Participatory Governance and Institutional Change[1]

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Jeremy Holland[2]

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Introduction

Despite conventions, laws and policies, service delivery in many countries remains poor and fails to reach socially excluded groups. With 'supply side' governance constraints often deemed intractable, many donors support 'demand side' participatory governance processes for better service delivery. When it comes to social and gender-based exclusion, the weaknesses of purely demand side accountability approaches become clear. This paper draws on case study research in Nepal to examine participatory governance processes that work on both sides of the supply-demand divide and consider their likely contribution to socially inclusive service delivery and to challenging deeper institutional norms that sustain social exclusion.

Institutions and participatory governance

Much of the operational literature on empowerment looks at the choices that individuals and groups make in relation to the institutions within which these decisions are made (see for example Alsop et al, 2006). This formulation sees power resulting from a combination of (individual or group) "resources" and "rules" (Giddens, 1993). On the rules side of this equation are the institutions that govern people's behaviour and which influence the success or failure of the choices that they make. Institutions are widely conceptualized as the humanly-devised "rules of the game" in society that shape and constrain human interaction and individual choices (North, 1991, 3). Institutions reduce uncertainty by providing a structure to everyday political, economic and social life. Understanding how institutions are created, how they change and how they influence human behaviour is therefore key to understanding how empowerment can impact on institutions.

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[1] This paper is an abridged and adapted version of Holland et al (2012).
[2] Jeremy Holland (jemholland@gmail.com) is an Associate of Oxford Policy Management (www.opml.co.uk).

A power-based analysis of institutions suggests that rules tend to emerge to support dominant ideologies and power relations in any given context, either through coercion or managed consent (March and Olsen, 1989). Institutions enable powerful actors to retain their sets of entitlements and opportunities. Those without power strive to invest in their assets and to build agency but often lack opportunities to make effective choices in political, economic and social spheres because of the uneven institutional playing field.

In an operational context, institutions are invariably part of the problem in that they protect the interests of the powerful, but they are also part of the solution in that they can be "progressively realigned" (World Bank, 2005).

This leads us to a focus on *participatory governance* as a means to progressive realignment of institutions in favour of the poorest. Socially excluded groups' access to entitlements within the policy process is mediated by governance systems. Speer (2012, 2379) characterises participatory governance mechanisms as follows:

> "They involve citizens in decision-making over the distribution of public funds between communities and the design of public policies, as well as in monitoring and evaluating government spending."

While there is plenty of evidence pointing to institutionalized exclusion in service delivery, there is an emerging body of evidence on the impact of empowered citizens engaging with the state. Speer assesses the evidence on the impact of participatory governance mechanisms as positive, but limited, and that while a few well-documented cases like participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre in Brazil demonstrated that success was possible (p.2385):

> "Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that the public policy benefits of participatory governance on government accountability and responsiveness remain to be proven and that implementing participatory governance effectively is likely to be a challenging enterprise in many places."

Mansuri and Rao (2012) examine over 500 examples of interventions (government- and donor-supported) that have sought to induce participation, including the World Bank's own substantial effort to support participatory development. The findings from their review of evidence are generally modestly positive about the results of participatory approaches, but emphasise that the main beneficiaries tend to be the most literate, least geographically isolated, and most politically well-connected communities. They found (p.9) "little evidence that induced participation builds long-lasting cohesion, even at the community level" and that "group formation tends to be both parochial and unequal."

In a recent "meta case study" analysis of 100 research studies of citizen engagement in 20 countries, Gaventa and Barrett (2010) applied a four-fold typology of impacts of citizen engagement. Looking at impacts on the construction of citizenship, strengthening practices of participation, strengthening the responsiveness and accountability of states and developing inclusive and cohesive societies, they concluded that citizen participation produced 'positive outcomes' in 75 per cent of the outcomes studied in the sample. In reviewing these positive outcomes, the authors warn against simple linear narratives of change and instead stress the importance of 'intermediate' outcomes, including strengthened notions of citizenship and thickened alliances and networks. They identified local associations as having the highest proportion of positive outcomes, with both local associations and social movements scoring more highly than participation through formal governance structures.

