

# Increasing Citizen Agency through Deliberation

### **Challenge: Improving development effectiveness by including the poor**

Development is not only a matter of technocratic solutions prescribed by international organizations. Increasing development effectiveness means including in the process of policy making the perspectives of those who are most in need of aid. Informed public debate helps identify problems, find feasible solutions, and build consensus around them.

Rao and Sanyal argue that “the struggle to break free of poverty is as much a cultural process as it is political and economic” (Rao and Sanyal 2010, 146). Economic prescriptions and political initiatives, such as poverty programs, may not have the desired effects because they do not take cultural circumstances into account. “Poverty” can be as much a matter of agency as an economic matter: The poorest and most disadvantaged groups are most often excluded from dialogue about how to improve their lives. Instead, development and government technocrats prescribe solutions that do not always fit the local contexts of the poor. Including the poor in the development dialogue means broadening the base of knowledge and experience on which decisions are founded. Inclusion helps target programs better, tailor solutions to those in need, and build agency for the poor—all of which may help them improve their position culturally, politically, and eventually in the

economic system. Equal agency needs to add to equal opportunity to sustainably alleviate poverty (Rao and Sanyal 2010).

### **Solution: Increasing citizen agency through deliberation**

The struggle against poverty is political and economic, but it is also a cultural struggle. Poverty is centrally related to voice, participation in public discourse, and access to the public sphere. This perspective requires a new approach from policymakers who need to understand poverty as a matter not only of economic factors, but also of voice and agency. Because it is the poor who have the least agency, they are in particular need of strategic efforts to make their voices heard.

The idea of the public sphere is at the center of participatory approaches to development. The public sphere is an arena where citizens come together, exchange opinions regarding public issues, discuss mutual problems, and arrive at solutions. It is a central aspect of good governance. Without a functioning public sphere, government officials cannot be held accountable for their actions and citizens will not be able to assert any influence over political decisions. The public sphere is a normative idea, an ideal of good and accountable governance. Its prerequisites are free flows of information, free expression, and free debate.

The ideal public sphere is truly participatory and the best protection against the abuse of power. In reality, we only find approximations of this ideal.

Deliberation for development is increasingly being applied to include marginalized voices in the development dialogue to improve the effectiveness of interventions. Deliberative forums are organized to approximate the ideal situation of the public sphere and to provide citizens with voice and agency. One of the most successful examples of deliberation for development comes from Porto Alegre, Brazil, where citizens are involved in allocating part of the public budget (Baiocchi 2003). Deliberative models have been applied in many different contexts throughout the developing and the developed world. In China, deliberative polls are being used to determine local spending priorities (Fishkin 2008). In India, local deliberative forums are anchored in the constitution, providing platforms for all (rural) Indian citizens—independent of caste, economic status, and gender—to participate in local decision making.

Deliberation allows marginalized groups to voice their problems and grievances and, in some cases, to have direct input into the planning of policies that are designed to help improve their lives. Moreover, it has been suggested that participation in public discourse builds civic competence and allows the poor to perform their citizenship (Rao and Sanyal 2010).

In India, deliberation is a constitutional right of citizens. The 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Indian Constitution provides space for participation of women and underprivileged castes in local policy making by institutionalizing village councils (Gram Panchayats) and public village meetings (Gram Sabhas). Gram Sabhas affect the lives of 700 million rural Indians in two million villages, making those meetings the largest deliberative institution in human history. They create a platform for groups to come together across economic and social divides and discuss public issues that affect all of them. These village meetings create a shared understanding between government

and citizens (including marginalized groups) about certain public policies.

These deliberative gatherings provide a chance for the poor and disadvantaged to be part of a public dialogue from which they have been excluded throughout history. Public discussions can contribute to building their civic skills and democratic understanding, empowering them to better articulate their interests and bring their needs to the attention of government officials.

### **Findings: Deliberation helps level the playing field**

Research by the World Bank's Development Economics Research Group (funded by the Communication for Governance and Accountability Program) has found that the deliberate inclusion of otherwise marginalized voices does indeed help overcome social chasms and lends voice to those who usually do not have one (Ban and Rao 2009; Rao and Sanyal 2010; Besley, Pande and Rao 2005). Analyzing 300 meeting transcripts and household surveys in South India between 2001 and 2006, the researchers concluded that although the voices of the disadvantaged did not dominate village meetings, they were being heard.

Gram Sabhas provide ordinary citizens with a forum to voice their opinions on policy issues and state their demands. Because opinions can be voiced freely in the meetings, Gram Sabhas provide a "level discursive playing field", which in turn encourages a culture of competitive participation where the politics of dignity are played out, boundaries of caste and class transgressed, and the political power of the poor displayed" (Rao and Sanyal 2010, 163). Marginalized groups find agency and dignity in the discourses of the Gram Sabhas. Although exchanges in the meetings are often initiated by political figures and government officials, they eventually produce a joint understanding of policies regarding benefits to the poor.

