began to promote ecological farming as an immediate solution to these socio-economic issues, which she claims generated a stronger response. This represented a decisive shift in her approach. Instead of simply promoting her own interest in ecological issues, she would engage with threats to farmers' livelihood, survival and way of life, in the interest of facilitating a widespread movement for change amongst farmers.

THE 2004 SOUTH ASIAN TSUNAMI: CONSOLIDATING THE FACILITATIVE STRATEGY

When the tsunami hit the coast along the Cauvery Delta in 2004, Revathi immediately travelled there to help in the relief effort. She mobilised her research connections to document salt contamination levels in soil and ground water, which were found to be very high. It quickly became apparent that, while the dominant aid response was directed at fishing communities, the contamination of soil and irrigation waters would precipitate a crisis for farmers, as well. Farmers had no previous experience with this level of salinity and, therefore, looked to others in search of answers. Meanwhile, a consensus developed in the research community that it would take between three to five years for the land to become arable again. This created panic amongst farmers, many of whom began to sell their land at desperation prices.

Revathi was confident that, by adopting ecological techniques, it would be possible to reclaim contaminated lands. She developed a chemical-free strategy to remove salinity and aerate compacted soil, which the government allowed her to initiate on an experimental basis in one highly affected village. Revathi claimed that the techniques were successful, and by May of 2005, was able to announce that the lands on which they had been working were restored and ready for cultivation. Following this announcement, local authorities agreed she could begin work on a larger scale. She began by working on some 600 acres of land, applying the same techniques.

Working on a larger scale introduced new organisational challenges. This was the first time that Revathi's work had required substantial funds. Money was required to finance machines used in the removal of salt, sand and mud and to train people in the techniques. Up until this point, she had avoided fundraising and the implementation of NGO-style project work. She had been registered as a trust, simply adopting a supportive role to the development of grassroots initiatives. Knowing that funds would be required to expand this work, however, she registered as an organisation in March of 2005. Due to the emergency situation, the government had waived the usual requirement that an organisation be registered for three years before receiving foreign contributions. The name chosen was Tamil Nadu Organic Farmers' Movement, reflecting Revathi's continued ideological commitment to 'movements' as a mode of organisation. They successfully applied for funding from a German based donor organisation, which Revathi

suggests was supportive of her methods and did not enforce onerous reporting conditions upon her.

As the work of Revathi and her team gathered pace, their success began to attract widespread attention from national and international media, academics, agricultural scientists and politicians. Encouraged by the positive response from outsiders, they decided to extend their work to the entire coast of Nagapattinam, the main coastal district in the Cauvery Delta. In order to reach larger numbers of farmers, they worked with other NGOs based in the region. They trained NGO workers directly, so that they could take the techniques to communities, and followed suggestions from NGOs regarding communities that were likely to be responsive to training programs. Revathi has documented that they provided training programs for at least 16,000 farmers of Nagapattinam District during the latter part of 2005. While it is difficult to verify such figures, farmers interviewed confirmed that Revathi had a substantive impact. 'After the tsunami, at least 50 NGOs came,' said one Mudaliyar, a large landholding farmer. 'They were mostly useless. Only Revathi and [one other activist] did good work.'

To ensure the impact of these interventions was sustained, Revathi implemented what she termed a 'master farmer' training model. After conducting two day training programs with larger groups of farmers, a smaller number were selected to receive more intensive training as 'master farmers.' They were chosen on the basis of their interest in ecological farming, yet care was also taken that master farmers were not selected from the local elite. These farmers received their training free of cost, on the condition that they take the techniques to others and support them in their transition to ecological farming. Where possible, they would be matched up with a team of others in their village, who were termed their 'fellow farmers.' In Revathi's words, the idea was to 'give [the master farmers] to the community as an asset.' The master farmer would provide grassroots leadership and act as nodes within support networks at the village and district level. They could also maintain communication with Revathi and other supportive outsiders, and call on them for additional help, where required. In the years that followed, this model would become a lynchpin in Revathi's participatory approach, allowing her to provide guidance and support, whilst retaining substantial local autonomy and facilitating the development of leadership-from-below for ecological farming. The 'master farmer' became a trusted local leadership figure, whose results

could be observed directly. 'I don't try to convince people' said one master farmer, 'my farm itself is an example. This year there was a lot of rain, so we had a lot of pest attacks. When the others saw that my farm had no pest attacks and that I was not using any chemicals, they started getting curious on how I did it. So that's how I influence people.'

