Towards Participatory Local Governance:
Six Propositions for Discussion
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Introduction

For the last twenty years, the concept of 'participation' has been widely used in the discourse of development. For much of this period, the concept has referred to participation in the social arena, in the 'community' or in development projects. Increasingly, however, the concept of participation is being related to rights of citizenship and to democratic governance. Nowhere is the intersection of concepts of community participation and citizenship seen more clearly than in the multitude of programmes for decentralised governance that are found in both Southern and Northern countries.

Linking citizen participation to the state at this local or grassroots level raises fundamental and normative questions about the nature of democracy and about the skills and strategies for achieving it. The literature is full of debates on the meanings of citizenship and of participation, on the role and relevance of 'the local', especially in the context of globalisation, and of course on the problem of governance itself. In this article, I pose six propositions which link to this debate and which raise critical challenges for how it may be pursued further.

PROPOSITION ONE: RELATING PEOPLE AND INSTITUTIONS

A key challenge for the 21st century is the construction of new relationships between ordinary people and the institutions - especially those of government - which affect their lives.

Recently, a number of studies have pointed to the growing gap that exists within both North and South between ordinary people, especially the poor, and the institutions which affect their lives, especially government. For instance, the recent *Voices of the Poor* report, prepared for the WDR 2000/1, finds that many poor people around the globe perceive large institutions – especially those of the state – to be distant, unaccountable and corrupt. Drawing from participatory research exercises in 23 countries, the report concludes:

> *From the perspectives of poor people world wide, there is a crisis in governance. While the range of institutions that play important roles in poor people's lives is vast, poor people are excluded from participation in governance. State institutions, whether represented by central ministries or local government are often neither responsive nor accountable to the poor; rather the reports details the arrogance and disdain with which poor people are treated. Poor people see little recourse to injustice, criminality, abuse and corruption by institutions. Not surprisingly, poor men and women lack confidence in the state institutions even though they still express their willingness to partner with them under fairer rules (Narayan, et. al. 2000:172).*

The *Voices of the Poor Study* is not alone in its findings. Another study by the Commonwealth Foundation (1999) in over forty countries also found a growing disillusionment of citizens with their governments, based on their concerns with corruption,

lack of responsiveness to the needs of the poor, and the absence participation or connection to ordinary citizens.

The empirical evidence on the crisis in the relationship between citizens and their state is not limited to the South. In a number of established democracies, traditional forms of political participation have gone down, and recent studies show clearly the enormous distrust citizens have of many state institutions. In the UK, for instance, a recent study sponsored by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation points to the

> *need to build a new relationship between local government and local people. There are two reasons for this. The first has to do with alienation and apathy. There is a major issue about the attitudes of the public, as customers or citizens, towards local government …This is a symptom of a lack of deeper malaise, the weakness or lack of public commitment to local democracy (Clarke and Stewart 1998:3).*

Other data in the United States, most notably the work by Robert Putnam, points as well to the decline in civic participation and the growing distance between citizens and state institutions.

PROPOSITION TWO: WORKING ON BOTH SIDES OF THE EQUATION

Rebuilding relationships between citizens and their local governments means working both sides of the equation - that is, going beyond 'civil society' or 'state-based' approaches, to focus on their intersection, through new forms of participation, responsiveness and accountability.

As Fung and Wright (2001:5-6) observe, the right has taken advantage of the decline in legitimacy of public institutions to 'escalate its attack on the affirmative state…Deregulation, privatisation, reduction of social services and curtailments of state spending have been the watchwords, rather than participation, greater responsiveness, and more effective forms of democratic state intervention.' They and of course many others argue that the response to the crisis should focus not on dismantling the state, but on deepening democracy and seeking new forms for its expression. They argue that the 'institutional forms of liberal democracy plus techno-bureacratic administration - seem increasingly ill suited to the novel problems we face in the twenty-first century'.

However, those who have sought to deepen democratic governance have often been divided on their approach to the problem. On the one hand, attention has been made to strengthening the processes of citizen *participation* – that is the ways in which poor people exercise voice through new forms of inclusion, consultation and/or mobilisation designed to inform and to influence larger institutions and policies. On the other hand, growing attention has been paid to how to strengthen the *accountability* and *responsiveness* of these institutions and policies through changes in institutional design, and a focus on the enabling structures for good governance.

