

India

# Working on 'both sides of the equation': the role of NGOs in strengthening champions of participation in India

Anju Dwivedi with John Gaventa

## Summary

In many parts of India a quiet revolution is taking place in the relationship between citizens and local governments. Strengthened by new opportunities created by constitutional changes and strong legislation, citizens are increasingly aware of their rights and speaking out for improved services and government performance at the local level. At the same time, elected officials and government officials are increasingly aware of their duties to involve citizens and how they can link with NGOs and local civil society groups to strengthen local government capacity. This case study focuses on how NGOs can play a critical intermediary role, working to build awareness of citizens on the one hand and also to find and strengthen the champions of participation inside government on the other. Anju Dwivedi is the state coordinator in Rajasthan of one such NGO, the Society of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA).

## Background

India celebrated its independence in 1947, over sixty years ago. It is the world's most populated democracy. But it was not until the mid 1990s that local self governance was re-established, following the earlier period of colonial rule. More recently, new legislation has also been passed, creating new opportunities for citizen engagement. Each of these reforms offered significant new opportunities for strengthening citizen participation.

- *The Panchayati Raj Constitutional amendments* in the mid-1990s gave local governments significant responsibilities for local development and social justice programmes (though in practice often these have not been fully devolved). The law also said that at least 33% of the elected representatives at the local level would be women and at least 33% would also be from the lowest castes, creating new leadership possibilities for previously excluded groups. The changes also gave power to local villages as well, strengthening the power of the *gram sabhas* (village assemblies) to monitor local government performance.
- While the Constitutional reforms were important, the participation of both citizens and local elected representatives has been given new strength by the passage of the *Right to Information (RTI) Act* in 2005. Itself a result of movements by civil society groups and champions in government, the Act gives citizens the right to request information from local officials and to appeal to state and national information commissions if their requests are not satisfied. It is one of the strongest such acts in the world, with local officials facing heavy fines if they do not respond to requests.
- In a country like India, which despite its recent growth, has one of the largest populations of people living in poverty in the world, basic employment is a key concern for many, especially in rural areas. Full citizen participation is difficult if people are just struggling to meet their basic needs. Here another recent government reform, the *National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005)* is potentially of huge impact: every single household in rural areas is given a right to at least 100 days paid employment (in manual work, paying at least minimum wage). If a person registers on the job rolls, he or she must be given work in at least 14 days by the local government, often helping to dig wells, build local roads, irrigate fields, or other needed development projects. If the local government fails, then, in principle the person must be given unemployment compensation. Moreover, the local *gram sabhas* are given the power to monitor the implementation of the Act through social audits and to use the provisions of the *Right to Information Act* if necessary to get information on how the employment funds are being used.

Each of these reforms gives new rights for citizen participation, as well as new duties and responsibilities for local governments. But both groups lack certain skills, awareness and capacity for how to use the new laws. This is where large numbers of local and national NGOs have stepped in, providing an impressive range of awareness-building, monitoring, advocacy and mobilising activities.



Elected local representative advises rural residents of their rights to employment under new legislation in Rajasthan, India. Anju Dwivedi attended the Champions of Participation workshop. Additional information for this case was gathered through interviews by John Gaventa in Rajasthan in February 2008.

## What happened and why was it significant?

The impact of these reforms is being seen in states like Rajasthan, the largest and one of the least developed states in India, facing enormous challenges of poverty, low literacy, and lack of basic services. The challenges are also large scale. Rajasthan has over 56.5 million people and almost 10,000 local or village governments or *gram panchayats*.

In this setting, PRIA's small state office links with local community groups and NGOs to build awareness, strengthen capacity, and support citizen leaders. But unlike some other NGOs which focus mainly on working with the communities, they also work to find, nurture and support champions at local and state level who are committed to strengthening citizen participation and to making the new grassroots democracy really work. There are many examples of the ways that this has occurred amongst local elected representatives, local officials and state level civil servants.

*Building champions amongst women elected representatives.* In concert with many other NGOs, PRIA has supported newly elected women representatives to assert their voice and exercise their leadership. In Rajasthan, which is known for the almost feudal relationships between men and women, this is a challenge – historically women were not allowed to speak in public places, they have very high illiteracy rates and even female foeticide continues at a high rate. Now due to the Constitutional changes and the work of many to use the new legal framework, 36% (over 40,000) of the local elected representatives in rural areas are women – who just a few years ago had never held public office. And a new ruling means that the quota of seats reserved for women will soon be 50%.

An example is a young woman by the name of Shakuntala Meena, a newly elected representative in the Karauli District, one of the poorest and remote regions of Rajasthan. Only 25, she represents 55 villages in her area, many of which are scattered. Asserting her leadership, she organised the first block-level social audit committee in the country to monitor the implementation of the rural employment law and to provide support for the villagers in her area to

gain their new-found employment rights. With help from PRIA and its local partner, the Society for Sustainable Development, she also used the right to information to help document and expose instances of corruption. Her activities as an elected champion received national attention.