By the end of 2005, Revathi felt her team's work in tsunami restoration in Nagapattinam was largely complete. They had attracted a great deal of national and international attention for their work, with visits from former U.S. President and U.N. ambassador, Bill Clinton, and former President of India, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam. Clinton went on to recommend Revathi to governments in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, where there was also urgent need for tsunami restoration and both governments extended invitations. Thus, from January 2006 until May of 2009, Revathi and her family spent much of their time travelling around South and South-East Asia, using similar techniques to restore tsunami-affected land. This was followed by another project in West Bengal in 2009 and 2010, in which Revathi assisted farming communities whose lands had been damaged by Cyclone Aila. During this time of intensive travel, Revathi was able to maintain only sporadic contact with the communities she had worked with in the Cauvery Delta. For Revathi, this reaffirmed the need for a light-handed facilitator's approach. She could not provide day-to-day support for farmers – she could only provide training and inspiration and develop their leadership potential so that they could support each other and manage their own 'movement.' As is documented below, the long-term impacts of this approach were mixed.

FACILITATING COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND REGIONAL FEDERATIONS

Between these various trips abroad, Revathi was employed by an international NGO² to consolidate results in the Cauvery Delta and further foster the development of ecological farming through participatory strategies. The NGO imposed certain conditions on how these strategies would be implemented, encouraging Revathi to use a model that they claimed had been demonstrated effective throughout the developing world. The model consisted of forming 'community-based organisations' (CBOs) within villages to work on

issues of resource management, with a focus on ecological farming. CBOs were established either for specific tasks, such as preparing bio-inputs or developing livelihood options for landless people, or to empower particular villages or neighbourhoods. The bio-input CBOs were perhaps most popular, as they provided villagers with an opportunity to produce organic inputs (made predominantly through cow urine) which they could then sell to practicing ecological farmers. CBOs would be financed through a 'revolving fund' – essentially a micro-credit program. Both the NGO and the local community would contribute towards this fund. The CBO would then collectively decide how funds could be distributed as loans to members of the community, specifically in relation to the purchasing of assets for tsunami recovery and transitioning to ecological farming (for example, purchasing cows or building ponds). Once established, CBOs would then be encouraged to 'federate' at a regional level, to form a large governing body, to which the local CBOs would send delegates. After several years of working on this project, Revathi's experience ultimately left her feeling unsatisfied and exposed some of the limitations of the facilitative model in the context of large international NGO-sponsored initiatives.

The use of community-based organisations in development emerged in the 1990s and has become a key component of the more institutionalised participatory development strategies around the world. As Dill (2009) outlines, CBOs are generally unpaid self-help groups, which are intended to function as intermediaries for development interventions. They provide a formal structure through which 'participation' can take place, such that interventions can be more easily documented and groups can be more easily recognised as legitimate by local bodies. Revathi had initially hoped to form CBOs around specific tasks relating to ecological agriculture, such as the preparation of bio-inputs or marketing, but eventually a large number of groups came forward to register as CBOs. After facilitating a number of such CBOs throughout the Cauvery Delta region, Revathi encouraged them to 'federate' as a district-level entity. The 'federation' of CBOs has also become an important aspect of the participatory development strategies, as it theoretically allows individual CBOs to maintain their autonomy, whilst making the collective decision to pool resources and cooperate with other groups for mutual benefit (Appadurai 2002). Revathi suggested the name Kadal Oosai for the district level federation. This name, literally meaning 'the voice of the sea,' reflected the coastal identity of farmers, and signalled their

willingness to 'raise their voice' in the context of regional neglect.