Increasingly, however, we are beginning to see the importance of working on both sides of the equation. As participatory approaches are scaled up from projects to policies, they inevitably enter the arenas of government, and find that participation can only become effective as it engages with issues of institutional change. And, as concerns about good governance and state responsiveness grow, questions about how citizens engage and make demands on the state also come to the fore.

In both South and North, there is growing consensus that the way forward is found in a focus on **both** a more active and engaged civil society which can express demands of the citizenry, **and** a more responsive and effective state which can deliver needed public services. In focus groups around the world, the Commonwealth Study, for instance, that

despite their disillusionment with the state as it is, poor people would like to see strong government which will provide services, facilitate their involvement and promote equal rights and justice. The Commonwealth Study argues that that at the heart of the new consensus of strong state and strong civil society are the need to develop both *'participatory democracy* and *responsive government'* (76): the two are mutually reinforcing and supportive - strong, aware, responsible, active and engaged citizens along with strong, caring, inclusive, listening, open and responsive democratic governments' (82).

Similarly, Heller (2001:133) discusses the limits of both of the 'technocratic vision', with its emphasis on technical design of institutions, and of the 'anarcho-communitarian model', with its emphasis on radical grassroots democracy. Rather, he calls for a more balanced view (the 'optimist conflict model') which recognises the tensions between the need for representative working institutions, **and** the need for mobilised and demand making civil society. The solution is not found in the separation of the civil society and good governance agendas, but in their interface. The IDS study by Goetz and Gaventa (2001) extends this argument further by examining over sixty concrete cases of citizen voice and state responsiveness, and discusses further the mechanisms and conditions through which they intersect and interact.

PROPOSITION THREE: RE-THINKING VOICE, RE-CONCEPTUALIZING PARTICIPATION AND CITIZENSHIP

The call for new forms of engagement between citizens and the state involves a fundamental re-thinking about the ways in which citizens' voices are articulated and represented in the political process, and a re-conceptualisation of the meanings of participation and citizenship in relationship to local governance.

Traditionally in representative democracies, the assumption has been that citizens express their preferences through electoral politics, and in turn, it was the job of the elected representatives to hold the state accountable. In both North and in the South, new voice mechanisms are now being explored which argue as well for more direct connections between the people and the bureaucracies which affect them. In the UK, for instance, the White Paper on Modern Local Government puts an emphasis on more active forms of citizenship, and on the concept of community governance:

> *Local authorities are based on the principles of representative democracy, yet representative democracy has become passive. Rather than expressing a continuing relationship between government and citizen, the citizen is reduced to being a periodic elector. It is as if the idea of representative democracy has served to limit the commitment of the citizen to local government. At the same time, representative democracy and participatory democracy have been argued as mutually exclusive opposites. In fact, an active conception of representative democracy can be reinforced by participatory democracy - all the more easily in local government because of its local scales and its closeness to the local communities. (Quoted in Clark and Stewart 1998).*

Similarly, the Commonwealth study argues that:

> *In the past the relationship between the state and citizens has tended to be mediated and achieved (or thought to be) through the intermediaries, elected representatives and political party structures. But this aspect of participation in governance for a good society requires direct connection between citizens and the state. This interface has been neglected in the past. The connection between the citizen and the state must be based on participation and inclusion (82).*

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Increasingly around the world, a number of mechanisms are being explored which can foster these more inclusive and deliberative forms of engagement between citizen and state. These go under various labels, ranging from 'participatory governance', to deliberative democracy, to 'empowered deliberative democracy' (Fung and Wright 2001:7) defined as:

o '*democratic* in their reliance on the participation and capacities of ordinary people,
o *deliberative* because they institute reasons-based decision-making, and
o *empowered* since they attempt to tie action to discussion'.

Such an approach, later re-labelled 'empowered, participatory governance by Fung (2002:3-4) involves linking 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' forms of governance to create 'a new architecture of governance that cuts a middle path between the dichotomy of devolution and democratic centralism'.

