
KNOWLEDGE FROM THE MARGINS IN THE POST-2015 PROCESS

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In November 2010, five development organisations came together to think about the MDGs. They recognised that despite the many shortcomings of the MDG framework (not least the [top-down secretive process](#) through which they were designed), there were a great many positive impacts of a global framework. Working on the theory that an inclusive process, set in motion early enough, could help create a better, legitimate framework to replace the MDGs — and Beyond 2015 was born. The original group grew into a campaign with more than 500 participating organisations from across the globe.

Initial tasks were for the UN to take the lead in developing the new framework. While the UN slowly took responsibility for post-2015, there were no plans for direct engagement of people living in poverty in the policy process. Beyond 2015 members felt that, unless they initiated such consultations, nothing would take place. A dialogue between Beyond 2015 and the Institute of Development Studies led to a proposal being put together. However, the project remained unfunded until the nomination of David Cameron as co-chair of the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on post-2015 (HLP) pushed DFID to prioritise this agenda.

Participate provides high quality evidence on the reality of poverty into the post-2015 debate by bringing the perspectives of the poorest. Participate is facilitating a global Participatory Research Group (PRG) comprising of 15 participatory research projects. While establishing some common criteria, the initiative adopted a broad, inclusive understanding of participatory research, fundamentally it is a process in which research is constructed and designed by the research participants. Participants are at the centre of process, contributing to identifying research questions, gathering information and knowledge, carrying out the analysis, and articulating the key messages that they want others to hear.

Participatory research is complementary to the other ‘knowledges’ used in designing a new framework. A unique contribution, it often shows unexpected insights by providing fresh perspectives into intractable problems. It helps to understand the complexity and interconnectedness of issues in people’s lives. Moreover, it can challenge assumptions about how change happens and which development interventions work. As the rate of change accelerates in many contexts, participation becomes even more important to shed light on rapidly shifting realities.

Participate delivered a review of previous consultations of ‘the poor’ in global policy-making to the HLP in November 2012. Participate aims to embed participatory methods into policy-making, monitoring and evaluation in the long-term. Participate has encountered several challenges, both methodological and practical, which are dealt with through collective reflection.

Participate is characterised by an intrinsic tension between the nature of participatory research and the needs of the policy process. The key feature of participatory research is its open process in which participants decide priorities and research questions. However, at the same time,

participatory research within a policy-process needs to provide some of the answers that policymakers are looking for, otherwise it risks irrelevance. Participate's research initiatives attempt to find the balance between these two elements. The framing questions set by the HLP will be used as a guideline of policy-makers needs, but negotiated with research participants to generate knowledge that responds to their own concerns and perspectives. In this way, Participate will have participatory research that is pertinent to the global process.

A second challenge is the analysis. The 15 research initiatives carried out by the PRG are the outcome of local research projects in numerous countries and communities. How is it possible to merge diverse participatory knowledge into clear key messages for policy-makers? Locally generated data, analyzed in its own context, may not be easily comparable with research conducted elsewhere. Moreover, Participate's research projects adopt a variety of participatory methods and techniques, shaped by both research participants and local researchers. How is it possible to move between different scales of analysis and use locally grounded data to contribute to a global discussion? How to translate complex contextual findings into policy recommendation? How is it possible to remain faithful to the original participants' analysis in the process of drafting a meta-analysis?

But, more importantly, who will do the meta-analysis? Where does the power lie in the process of synthesising the perspectives of those living in poverty? We are now exploring different possibilities for a solid methodological framework to facilitate the process. Limitations will, however, always remain.

Finally, there is the issue of the timing. Whilst policymakers have committed to 'listen to the perspectives of those living in poverty', in reality they made very little time available for it. The post-2015 policy process has a very tight schedule, with the three co-chairs pushing for a draft report to be written as quickly as possible – some sections will be signed off in March 2013. Participatory research is an inherently time-consuming process, requiring collective listening, research planning, data analysis, and so on. Participate has to mediate between the pressure to produce 'quick messages' that simplify the lived experience of poverty, and the risk of failing to impact on the policy process if outputs reach policymakers too late. The decision was taken to avoid undermining the participatory nature of the project, and thereby compromising the quality of the research process, at the expense of opportunities influence the HLP. Participate will report in early summer 2013, in order to feed into the UN special event on post-MDGs which will take place in the fringes of the UN General Assembly next September.

You're invited to follow Participate as it develops and get in touch with reflections, comments and criticisms at <http://www.ids.ac.uk/participate>

While this piece reflects on a collective process, any shortcomings and failings in presentation are my own