During our interviews in 2010, Revathi made mostly positive comments about her work on this project. She saw it as an extension of her work as a facilitator, which enabled her to provide support and guidance, whilst giving communities the power to ultimately make their own decisions. She suggested that Kadal Oosai had developed as a completely autonomous federation, with each subgroup formulating their own rules, delegating responsibilities, and organising regular meetings: it was, in her words, 'completely managed by the farmers and the landless labourers.' She explained her own, somewhat curtailed role as follows:

We are not strictly telling any rules and regulations to them. We tell them, wherever there is a need, they have to collectively raise their voice, and collectively purchase things and collectively market their products. For these things we gave our training, our facilitation, and until today we are supporting them.

Despite this optimism in 2010, by the time of our second series of interviews, in 2014, Revathi had become disillusioned with the CBO/federation model. She had three major concerns. The first reflected concerns raised in the wider literature that CBOs tend to form along lines of caste and kinship groups and hence become exclusivist (see Dill 2009; de Wit and Berner 2009). In 2010, Revathi had been clear that CBOs needed to be inclusive if Kadal Oosai was to function in the manner she had hoped and, to that end, she had explicitly opposed caste, gender and class discrimination within Kadal Oosai:

[W]e told them strictly that real involvement of people is our aim, so we cannot support the caste system... And we told strictly in the elected bodies like the district resource centre, we cannot exclude people from low castes... They should be given proper space. And women's participation is also very important... So [we told them] fifty per cent of the space is provided to women.

Despite these attempts to promote inclusivity, by 2014, Revathi was forced to accept that various forms of discrimination had entered into the CBOs, particularly along caste lines. While all CBOs were intended to be open to all castes, it became apparent that over time they became dominated by particular castes and eventually degenerated into caste associations. In the 'master farmer' model, Revathi could encourage the formation of relations of economic dependency between castes, but when groups were allowed to proliferate on their own, they tended to be more insular. As Revathi explained, 'Whoever

could make a group, they joined together – that is, according to their caste, or neighbourhood³ or according to their status or according to their education.’

When Revathi raised this issue with the international NGO funding the project, they suggested that this could be overcome by having village and district level federations, with delegates from all CBOs theoretically providing representation to all castes within the communities. This, however, neglected the fact that in the context of intense caste discrimination, lower caste delegates would have very little influence or decision-making capacity within the village-level federations. Furthermore, she noted that when community events were held to try to bring the different CBOs together, overt practices of untouchability were observed, with lower caste and upper caste people being fed from different vessels. Revathi was highly disappointed by this and felt that it reflected a flaw in the CBO-federation model. As has been noted elsewhere (Dill 2009), the model rests on the problematic assumption that electoral representation can overcome entrenched discrimination. This neglects the fact that in many developing countries, electoral representation is mired in clientelism and elite bias, which make it very easy for traditional elites to ‘capture’ positions of power, both within the localised community-based organisations and in the larger federated bodies. As has occurred in many other documented examples, local power structures subverted the potential of CBOs as a pathway to inclusive participatory development.

Revathi’s second concern was with the use of loans as a method of distributing funds. She strongly believed that money was no substitute for training. For her methods of ecological farming, assets were not as important as knowledge in ensuring success. Further, she had seen that many of the problems affecting rural India had been caused by indebtedness, and that distributing more loans could not be a solution, particularly given that loans were repaid with interest. She witnessed that many farmers were taking loans from revolving funds for non-productive purposes, such as weddings, which she attributed to a lack of experience dealing with larger sums of cash. She also heard of communities harassing and abusing people for non-payment.