Finally, a review of approaches to social accountability globally conducted by McGee and Kelbert (2013) also concluded that the evidence base is uneven, often based on speculative and even anecdotal information, and sometimes reflecting institutional biases (e.g. written to satisfy donor expectations). They also found that theories of change were weak and incomplete, that many evaluations assessed effectiveness (largely focused on output measures) rather than impact; and that some implausibly claimed attribution in complex environments with multiple interventions.

Participation in the governance of service delivery

Much of the literature on public service management condemns developing country governments for their poor performance on service delivery. A mix of 'supply side' issues -- scarce resources, limited front line authority, political recruitment and promotion practices, poorly skilled and low-waged public sector workers with little opportunity for professional development or career advancement, and mismanagement and corruption – point to the challenges facing public service delivery in many contexts (e.g. Grindle 1997; Ulleburg 2009; World Bank 2003).

Given this mix of supply side constraints, the public often become inured to poor service delivery so that effective demand is weak. A review of devolved social service delivery in the North West Frontier Province and Punjab regions of Pakistan, for example, is a typical critique, concluding that "a combination of weak managerial capacity, autonomy, inefficient resource allocation mechanisms, and weak public demand has continually eroded the quality of public service delivery in Pakistan" (Williamson et al 2005: 30). In the absence of a proactive state strengthening formal accountability to citizens, service users can often only fall back on what Hossain (2009: 7) calls 'rude accountability', or 'informal and social sources of pressure for accountability' in their day-to-day interactions with service providers.

With the scale and complexity of supply side governance challenges, it is hardly surprising that donors have invested heavily in the demand side of governance. Building on the intellectual and operational case for local accountability – the "short route of accountability" outlined in the influential *World Development Report* 2004 (World Bank, 2003) -- donor enthusiasm has grown apace in the past decade, with 'accountability' basket funds for grant disbursement flourishing. Donors and NGOs strengthen the demand side by investing in civil society and the means by which individual citizens and citizens' groups can hold local government to account (Gaventa 2006). The assumption behind much of this activity is that raised consciousness about rights, combined with stronger oversight of the accessibility and quality of services, can strengthen accountability relations between service providers and service users and improve delivery.

Accountability in the governance of service delivery has also been the focus of work with women and for women. UNIFEM's landmark *State of the World's Women Report* (Goetz 2009) is a rich source of good practice in strengthening accountability for gender-responsive service delivery. The report describes access to services as "a rallying point for women's collective action" (ibid: 38) but cautions on the importance of understanding context, including those contexts where women's relative powerlessness and lack of mobility results in their relationship to the public sphere being mediated by men so that they effectively seek accountability 'at one remove from states and markets' (ibid: 6).

Given the mixed findings above and the call from these and other authors for understanding of complex and contextual relations between cause and effect, it is clear that donors' normative assumptions about the effectiveness of demand side capacities to transform governance should

themselves be subject to close scrutiny. This challenge has been thrown down most recently and most emphatically by Booth (2012). He challenges the 'information is power' assumptions behind much of this demand side investment, such as the fashion for citizen report cards, characterising it as "partial equilibrium" thinking, that is, thinking based on mono-causal assumptions. In contrast, he argues, "general-equilibrium" causalities are multiple and complex.

