

Participatory Processes and Empowering the Poor

As the Commonwealth Heads of Government stated in their Fancourt Declaration of 1999, 'if the poor and vulnerable are to be at the centre of development, the process must be participatory in which they have a voice'. While democracy should in principle be promoting greater participation by all citizens, including the poor, in decision-making processes, in far too many countries democratic processes advance only to the point of holding elections periodically. Between elections, people remain far removed from the process of governing. Countries that allow for greater participation, it is suggested, achieve not only higher efficiency but also better targeting of needs. The participation of people could be in various contexts and take various forms: in budget making, the design of projects, monitoring, evaluation, the management of local facilities and institutions like irrigation, roads, schools, water supply and clinics, and auditing and accounting.

But the effective participation of people in governance is limited by the feeling of powerlessness on the part of the poor. A study by the World Bank identifies ten dimensions of such powerlessness:

- Livelihoods and assets are precarious, seasonal and inadequate;
- The places where the poor live are isolated, risky, unserved and stigmatised;
- The bodies of the poor are hungry, exhausted, sick and poor in appearance;
- Gender relations are troubled and unequal;
- Social relations are discriminating and isolating;
- Security is lacking in the sense of both protection and peace of mind;
- The behaviours of more powerful people is marked by disregard and abuse;
- Institutions are disempowering and excluding;
- The organisations of the poor are weak and disconnected;
- Capabilities are weak because of lack of information, education, skills and confidence.

Many of the poor interviewed for the *Voices of the Poor* study from which the above findings are taken have suffered the traumas of war, violence, hunger, sickness, debt, exploitation, exclusion, harassment, pain and fear.³²

As Dreze and Sen have noted:

... in most societies, it is the case that that a person's ability to use electoral rights, to obtain legal protection, to express oneself in public, and to take advantage of democratic institutions in general tends to vary with class, education, gender and related characteristics.
Dreze and Sen (2002), p. 353

Empowering the poor is about how to reduce these vulnerabilities. It requires action in terms of enhancing income security, establishment of property rights for the poor, greater gender equality, better delivery of public services, elimination of corruption and establishing an attitude of respect and service by public servants – to mention only a few issues.

Experience suggests that imaginative solutions can be found if there is a political will. For example, a major innovation that has helped to empower the poor in recent decades is the establishment of Grameen Bank-type micro-credit schemes, inspired by Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh. Reviewing the impact of these schemes, some researchers have found that they raise the income/assets of at least some participants, that they diversify income sources and that the focus on women has contributed to reduced fertility and a drop in child mortality. Why this effect on fertility and infant mortality? The authors comment:

It may be that their economic power, new information, or new support system allows women to take more control over their child-bearing decisions.

C. Leigh Anderson *et al.* (2002)

Enhancing the capacity of the poor to manage risks, and reducing their vulnerability to ill health, economic shocks and natural disasters are indeed a critical means of empowering the poor. So is expanding their assets and facilitating the transformation of their assets into property rights: as Hernando de Soto (2000) has observed, poor people do indeed have many assets which fail to get transformed into capital:

... in the midst of their own shanty towns, there are trillions of dollars, all ready to be put to use if only the mystery of how assets are transformed into capital can be unraveled.

Secure property rights make assets fungible, and help the poor to participate in credit markets.