Around the world, there are numerous examples of innovations which incorporate this approach, ranging from provisions for participatory planning at the local government level in India and the Philippines, to participatory budgeting in Brazil, to citizen monitoring committees in Bolivia, to forms of public referenda and citizen consultation in the Europe. Most of these approaches involve new legal frameworks for local governance which incorporate a mix of direct forms of popular participation with more representative forms of democracy. (For a review of a number of these mechanisms, see Goetz and Gaventa, 2001 and also 'Online Bibliography on Citizen Participation and Local Governance, www.ids.ac.uk/logolink. The IDS LogoLink project is currently undertaking a further review of these legal frameworks, forthcoming.)

As discussed in previous papers linking participation to the political sphere means re-thinking the ways in which participation has often been conceived and carried out, especially in the development context (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999). In the past within development studies, the drive for *'participatory development'* has focussed on the importance of local knowledge and understanding as a basis for local action, and on direct forms of participation throughout the project cycle (needs assessment, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation). A wide range of participatory tools and methodologies have grown from this experience which now may have application in the field of *'participatory governance'*.

On the other hand, work on political participation growing out of political science and governance debates has often focused on issues largely underplayed by those working on participation in the community or social spheres. These include critical questions dealing with legitimate representation, systems of public accountability, policy advocacy and lobbying, rights education and awareness building, and party formation and political mobilisation. Yet, the political participation literature has paid less attention to issues of local knowledge, participatory process, or direct and continuous forms of engagement by marginalised groups.

Each tradition has much to learn from the other. Increasingly, they brought together, especially in the development field, under the concept of *'citizenship'*, which links participation in the political, community and social spheres. But the concept of 'citizenship', itself, has long been a disputed and value-laden one in democratic theory (Jones and Gaventa 2002; *IDS Bulletin* 2002) On the one hand, citizenship has traditionally been cast in liberal terms, as individual legal equality accompanied by a set of rights and responsibilities and bestowed by a state to its citizens. Newer approaches aim to bridge the gap between citizen and the state by recasting citizenship as practised rather than as given. Placing an emphasis on inclusive participation as the very foundation of democratic practice, these approaches suggest a more active notion of citizenship, which recognises the agency of citizens as 'makers and shapers' rather than as 'users and choosers' of interventions or services designed by others (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000 and 2001). As Lister suggests,

'the right of participation in decision-making in social, economic, cultural and political life should be included in the nexus of basic human rights… Citizenship as participation can be seen as representing an expression of human agency in the political arena, broadly defined; citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents' (Lister1998:228).

At the same time, there is a growing recognition that universal conceptions of citizenship rights, met through a uniform set of social policies, fail to recognise diversity and difference, and may in fact serve to strengthen the exclusion of some while seeking inclusion of others (Ellison 1999). With this has come a renewed concern on questions of identity, diversity and inclusion. The DFID paper on *Human Rights for Poor People* calls for participation of the poor in decisions which affects their lives to be included in the list of universal human rights (DFID 2000). The right to participate is also linked to rights of *inclusion*, and to rights to *obligation*, through which poor people may expect to hold governments more accountable and responsive.

Realising these rights poses enormous challenges for local governance, and the new deliberative mechanisms for citizen engagement increasingly associated with them. Whose voices are really heard in these processes? What about issues of representation and accountability within them? How will various forms of local governance accommodate differing meanings of citizenship that cut across gender, political, cultural, and social lines? Without attention to these questions, increased participation in local governance for some may simply re-enforce the status quo.

PROPOSITION FOUR: LEARNING ABOUT OUTCOMES AS WE GO ALONG

While the search for new democratic processes of local governance is critical, far more needs to be learned about how they work, for whom, and with what social justice outcomes. In general, while there is some evidence of positive 'democracy' building outcomes, there is less evidence about the pro-poor development outcomes of participatory governance.

The promises on behalf of democratic decentralisation, especially in its newer more innovative forms, have been great. As Blair (2001: 23) summarises one line of argument:

> *the hope is that as government comes closer to the people, more people will participate in politics…that will give them representation, a key element in empowerment, which can be defined here as significant voice in public policy decisions which affect their futures. Local policy decisions reflecting this empowerment ill serve these newer constituencies, better living conditions and enhanced economic growth. These improvements will then reduce poverty and enhance equity among all groups.*

On the other hand, the evidence about the degree to which these outcomes have been realised is mixed.