Finally, Revathi became convinced that the CBO model was inherently exploitative. The sponsoring NGOs had demanded rigorous bookkeeping from CBOs, which most rural people lacked the education and skills to maintain. They were therefore forced to employ outsiders to do their bookkeeping, with money coming from

their collective fund. This left Revathi feeling particularly uneasy. Furthermore, whether giving up their own time, or employing an outsider, Revathi began to question whether these bookkeeping tasks constituted a service that rural people should have been able to expect from the state or banks. Revathi questioned who the real beneficiaries of such operations were and suspected that the funding NGO may have come under the influence of vested interests. The small amount of money disbursed through micro-loans were not sufficient to make significant improvements in people's lives. It would, however, make a significant contribution to the financial institutions, as collective funds served to consolidate dispersed rural savings, without the substantial associated bookkeeping costs (these costs being borne by the communities themselves). When Revathi raised this concern with the sponsoring NGO, she was told that her attitude was 'immature' and that this model had been tested and was being used all over the world. Ultimately, however, Revathi's view was vindicated. Farmers came to reject the CBO model. In most cases, they divided the group savings and distributed them amongst members, after numerous problems with repayments.

After this experience, Revathi became more convinced of the merits of 'master farmer' model. This model was not based on representation, which could be subverted by the powerful, but on economic empowerment and cooperation. Having a master farmer and set of fellow farmers from various local caste groups encouraged relations of mutual dependence and support within the community. Further, it provided communities with what Revathi believed was the most crucial factor required to transition to ecological farming: technical knowledge. A well-trained, well-equipped master farmer could fill in gaps in project implementation, identifying problems at the grassroots level and requesting outside support where required. Revathi firmly believed that with the CBO model, much of the technical know-how and economic empowerment was lost, as at least half of communities' energy was spent in the formation and maintenance of groups. The facilitation of political empowerment was surely a priority, yet Revathi believed that this would evolve naturally, as communities became more empowered at the grassroots level, by cooperatively taking control of their farming systems.

The case of Kadal Oosai highlights the very different ways in which 'facilitation' can be interpreted in the context of participatory rural development projects. Revathi conceptualized her primary task

as facilitating ‘movements.’ By this, she implied building unity amongst farmers, their capacity to share knowledge and ‘raise their voice’ if their rights were infringed. For her donor, however, the objective was to facilitate the formation of CBOs and microfinance initiatives, developing communities’ capacity to provide services for themselves. This discrepancy lays bare the fundamental ambiguity in the facilitator’s role and the fact that *what* one facilitates is never simply the choice of the ‘empowered community.’ The facilitator’s input always has some impact on the choices that are available to rural communities. Given this, understanding the outcomes of facilitative approaches to rural development, requires careful attention to the institutional context in which development organisations are embedded and the interests being served. Donor organisations, which frequently act as institutional agents for neoliberal development, often have different interests to those professed.

LONG TERM IMPACT IN THE CAUVERY DELTA

During fieldwork in late 2014, I visited a village outside the town of Nagapattinam in the Cauvery Delta. In-depth interviews with seven villagers not only allowed Revathi’s claims to be cross-checked, but also provided great insights into which aspects of her work had enduring impacts. The findings provided support for Revathi’s claim that a focus on economic empowerment would have a greater impact than micro-credit programs, CBOs or regional federations, though the reasons for this may have differed from those that Revathi had supposed.

Revathi’s ‘master farmer’ model had clearly had an impact in this village. Mathew,⁴ a retired public servant with five acres of land, had been selected as a master farmer by Revathi shortly after tsunami recovery work began. He was chosen due to his interest in ecological farming and leadership qualities. With Revathi’s facilitation, Mathew established a network of some 10–20 ‘fellow farmers’ from his village who he supported in their transition to ecological farming. He also subsequently become involved in a range of campaigns in defence of farmers in the region, and at the time of fieldwork in 2014, was deeply involved in a campaign to increase water allocations to the Cauvery Delta. At the time of research, Mathew’s network of ecological farmers continued to maintain contact and supportive relations,

though were not meeting as frequently as in the past. The members of this group who were interviewed, including Mathew himself, referred to Mathew as the 'guru' of the group, who provided advice whenever needed to his 'disciples'.