#### *Caste and landownership*

The design of Gram Sabhas allows members of the

lower castes to temporarily overcome the stigma of their social status. It allows them to be citizens with rights equal to those of the higher castes. Therefore, the World Bank researchers conclude, Gram Sabhas potentially challenge traditional social relationships that marginalize groups in society.

Although policy preferences of landowners may dominate the public discussion, they are not necessarily being given preferred treatment. Landowners tend to be more vocal in the meetings and more focused on their own preferences. Officials leading the meetings, on the other hand, are more likely to mention the interests of the disadvantaged.

Members of economically and socially disadvantaged groups are more likely to attend village meetings than is any other group of citizens. This finding implies that there is genuine demand among the poor to have a say. The research presented by Ban and Rao (2009) also shows that poverty programming is more targeted toward the poor in those communities where Gram Sabhas are held: public discourse on poverty and public policy may produce better results for the groups that are intended beneficiaries of public policy.

### *Gender*

Some constituencies are reserved for female Gram Sabha presidencies. Women, especially members of the lower castes, have a chance of voicing their demands in the meetings. Among other effects, this has educational value: Until the establishment of Gram Sabhas, the disadvantaged, the poor, and women had little—if any—opportunity to make demands in a public arena. The deliberative forum allows them to practice their citizenship and place their needs within a broader frame of social justice.

The researchers found that, in village meetings, women talk more and longer about their preferences. That means that the interests of this marginalized group can be made public. The researchers conclude that “affording voice to the women has real benefits for the women’s community” (Ban and Rao 2009, 17). When women talk, the economic status of owning or not owning land does not play a role, as it does among men.

Women’s talk is not limited by the traditional power of the landed class.

However, women are less likely than men to attend Gram Sabhas, and woman presidents of village meetings are often only nominally in charge. Their authority is often replaced by their husbands. Women are also less active than men in the deliberative meetings and are not always afforded the same rights in the discussions. The researchers found instances in which men silenced women and discounted their opinions.

Obviously, deliberation cannot make social and economic differences among participants disappear. However, participation in public discourse helps level the playing field by giving voice to those who would certainly be excluded otherwise and helps poor people exercise their citizenship. Rao and Sanyal (2010) show that inclusive discourse of poverty benefits can even shape the definition of poverty and the interpretation of selection criteria for beneficiaries.

### **Policy recommendations**

Deliberation can even out differences in social and economic status, such as class, caste, and gender gaps. Deliberative forums such as Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayats also provide an arena for the underprivileged to practice citizenship and get a voice in policy issues that they would not have without these institutionalized forums.

However, not all inequalities can be leveled through deliberation. The research presented here implies several recommendations for policy makers and organizers of deliberation events:

- If development is to achieve equal opportunity for the poor, it must allow for equal agency for the poor (Rao and Walton 2004). Deliberative forums such as Gram Sabhas give voice and agency to the poor, empowering them as citizens and as part of local communities.
- Development for the poor must address needs that are most relevant to the poor. Marginalized groups

must be permitted to express their views in a public arena to force discussion on issues that would otherwise not be part of the public dialogue.

- Deliberation across gender and class needs to be institutionalized with the explicit aim of equalizing political power. Institutional deliberative forums need quotas for marginalized groups; otherwise, those groups will be crowded out of deliberative meetings and their voices will not be heard. Gram Sabhas are mandatory and need to be held at regular intervals.
- Although quotas help in guaranteeing the participation of underprivileged people, they do not guarantee their equality in the discussion. Members of advantaged groups, such as the upper castes, tend to dominate public discussions and try to establish their traditional privileges. Minorities whose participation in deliberation is not guaranteed through quotas, such as Indian Muslims, will have more difficulties in expressing their needs and opinions.
- To effectively include citizens' voices in policy making, the outcome of deliberation needs to matter. In Gram Sabhas, citizens discuss and ratify core decisions made by the Gram Panchayats on who will benefit from antipoverty programs and on budgetary allocations for the provision of public goods and services. Village councils actually command funds and have jurisdictional powers. Participatory forums must have clout.
- Gram Sabhas are mapped onto the electoral system and village councils are staffed by elected representatives who usually are members of mainstream parties. This allows for a relatively unrestricted performance of citizenship across social and economic groups, with stigma attached to those groups being minimized. Local politicians must allow all groups to speak or risk losing votes from those they ignore.
- Deliberative forums need to be held regularly and must be part of the political culture. Ad hoc, short-term and irregular events can be ignored and manipulated, thereby rendered ineffective.

## References

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## CommGAP

The **Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)**, a global program at the World Bank, seeks to confront the challenges inherent in the political economy of development. By applying innovative communication approaches that improve the quality of the public sphere – by amplifying citizen voice; promoting free, independent, and plural media systems; and helping government institutions communicate better with their citizens – the program aims to demonstrate the power of communication principles, processes and structures in promoting good and accountable governance, and hence better development results.

CommGAP has launched a blog entitled *People, Spaces, Deliberation* to share ideas about the role of the democratic public sphere in governance among a growing global community of practice with members who are united in their commitment to improve governance and accountability in developing countries. The blog is addressing issues such as accountability, governance, media development, anti-corruption, post conflict environments, and public opinion.

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