PARTICIPATION MAKES A DIFFERENCE
But not always how and where we might expect
BY JOHN GAVENTA
Indian grassroots activists, village councillors, farmers, and agriculture unionists from 18 of India’s 27 states take part in a “Right To Food” campaign as they shout slogans during a protest in New Delhi on November 25, 2010. Protesters demanded that the government live up to its promise of guaranteeing food security.
n their article: Participatory Development Revisited, Ghazala Mansuri and Vijayendra Rao outline the high hopes for participation over the last two decades, yet conclude that participatory development has become a “tarnished silver bullet”—perhaps another in a long series of development fads that promise more than they deliver. The article doesn’t throw out the idea of participation altogether, but argues for a more thoughtful analysis of the interrelationships between civil society, markets, and government to help us understand how and in what conditions participation can best make a difference. The authors argue that we need to take into account “civil society failure,” as well as the limitations of purely market—or government-based approaches.

WHERE DOES PARTICIPATION OCCUR?

WE AGREE. But while the Mansuri and Rao article offers some important caveats and insights into understanding participation in certain settings, we need to be careful about drawing conclusions from these too broadly. Their article focuses on only two arenas of local participation: donor-driven community-based development efforts and the decentralization of resources and authority to local governments. While these may be important, they are by no means the only ways in which people participate in their own development. In fact, they may be the avenues that are most subject to the kinds of participation failures that the article discusses. Community-based development efforts, particularly the kinds that the World Bank and others have been supporting, are often large-scale, created from above, and based on a form of participation mediated by local elites. And decentralisation in and of itself may or may not be participatory—it all depends on the enabling policies and legal frameworks that are in place, and whether they include participation as a legal right, or simply as an invitation for consultation which can be dismissed or ignored at will.

TOP DOWN OR BOTTOM UP?

RESEARCH by the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex yields a somewhat broader view of where and how participation happens (Gaventa and Barrett 2010). Drawing from 100 case studies of citizen engagement in twenty countries, this research argues that people don’t engage only in “invited” forums of participation created by authorities from above. In most places, they also act for themselves in myriad other ways—through their own local community development associations, neighborhood or self-help groups, through social movements and campaigns to get their voices heard, or through informal as well as formal mechanisms for monitoring and holding officials to account.

SOME HOPEFUL RESULTS

THESE BROADER “SPACES” for participation provide a slightly different—and less pessimistic—picture than do donor or state-created programs or processes. Analyzing over 800 outcomes of participation, the IDS study points to largely positive results in four broad areas, each of which is essential for development.

FORMING BETTER CITIZENS AND PRACTICES

FIRST, engagement is important because it helps form better citizens: people who are aware of their rights to participate in the first place, and are more confident of their ability to do so. Second, it also builds more effective participation practices: people can learn the civic skills, form the relationships and networks, and build the organizations needed to make their voices heard. Both of these—more aware and more effective citizens—are necessary, yet often overlooked, building blocks of effective participation and for delivering change more broadly.
Third, the study points to dozens of examples of participation contributing to development results, for example, in improved health, water, sanitation, or education. There are also many examples of how participation contributes to strengthening governance by improving cultures and frameworks for accountability, or better implementation of national and international commitments to human rights. Finally, the studies show that participation can contribute to more pluralistic and inclusive societies, bringing new voices and issues into the public arena.

However...

But just as Mansuri and Rao found in their work, this study also warns that participation is not always used for purely benevolent or benign purposes. Although 75 percent of the participation effects cited in the IDS study were positive, the other 25 percent were more negative. These include a sense of disempowerment arising from meaningless, tokenistic, or manipulated participation; the use of new skills and alliances for corrupt or questionable ends; and elite capture of the participatory process.

A two-way street

Significantly, many of the negative examples had less to do with citizens’ failure to participate, than with government’s reluctance or inability to be responsive. Greater citizen engagement might simply be met by bureaucratic “brick walls,” failure to implement policy decisions and, in many cases, reprisals, including violence against those who challenged the status quo.

What to look for

These studies demonstrate that participation is no panacea. But under some conditions it can make a positive difference. Both the IDS and the Mansuri and Rao studies suggest that the challenge is to gain a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the factors that can lead to failure or success. The IDS study points to several of these factors, with important implications for donors, policy makers, and practitioners alike:

- Participation is not limited to spaces and through avenues created “from above” by donors or governments. In fact grassroots associations as well as broader social movements outside of these arenas are important sources of positive change. And, for building accountable and responsive governments, the results are most positive when multiple strategies for engagement are present simultaneously. Donors might be well advised to figure out in any given context how citizens do participate in their own ways and spaces, and then build links with and support for these, rather than simply creating new “participatory” mechanisms and inviting citizens in.

- “Invited” forms of participation in local governance or large-scale donor programs work best where several other conditions exist. These include the presence of:
  - strong champions inside the government who open the doors for civic participation,
  - organized groups of citizens that can help articulate the collective voice and help monitor the process, and
  - well-designed processes for deliberation and decision making that bring the two together. These processes also appear to work better when legal frameworks give participants an explicit right to participate, not just an invitation to do so, and when there is an acknowledged need for resources to be allocated or decisions to be made.

- Active, aware, and effective citizens who can help deliver development and governance gains do not emerge automatically. Yet unless they are in place, new spaces for participation, especially those created from above, will simply be filled with the same elite voices. Building awareness, skills, organizations, and networks that enable more inclusive and empowered forms of participation takes time; but these are critical for longer-term success, and should be recognized, and measured, as intermediate outcomes of broader change.

- Empowered participation faces the risk of reprisal, especially when citizens may be challenging powerful established interests. This may take the form of violence—as seen recently in several well-publicized cases of reprisal against citizens in India who were using the new Right to Information laws to demand...
transparency and expose corruption. But they can also take more subtle forms, including using development resources (such as land, housing, benefits, or jobs) as political clubs to silence dissent. Donors and policy makers who encourage participation must also be willing to help protect and strengthen the space for citizens who do exercise their voice, and to support the other enabling conditions for citizen engagement to occur.

SEEING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

AFTER MORE THAN two decades of work in international development circles to promote greater citizen participation, let’s not lose sight of its potentials as we also become more aware of its limitations and risks in various settings. There is abundant evidence to show that participation can make a difference, but often in ways and in places that are not donor-created. The challenge now is for donors and development institutions to take a broader and longer-term view of what participation is about, develop a better understanding of the conditions under which it makes a difference, and be willing to support those whose participation may raise uncomfortable truths, even when these challenge the status quo.

Reference

Schoolchildren in Bhutan.