Importantly, this supportive network did not appear to be dominated by any particular community. Revathi had facilitated this collaborative group in such a way that it was composed of members of various castes and religious groups and both small and large landholding farmers. One particularly prominent member of this network, a dalit woman named Lalita, developed as a leader in her own right. Recognising the need for more cows in the village to provide bio-inputs to support ecological farming, Revathi had encouraged landless households to revive their traditions of animal husbandry. Animal husbandry had become a stigmatised livelihood in the region, due to associations with illiteracy and low caste status. With Revathi's backing, Lalita encouraged landless people in the village to recognise the dignity in this form of labour, and promoted keeping cows as a means to generate livelihoods. With some financial support from the 'revolving fund,' these communities had purchased cows and were making income through the sale of milk to consumers and cow dung and urine as inputs for ecological farmers. The relations of mutual dependence that this created helped to sustain connections and positive relations within the group. Like Mathew, Lalita had also gone on to develop as a leader on other issues, representing dalit women at the local Gram Sabha,⁵ highlighting the empowering effects of Revathi's interventions for members of various social strata.

In terms of the technical practices of ecological farming, the farmers who received training acknowledged that Revathi's input was more than adequate. One small-holding farmer, Madhu, was particularly vociferous on this point, advising that he had already gained much from Revathi. Indeed, despite a lack of formal education, he was able to recite the technical knowledge of agro-ecological processes that Revathi had imparted, years after her departure. Emphasising that he did not expect or require any further support from Revathi, Madhu stated that:

Training is over. They have given us everything we need - they taught us how to cultivate. I'll say that that is what we are doing now [cultivating]. After studies, you go out to work.

The continuation of this network of farmers and their confidence in practicing ecological farming provides evidence in support of Revathi's interventions; yet, comments from villagers also suggested some limitations to her approach and of her participatory methods. Perhaps Revathi's most problematic assumption was that farmers would be able to take over the leadership of the collective structures whose formation she had facilitated. Villagers noted that Revathi's involvement with their communities was intermittent and decreased over time. She helped to facilitate group formation between her time doing tsunami and hurricane restoration abroad and elsewhere in India. From 2008 onwards, her role was highly truncated. Firmly holding to the view that her role was to provide rural communities with the tools required to organise and lead their own 'movements,' it was important to her that her role would become less significant over time. Nonetheless, this was at odds with community expectations. Villagers spoke highly of Revathi's work in tsunami restoration, yet, perhaps because of this positive impact, there was a sense of abandonment when she withdrew. This was clearly articulated by Mathew, who attributed the collapse of village level collectives and Kadal Oosai to the fact that Revathi left so abruptly. He reported that after Revathi's departure, rather than farmers taking over the leadership of Kadal Oosai, a new NGO named BRIGHT⁵ arrived on the scene. This new NGO was unable to provide adequate support.

While Revathi was here, everything was smooth. Then it changed. After BRIGHT came, everything was broken. While she was there, she took care of us, but after she left, nobody bothered. BRIGHT was there, but Revathi, when she left, she washed her hands of us. Not even a phone call in eight years.

Given that, earlier in the interview, Mathew had referred to Revathi as *Amma* (mother), the use of the phrase 'washed her hands' (*kai kazhuvirathu*) is particularly poignant here, implying a relinquishing maternal responsibilities. The sense of abandonment was palpable. In his view, more work needed to be done, so that he could take over the coordination process and promote ecological farming more effectively.⁷ He felt that BRIGHT was completely unable to replace Revathi as a facilitator of Kadal Oosai, emphasising that its leader lacked her mental maturity (*manapakavaum*) and financial backing. It was suggested that BRIGHT had used Kadal Oosai as a means of generating income

for itself, with NGO workers charging communities bookkeeping fees for managing their collectives. Farmers were aware that this was exploitative and unimpressed by BRIGHT's leadership, which led to the eventual collapse of the Kadal Oosai federation.