Traditionally, the more pessimistic argument has been that democratic decentralisation simply opens up space for the empowerment of local elites, not for consideration of the voices and interests of the more marginalised. Obstacles of power, social exclusion, minimal individual and collective organisational capacity mean that few gains will be made by the poor. As Manor observes, he has 'yet to discover evidence of any case where local elites were more benevolent than those at higher levels.' (Manor 1999: 91, quoted in Blair 2001).

On the other hand, more recent studies of participatory forms of local governance have begun to point to some more positive outcomes. Blair's own study of democratic local governance in six countries, for instance, points to some gains in accountability and as well

as participation and empowerment goals. Moreover, some improvement may be seen in 'universal services', such as education and health care - arguably because these served to benefit the local elites as well. Less success was seen in programmes targeted for the poor themselves, as these were more likely to be 'captured' by local elites.

Osmani's review of the literature, however, points to any number of examples of where 'truly participatory decentralisation' has contributed to both to greater equity and efficiency of local services, because it allows responsiveness to local services. But, he is also quick to point out that attempts to take such cases to scale have faced obstacles both of the unwillingness of those at the top to give up power and gaining involvement of the poor from the bottom.

 Heller's study (2001:158) of democratic experiences in Kerala, Port Alegre, and South Africa is more positive, at least when it comes to what might be termed 'democratic process outcomes.' He finds that the synergy of state and society in local governance:

o   creates new associational incentive and spaces
o   allows for a continuous and dynamic process of learning
o   promotes deliberation and compromise
o   promotes innovative solutions to tensions between representation and participation
o   bridges knowledge and authority gap between technocratic expertise and local
      involvement

On the whole, the evidence on both the pro-poor and the democratic outcomes of experiments in new forms of participatory governance is as yet inconclusive. Many of the studies that have been done have been on the impact of decentralisation in general, not on the more democratic and participatory innovations we have begun to see in recent years. Far more work needs to be done on the impact of these newer sets of innovations.

PROPOSITION FIVE: BUILDING CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

The enabling conditions for the better known 'successful' experiments in participatory governance are limited to a few countries. Effective intervention strategies in most cases therefore must begin with how to create the pre-requisite conditions necessary for participatory governance to succeed.

Many of the experiments which are often held up as recent 'success' stories in participatory local governance are limited to a few places in the world, which often reflect contexts and conditions which are not widely found elsewhere. For instance, Heller's study (2001) in Brazil, India, and South Africa points to three enabling conditions or participatory governance:

o   strong central state capacity;
o   a well developed civil society and
o   an organised political force, such as a party, with strong social movement
      characteristics.

How many countries (or indeed how many places in these three countries) are such pre-requisites found? Of the over 60 - 70 countries where experiments of democratic decentralisation are taking place, no doubt very few.

This has enormous implications for strategies of replicability, or for intervention in countries where these conditions do not pre-exist. In such cases, more work will need to be done on the pre-conditions of participatory governance, including awareness building on rights and citizenship; building civil associations and social movements engaged in governance issues; and strengthening institutions of governance, both at the local and central levels. Merrifield's (2002) work raises important challenges for how to promote 'citizenship learning' in places

where strong awareness of rights and responsibilities do not previously exist. Osmani (2000) argues for the ongoing importance of supporting empowerment strategies, through economic livelihoods, social mobilisation, and advocacy, as a necessary pre-condition for taking participatory governance to scale.

The work by Fung and Wright (2001) on innovative deliberative mechanisms in the US, Brazil and India, points to three principles that are fundamental to EDD (empowered deliberative democracy) and three which 'design principles' for institution building. They are perhaps helpful starting points for democracy building strategies:

Principles of EDD (empowered deliberative democracy)

o   focus on specific, tangible problems
o   involvement of ordinary people affected by these problems and officials close to them
o   deliberative development of solutions to these problems

Design principles for EDD

o   devolution of public decision making authority
o   formal linkages of responsibility, resource distribution and communication
o   use and generation of new state institutions to support and guide these efforts.

However, they also point to one background enabling condition, which is by no means universally found in work on participation and local governance. That is, "there is a rough equality of power, for the purposes of deliberative decisions, between participants' (2001: 25).   To gain such conditions means that the work on local democracy building must also be linked to work on empowerment, especially of oppressed and marginalised groups, as discussed briefly above.