*Supporting local government officers.* Another example of PRIA's strategy of 'working both sides of the equation' is how it supports officers in small local governments to carry out their new responsibilities. For instance they have helped local governments do 'responsibility mapping' to understand what roles are devolved in the new system, and through citizen monitoring, to see where the gaps were in implementation. At the same time, they have trained citizens to know how to use the right to information and to communicate with government officials when there are problems. Local citizens can give example after example of where they have used RTI to get responses to local complaints about government, some of which had been left unanswered for over 20 years.

For many officials, this has led to a change of mindset. A government officer in the town of Karauli says, 'it used to be that our informal motto was *withhold information*'. But he added, 'All of that has changed. Now local NGOs are the catalyst and creating headaches for us – but they are good headaches to have. When things aren't working – such as the village pump – people tell us so, rather than just ignoring the problem because they don't think we will respond. When I joined the civil service we worked only to government targets, now we have to respond to peoples' demands.'

*Supporting champions at the policy levels.* Not only working at the local level, PRIA uses its local monitoring and research to help state level and even national level officials understand how the new programmes are working on the ground and where there can be improvements. For instance studies on the finances of local governments have been shared with the State Finance Commission to help identify how to strengthen financial capacity at the local level. For many officials, such external support is welcome for it helps them strengthen their commitments to make the new reforms work as well.

One such champion of participation is

the Principal Secretary for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj in Rajasthan, Ram Lubhaya. A senior member of the Indian civil service, Mr Lubhaya is himself a strong advocate of participation in local governance. He has introduced a bottom-up planning process in every district in the state. He doesn't always agree with the NGOs working to support citizens to assert their rights, but he values their 'constructive criticism', their capacity building roles at the local level and their high quality advocacy research. 'For grassroots democracy to establish itself in this country,' he says, 'NGOs will have to play their role. It will not come from government alone.'

What is significant in all of these examples is the massive shift in awareness that has occurred amongst both citizens and government officials alike. For citizens with a new understanding of rights, has come a gradual move from a patron – client relationship with government to that of active citizens who express their voices, run for public office, monitor government, and advocate change. 'We had our independence from Britain in 1947' says one citizen, 'but now for the first time, we can get information and use it. This is our real independence.'

And the spirit is echoed by those champions of change on the inside. 'There is a huge paradigm shift of governance to a rights-based approach,' says the Principal Secretary. And in this shift, 'we understand that we need to work with the NGOs who can implement the change... wherever we have joined hands, things have been better.'

## What were the challenges?

### **1. Social exclusion is difficult to overcome.**

Such changes of course are not uniformly experienced nor easily brought about. For many poor citizens – especially women and those from the lowest caste – to speak out or run for office means overcoming deep-seated social exclusions. And, when the challenges are on such a scale, for every success story, there are many other stories of where changes are not occurring.

## **2. Exposing corruption or misuse of funds can make elected local leaders vulnerable.**

There are also challenges for those champions who do emerge, whether they are the NGOs, the newly elected local leaders or the government officers. As citizens use their newly acquired rights more forcefully, they encounter corruption and misuse of government funds and face risk of reprisal when these are exposed.

## **3. Government officials may lack the resources to respond.**

While some government officials may want to exercise their new duties to provide information and employment and support to local groups they face serious lack of funds and basic government systems to do so.

## **4. Those who hold power may not want to relinquish it.**

For both citizens and officials, powerful special interests – be they politicians or other local elites – may also resist change and work to undermine the commitment to change the status quo. Even though the laws give new powers and authority to local governments and local elected representatives, many higher up the system – either in the bureaucracy or in the political leadership – do not want to let their power go.

## **What were the lessons?**

### **1. Both sides of the equation – officials and citizens – need to learn and change.**

This case illustrates that in certain cases advocates for citizen participation on the outside, such as NGOs and local groups, can join forces with champions of change inside government, be they elected representatives, local officials or senior policy leaders, to help strengthen and support citizen engagement. Doing so, however, requires change on both sides – advocates on the outside have to learn when and how to collaborate with those on the inside, and support them in the challenges they face, while those used to being in charge on the inside have to learn that citizen demands and advocacy can help them do their job.

### **2. New legal frameworks can be used to hold government to account.**

The important changes happening in India are not coming from local action alone. New legal frameworks – which give citizens new rights to participation and give officials new duties to engage with and respond to citizens – have been critical. In particular, the right to information and the duties for officials to respond in a timely and responsible manner have been used by champions of participation both inside and outside government to challenge corruption, identify points of resistance, and to find out what has happened to projects and funds that may not have been implemented.

### **3. Champions of participation need motivation and support as well.**

Whether inside or outside government, champions can strengthen one another by appreciating each other's contributions and acknowledging each other's strengths and weaknesses. It is important to create a space for them where they can seek support and exchange learning. The use of media to highlight success stories can also help to boost the confidence of champions for change in local governance.

### **4. Concrete and meaningful change happens through citizen participation.**

Through the combination of greater citizen engagement and more participatory and responsive local governments concrete changes are visible. Interviews with villagers time and again point to examples of how they have been able to use their voices, often with the help of champions inside government, to get jobs, settle land disputes improve local services such as health and schools, assure that benefits (such as cooking oil for poor people) reach those that are entitled to them. Perhaps most of all, then, the lesson of this case is that concrete and meaningful change can happen through empowered citizen engagement in local governance, even in rural poor areas with long histories of social exclusion and control.