The collapse of Kadal Oosai suggests another reason for the weakness of Revathi's model in the current institutional climate. On the one hand, communities were not entirely equipped to take control of this movement for themselves, refuting a core assumption of the participatory strategy – namely, that leadership can eventually be completely transferred to communities. Indeed, communities evidently expected Revathi to stay on and provide ongoing leadership and guidance. On the other hand, there were other NGOs who stood to profit from taking the collective structures under their wing, continuing relations of dependency and patronage. Once again, institutional context cannot be ignored. Other NGOs will always be present, and may intervene in ways that undermine processes of grassroots empowerment.

While the 'Master Farmer' model appears to have been more successful in the long term, there were some signs that this, too, could have benefitted from more ongoing support from Revathi. It was certainly an achievement that in 2014, ten years after the tsunami, the collective of 10-20 farmers in Mathew's village were still maintaining their supportive relationship and continued practicing ecological farming. Yet, not all farmers in the village were doing so. Indeed, it seems that beyond this 10-20 persons, most in the village had gradually returned to chemical farming. Mathew claimed that this occurred at the same time as Revathi was withdrawing. This created problems even for practicing natural farmers, as the use of flood-irrigation in the paddy-growing region had led to the cross-contamination of their fields by their neighbour's chemicals, making organic certification impossible.

An even clearer indication of the potential benefits of Revathi maintaining more sustained contact came from Lalita. Lalita's determined efforts to encourage local women to purchase cows for livelihood generation were ultimately undermined by external circumstances. She had convinced more than ten local women to save money to purchase cows and she, herself, was raising four. Yet, this was to be tragically interrupted when an outbreak of foot and mouth disease resulted in the deaths of all of Lalita's cows and of many others in the village. The others who had bought cows at her suggestion felt

betrayed, and this, she said, had undermined the collectives that were developing within the village. Some ongoing support from Revathi may have assuaged the economic and social backlash that Lalita encountered as a result of these circumstances. This demonstrates that participatory strategies do not inevitably lead to outcomes that are empowering. It cannot be assumed that after a brief intervention by development workers, communities can be left to take over, particularly given the unpredictability of the natural and social environment in which they operate.

CONCLUSION

Participatory approaches to sustainable rural development clearly have their merits. This is particularly true when development workers are seen as ‘urban outsiders’ in their target communities, whose knowledge of local agricultural conditions may be questioned. A disposition towards ‘facilitation’ rather than ‘leadership’ encourages development workers to listen to community needs and aspirations and to merely provide support in areas of shared interest. Further, it encourages rural communities to take leadership into their own hands. In the case of ecological farming, this is important, as local people’s advice may be taken as more authoritative than that of an outsider and the results can be witnessed first-hand. Revathi clearly recognised these factors and felt that it was essential for her to avoid taking a leadership role if communities were to overcome entrenched disadvantage.

Nonetheless, this case study also reaffirms many of the critical observations made in the literature on participatory development, suggesting that some aspects of the model may need to be rethought. In particular, the forms of participation that the development worker facilitates may need to be limited to specific domains, if participation is to be genuinely empowering, non-exploitative and to avoid elite capture. Revathi’s experiences suggest that it may be appropriate to curtail facilitation to building relations of economic cooperation, particularly amongst disadvantaged sections of rural communities, rather than facilitating community-based organisations to represent community needs. This acknowledges four important points. First, that whether it is acknowledged or not, the facilitator *always* has some kind of agenda, and the question of *what* they facilitate is never neutral. Development workers need to acknowledge that even if they gesturally

allow communities to set the agenda, they still enter communities with a degree of power and their input, however light-handed, is influential. Revathi clearly was only interested in ‘facilitating’ non-chemical forms of agricultural practice, though she left it to communities to evaluate the merits of her approach for themselves. Given that these choices are inevitable, the facilitator should be explicit about their interests, and make a decision to facilitate developments that are effective, sustainable, and empowering.

