

INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS STORIES OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: UNDERSTANDING BEST PRACTICE

The Pioneers of Participation workshop highlighted the importance of recognising country context. Yet international experiences shared by participants also highlight the gains of recognising and adapting Public Participation Best Practice. Om Prakash from PRIA in India, Tricia Zipfel from the UK and Nina Best from Polis in Brazil emphasised how both the state and civil society 'learn' effective participatory strategies through ongoing engagement and the adaptation of legislation and policies. This emphasises a recurring theme of the workshop: innovation is as important as legislation, and legislation needs to be flexible enough to allow adaptation.



CASE STUDY

Each of the international examples flags a key aspect of the workshop discussions held, namely:

- » the importance of lessons from international experience and necessity of adaptable government policies;
- » the importance of civil society organisations as mediators; and,
- » the role of national and international social movements and social activists in ensuring meaningful participation.

Tricia Zipfel emphasised the importance of learning from other contexts, as has been the case in the UK with the ongoing attention from government to the legal framework and national infrastructure to support participation. This framework has been modified both by learning from other contexts – Participatory Budgeting has been adapted from Brazilian examples to suit local public participation initiatives. In India, NGOs like PRIA have adapted their strategies to act as effective mediators between poor uneducated communities and government to ensure effective Development Planning. In Brazil, the importance of strong social movements to lobby for effective public participation over the allocation of resources is underlined in the sphere of Participatory Budgeting, Health and Housing.

The importance of context

The three international cases illustrate how historical, geographic and cultural differences have an impact on participation, particularly at the grassroots level. Each of the cases emphasises the interplay between government and society to achieve effective participation, it is never a 'one way street', nor purely about cooperation versus conflict.

In the UK case, even while there is much longer history of democratic practice, there is no constitution and no constitutional commitment to participation. Effective participation as a way of alleviating poverty has been recognised by government, and over the past ten years the Labour government has been trying to tackle poverty through local neighbourhood renewal programmes and to simultaneously reform local government in order to strengthen their role and encourage more accountability between elected representatives and the communities they serve.

In India, civil society organisations like PRIA have played a critical mediating role between government and poorer communities in Development Planning initiatives. As mediators or intermediaries, organisations like PRIA have helped to give local meaning to national policies like India's Five Year Plans. These Plans led to the devolution of development planning into National, State, District and Local levels and the establishment of district Panchayats aimed at encouraging local participation. The Panchayats were not assigned any meaningful role or resources even though there have been national policy adaptations to the role of Panchayats to allow for power to manage all development programmes. For a number of reasons including poverty and lack of education, many local communities have not been able to play a meaningful role in the Panchayats without the assistance of NGOs.

In Brazil, since the end of dictatorship in the mid 1980s and democratic elections in 1989, social movements have played an important role in ensuring the more equitable allocation of resources especially for development planning, and in ensuring state accountability. Participatory Budgeting highlights the role of communities in ensuring they get their needs met through participation. Social movements have ensured that communities are mobilised through a variety of measures including door to door campaigns where necessary. Strong social movements like the Health and Housing movements in Brazil, provide an effective conduit for ensuring more robust and representative forms of public participation.

Understanding the dynamics

In the UK, the efforts of the Labour government to strengthen local government has included a policy commitment to participation, outlined in a government White Paper entitled "Communities in Control – Real People, Real Power" (see <http://www.communities.gov.uk>). New legal requirements make it a statutory 'duty to involve' citizens and communities, albeit on the terms of the local authority, and ward councillors now have greater power to raise local issues and initiate 'calls for action'. A new 'duty to promote democracy' is also being introduced and to ensure appropriate local services, community contracts are being introduced at local level, clearly outlining the obligations of service providers as well as local residents. Government has also provided infrastructure in the forms of regional empowerment partnerships (REPs) and local authorities are also being encouraged to transfer public assets (buildings/land) to community organisations so as to establish a network of community anchor organisations that will be able to generate their own income and support community initiatives. Due to strong support for Participatory Budgeting, there are now 82 local authorities adopting some form of devolution of budgetary decisions.

In India, although development planning has long been recognised as an area that required the input of communities, it was only in 1992-93 that the 73rd and 74th Amendments gave constitutional status to local self-government and provided a new and universalised platform for decentralised planning. The comprehensive district plan integrates multiple programmes that are in operation in the District concerned and therefore address backwardness through ensuring that multiple resources flow to the District. PRIA has ensured that communities are actively involved through organising 'stakeholder workshops'. Om Prakash gives the example of the state of Bihar, where the main form of income is agriculture and 42.6% of the population live below the poverty line against India's national average of 26.1%. Literacy levels are 42%, a factor that also hampers participation. Ensuring participation is critical in this state, but mediation has been vital. PRIA has acted as the intermediary, through the organisation of stakeholder workshops that include communities as well as government and others (such as the media). PRIA also assists drawing up of development plans attuned to the needs of very poor communities. To ensure effective planning, PRIA has been instrumental in conducting local service delivery audits to assess what the real needs and priorities are in specific cases such as Bihar.

In Brazil, since democratisation there has been a lack of state accountability on resource expenditure to poor communities in urban communities as well as in towns outside the Sao Paulo city, such as Diadema in the state of Sao Paulo. This has given rise to strong workers, housing and health movements that actively engage with government through formal participatory spaces such as Public Policy Councils. Other forms of non violent pressure such as demonstrations and the occupation of public land have proven effective in the Diadema case. The implementation of a people centred housing and services policy took place in Diadema as a result of the various forms of pressure brought to bear by the Housing Movement and the networks it formed with neighbourhood associations and other stakeholders (including the state owned Housing and Urban Development Company and one of the state owned Federal Banks). These networks were actively encouraged by government under pressure from the Councils, and this ensured a wide basis of consensus and agreement at grassroots level, despite political tensions that arose between the housing movement and the workers movement that became the Workers Party in the 1980s. The strength of social movements in Brazil in relation to the state at different levels emphasises the porousness of the state to the inclusion of key societal actors. This underlines that state and civil society networks are mutually constitutive.

Key issues and challenges

In all three examples, even though the challenges may be contextually somewhat different, there is the question of real political will on the part of government to devolve power for participatory decision-making over resources.

The cases also highlight that policies do not always allow for effective power sharing. The importance of mobilisation, organisation and lobbying on the part of communities is critical.

Ensuring non-partisan representation at community level and in social movements is an issue of particular importance in the UK and Brazilian examples.

The Brazilian case emphasises that keeping networks going and ensuring ongoing mobilisation after key struggles have been settled satisfactorily is a key challenge.

The Indian case also refers to the importance of action after participatory decision-making, especially in relation to the allocation of resources. Failure to deliver on promises makes it harder to encourage public participation in the future.

Key areas of success

Flexible legislation and policies allow for contextual and stakeholder adaptation. Government plays the lead role in 'setting the participatory scene' and determining how stakeholders will perceive the legitimacy of the public space.

Effective citizen leadership, especially through strong networked social movements and organisations, is vital to ensuring accountability and effective public participation.

The UK case shows it is possible to adapt models of public participation best practice (in this case drawn from examples in the South) and make it work in different local contexts if there is flexibility and commitment in all spheres of government.

The Indian case shows how intermediaries can help to make public participation meaningful for the very poor.

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