PROPOSITION SIX: CONTESTING THE 'LOCAL' IN AN ERA OF GLOBALISATION

While the 'local', and related themes of 'participation' and 'empowerment' are increasingly part of the development discourse, the 'local' has many conflicting political meanings, and is itself a problematic concept, especially in an era of increased globalisation.

Historically, the 'local' has been considered a key site for democracy building and citizen participation. It has been there that 'people usually come into contact with politicians or public officials, receive services and benefits from the state, and organise together in communities' (Lowndes 1995:161). Citizenship was thought to derive largely from community identification and membership; civic action and political participation were thought to be concentrated at the local level; and local governance provided a learning ground for broader understandings and forms of citizenship (Lowndes 1995).

However, in the current climate, the focus on the 'local' is increasingly problematic, for at least two reasons. First, as Mohan and Stokke (2000) remind us, we need to carefully examine the concept of locality, and how it is being used by a variety of non-local actors. Increasingly, ideas of participation and local governance are being promoted by a wide variety of actors, ranging from grassroots social movements and political parties, to mainstream development organisations, such as the World Bank , UNDP, USAID, and many others. As concepts of local participation are being mainstreamed throughout development discourse, they are also being used to support and justify a variety of agendas, ranging from consolidation of central powers, to support for a neo-liberal agenda and structural adjustment, to promotion of more progressive notions of development and democracy building. Again quoting Mohan and Stokke (2000: 263-264):

the paradoxical consensus over the role of 'local participation' in a globalising world, is fraught with dangers. Local participation can be used for different purposes by very different ideological stakeholders. It can underplay the role of the state and transnational power holders and can overtly or inadvertently, cement Eurocentic solutions to Third World development. There is a need for critical analysis of the political use of the 'the local', but also a need to develop a political imaginary that does not repeat these weaknesses.

Given the widespread adoption of the discourse of participation, we need both to critically examine how and for what purposes the agenda is being used, and also to develop a clearer analysis of under what conditions the mainstream development discourse creates spaces for positive engagement. That is, how do we assess when engagement with large institutions which are promoting participation discourse will widen the opportunities for genuine democracy building at the local level, and under what conditions will it risk co-optation and legitimisation of the status quo?

A second problem surrounding a narrow focus of the local is the way in which the discourse may screen out the importance of extra-local factors that equally shape the possibilities for democratic participation locally.

At one level, of course, this is seen in the importance of national legal frameworks, and strong central governments, for making local democratic innovations more effective. At the same time, a focus on the local without attention to the national may in fact diffuse national reform strategies. Some see the decentralisation agenda as a way of undercutting work on human rights, especially for women, much of which has been carried out at the national and international levels. In such situations, work on national level reforms, such as participatory constitutionalism, may be a pre-requisite for local work. But there are important strategic questions: How can national level advocacy groups and reform processes build and support a local constituency? Conversely, how can local groups scale up their demands for reform in the national legal and political process? What are the enabling legal frameworks created 'from above' that strengthen the possibility of effective democracy building 'from below'?

The problem becomes more complex when questions of global governance and global citizenship are also taken into account. Increasingly assertions of universal global rights (of the woman, of the child, for participation, etc.) may shape or conflict with understandings of local rights and citizenship. Local actors may use global forums as arenas for action (e.g. Narmada Dam; Chiapas), just as effectively - or more effectively - than they can appeal to institutions of local governance (Edwards and Gaventa 2001). Conversely, expressions of global civil society or citizenship may simply be vacuous without meaningful links to the local. The challenge is not only how to build participatory governance at differing levels, but how to promote the democratic and accountable *vertical links* across actors at each level. As Peieterse puts it, 'this involves a double movement, from local reform upward and from global reform downward - each level of governance, from the local to the global, plays a contributing part' (quoted in Mohan and Stokke 263).

Conclusion

The widespread engagement with issues of participation and local governance creates enormous opportunities for re-defining and deepening meanings of democracy, for linking civil society and government reforms in new ways, for extending the rights of inclusive citizenship. At the same time, there are critical challenges to insure that the work promotes pro-poor and social justice outcomes, to develop new models and approaches where enabling conditions are not favourable, to avoid an overly narrow focus on the local, and to guard against co-optation of the agenda for less progressive goals. These are important

challenges for the broader agenda of promoting *both* participatory democracy *and* development, for theorists and practitioners alike.

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