

Does Participation Work?

A controversial World Bank study also challenges SDC practices.

The dlgn and the division Global Institutions organised a presentation of the findings of the study by one of the authors, Vijayendra Rao, lead economist of the development reserach group of the World Bank, which then were discussed at SDC on May 16. Rao's presentation can be found on the dlgn shareweb, as well as a summary of two presentations of IDS researchers commenting the study (links).

First: the study is about participation induced by development programmes, and not about analysing organic civil society participation in the framework of political processes in our partner countries. Key findings of the very extensive study (over 3 years), analysing many projects financed by different sources (not only WB!), are that such induced participation, like for instance organised village water users associations, does not automatically lead to more inclusive service delivery. On the contrary, in the absence of a responsive (local) state, inequal access to services and exclusion mecanismes tend to be perpetuated. Mostly, it is litterate, old men who have the say, not only in most societies but also in groups which gather when cooperation agencies pay perdiems for meetings. However, the study found that introducing quotas (e.g. for women or minority groups) for more representative elected structures has produced good results.

On financial participation: it was found that the principle of making beneficiaries pay their own contribution to the cost of a service or infrastructure - which is common practice in SDC programmes, almost a „holy cow“, can be a factor of exclusion, because it charges the poor disproportionally and prevents from participating.

The study also criticizes that monitoring of programmes is often not really participatory (no effective in-built learning) and that efforts to study effects and impacts are insufficient. They say that in general, PCM tools used are adequate to bring an classical investment project like road construction or sewage systems to success. However, they are not adapted to the „social organisation“ part of these projects, since social dynamics do not simply follow project plans and objectives defined in governmental or NGO offices. Too manyfold are the factors of influence, too uncontrollable the power dynamics. But above all, development agencies do not analyse local societies to sufficient degrees. We tend to close our eyes on injustices and inequalities because we want to „achieve the project results“; incentives in our institutions are set terribly wrong.

How relevant are these findings for SDC?

We have to accept that induced participation does not bring automatically democratisation and therefore social inclusion, as one would hope for. The nature of the „average“ project analysed in that study might not necessarily match an average SDC project, since SDC is less engaged in large infrastructure projects than the EC, the WB or other bigger donors. However, „participation“ is a key approach of SDC linked to values of justice and equality. But: civil society can not compensate for market failure and state failure, but fails too „*in the absence of a responsive state*“ (this is the key issue for me in that debate). The role of the state is crucial in view of redistribution of wealth, in assuring basic rights to the people. A rights based approach can help to sharpen our view on the relationship between duty bearers and rights holders.

Sustainable accountability systems must include "downward accountability of local authorities" (towards their population). But when development partners like SDC or the WB insist on accountability mechanisms where beneficiaries account towards development partners, accountability of mayors, legislatives and local administrations will be further weakened, thus contributing to compromising sustainable institutional solutions.

Fragile situations: Can induced participation replace the state?

What does the report say on situations where the state is virtually absent? This fundamental question for SDC did not find a clear response. However, the study concludes that in the absence of a responsive state, induced participation will not lead to inclusive services, and elite capture and exclusion mechanisms will prevail. Interesting what Shandana and Patta, both researchers at IDS Sussex, who were approached by the dlgn to mirror on the WB-study, comment: They propose that development partners should go into deeper analysis of the societies and learn about their structures in order to identify how power is distributed, how movements grow to improve services or reduce corruption, who are the facilitators, and how deliberation works and ideas flow.

What SDC should change

1. Better study the political environment (PED)

- Support strategies can not "ignore politics", but must analyse political processes and institutions (power) and orient strategies accordingly. This includes paying attention to representation in institutions: for instance women, minorities in elected councils
- More in-depth analysis of local societies: Invest more money, time, and efforts into knowing our partner societies, their power mechanisms, exclusion mechanisms

2. Adapt cooperation approaches

- Refrain from "service delivery sector projects" (health, education) which do not take into account decentralisation: role, responsibilities, capacities, competences, and

financial means (fiscal aspect) of local governments and sub-national legislatures

- Prioritize primary education programmes: literacy greatly promotes developed citizenship
- Define "democracy promotion" as a field of cooperation that merits specific analysis and adapted support strategies, including tools.

3. New PCM Priorities

- Systematically introduce participatory monitoring and learning systems in development activities and reserve 10% of every project budget for that. Use the potential of new media in PCM (like digital story telling) to empower beneficiaries and stakeholders through feedback loops in harmonised and aligned settings, meaning local and national accountability systems. These serve, at the same time, the development objective of democratisation of local political processes.
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- Promote PCM practices more adapted to complex processes of societal change, like Outcome Mapping.
- Formulate clear theories of change/impact hypotheses.
- Totally renounce on rigid Logframes when not feasible in volatile situations. Invest into exploration of innovative methods
- Replace external evaluations by participatory assessments and privilege beneficiaries' perspectives
- Introduce tools like Democracy/Local Governance Assessment, PED Analysis, Stakeholder analysis
- Privilege, impose, award more honesty in reporting.

4. Modify incentives at SDC accordingly

- HQ to signal recognition for innovation and taking risks to COOFs
- HQ to accept more flexibility in disbursements
- Introduce an obligation to reserve 5% of annual cooperation budget (of country programmes) for research and analysis

- 10 % of every project budget for participatory, harmonised and aligned learning systems
- Set specific performance objectives for country directors: Invite them to participate in thematic networks and award them for that. Control through staff performance assessment.