Secondly, social and institutional context has a substantial impact on what one facilitates and whether it is likely to be effective. This includes the institutional influences on facilitators (from the donors, the state, etc.), the influence of local elites over any collective structures formed and the influence of other NGOs who form part of the local social environment. Although the facilitator may have a strong personal commitment to allowing rural communities (particularly the marginalised) to set their own agenda and lead their own movement, any of these additional influences can derail this process – often in subtle ways that are difficult to detect. These influences are more substantial and counter-productive within ‘community-based organisations’ with representative structures since, particularly in developing countries such as India, representative politics is mired in relations of patronage and clientelism, making CBOs prone to elite capture.

Thirdly, while it may seem reasonable to assume that it is always best to facilitate local participation to the greatest extent possible, in some cases, participation can be exploitative. When designing rural development interventions, one must be cautious to ensure that participation will have directly empowering effects. As Revathi became all-too-aware, often ‘people’s participation’ is simply code-word for displacing responsibilities from the government and finance sectors onto communities. This is particularly the case when group formation and maintenance requires arduous bookkeeping and other administrative burdens, which rural people are generally ill-equipped to take on themselves.

Finally, aspects of the facilitative model are clearly not aligned with community expectations. In particular, the case study shows that communities may expect NGOs to commit to a long-term involvement with them, rather than a complete transfer of leadership from the NGO to the community. As the interviews with Revathi’s target communities demonstrated, people did not share Revathi’s assumption she could withdraw as communities took the movement

for ecological farming into their own hands. Rather, they wanted her ongoing support, education, and guidance. The amount of time that a facilitator is expected to spend in communities and the extent of their long-term involvement is an ambiguity within the participatory development model that needs ironing out.

These four factors suggest important limitations to participatory approaches to sustainable rural development. Importantly, however, they do not imply a need to abandon the participatory approach altogether, but rather to limit its scope to domains in which it can be most effective and least detrimental. The case study suggests that a focus on facilitating economic cooperation may be most suited. Revathi's 'master farmer' model, which was based on knowledge sharing, cooperation and building relations of mutual dependence, proved to be durable even after her departure. Although it did not lead to a spreading of ecological farming techniques, as she had hoped, it did make a meaningful long-term impact on the lives of those directly involved. Such cooperative structures are less likely to degenerate into caste-based organisations or be subject to elite capture, particularly if they have been designed in such a way as to promote cooperation between diverse sections of communities. Sustained involvement from facilitators, however, appears to be crucial, to ensure that community innovations are successful (and to buffer experiences of failure) and to prevent co-option of such groups by other NGOs who may have ulterior motives. Further, in keeping with the basic assumptions of participatory development, the development worker should take a backseat throughout and allow a substantial role for communities in agenda-setting. This, however, may be difficult to achieve in the current institutional climate, in which community-based organisations and micro-credit programs remain in vogue amongst major donors. At this level, some core assumptions need to shift, as there is now ample evidence that CBOs and community-policed micro-finance come with levels of risk that are not worth taking, particularly in South Asia.

Revathi's experiences align with those of many others identified in the literature on participatory development. Whether or not her focus on economic empowerment can provide a satisfactory alternative in all settings certainly requires further research attention. What development workers can certainly take inspiration from, however, is her determined effort to avoid aspects of the participatory development model that have decisively *not* worked and to develop alternatives that are suitable to ground realities. In this sense, her example provides

useful lessons for the development community at large on overcoming the current participatory development impasse.

NOTES

- 1 As the purpose of the research was to evaluate the holistic impact of Revathi's interventions and the reasons that particular interventions were successful or otherwise, qualitative methods, particularly interviews, provided far more relevant data than quantitative research could have.
- 2 For confidentiality purposes, this NGO is not named.
- 3 Neighbourhoods in rural Tamil Nadu are generally segregated according to caste and religion.
- 4 All names given to these informants are pseudonyms.
- 5 Gram Sabhas (or Gram Panchayats) are local elective governments in India's villages.
- 6 A pseudonym.
- 7 This resonates well with Ricks' (2016) recent study, which found that regular interaction was more likely to lead to positive outcomes in participatory development projects than training programs.

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