Alongside Booth's review, there is also a range of anthropological critiques of demand-side intervention that fit within a broader concern about donor interventions in the realm of governance and social capital building. Notable amongst these is Li's analysis of the World Bank's flagship community-driven development project in Indonesia, the Kekamatan Development Project (Li, 2007). For Li, the framing of the good governance agenda by the KDP designers restricted its influence to a "technocratic exercise" of social engineering around normative assumptions of what local good governance should look like, ignoring in the process the deep structural power imbalances around "land, fair prices and fair wages" (ibid: 256).
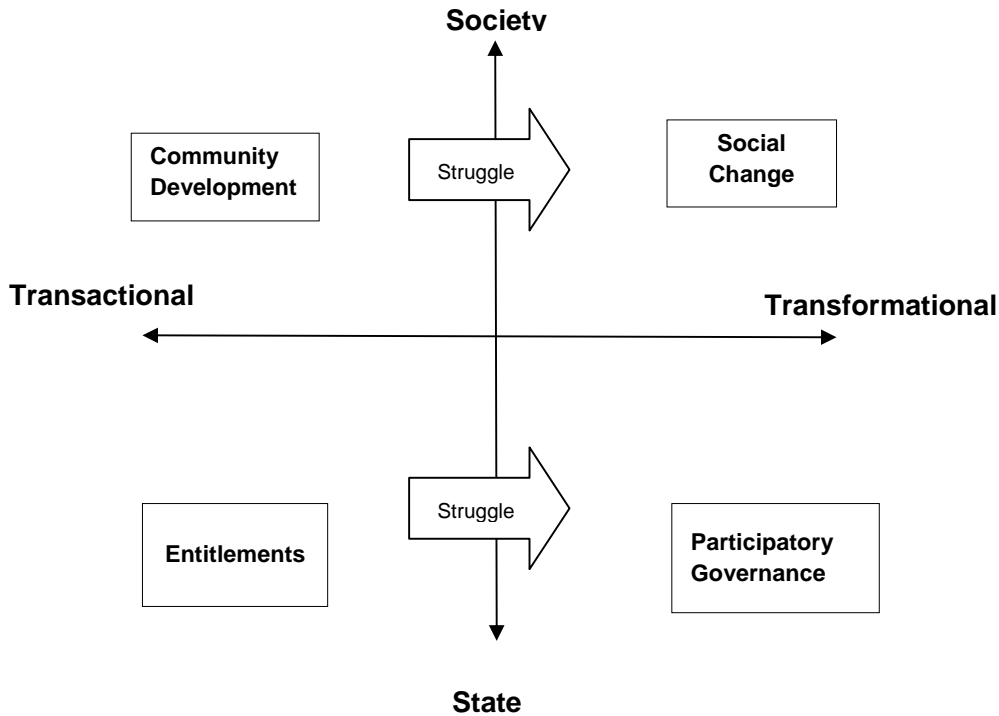
Towards an operational model of participatory governance

It has become increasingly clear that governance of services is a matter of co-governance, rather than the interaction of two separate spheres of supply and demand (Gaventa 2006: 23). With this lens it also becomes clearer how social and gender issues mediate the governance of services in context, content, approach and accountability. Hence the operational response to the demand side challenge should be to think in more critical and concrete ways about what accountability in its broadest sense means for improving the governance of service delivery and transforming social and gender relations. Borrowing Booth's metaphor, what are the ingredients of a 'general equilibrium' approach? While oversight is one part of the accountability process, accountability clearly means much more than providing information.

From recent case study research this author and others have developed an integrated accountability model that links institutional change through accountability across domains of society and governance. The model, presented in Figure 1, shows four inter-linked domains of accountability across four quadrants. Transactional change characterizes the left half of the diagram and transformational change the right, with people's relations in society making up the top half of the diagram, and citizen-state relations making up the bottom half. Thus the diagram shows the connections between:

- Left to right: Citizen engagement that is either transactional, getting things done and building agency, or transformational, changing the way society and governance work in favour of equality and inclusion (see for example, Hickey and Mohan, 2004)

- Top to bottom: Accountability of excluded and powerless people within society and in their relations with the state.

Figure 1: An integrated model for accountability in the governance of service delivery


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                            Society
                              ↑
  ┌──────────────┐      ┌─────────┐      ┌──────────┐
  │  Community   │      │ Struggle│──▶   │  Social  │
  │ Development  │      └─────────┘      │  Change  │
  └──────────────┘                       └──────────┘

Transactional                                    Transformational
  ←──────────────────────────┼──────────────────────────→

                        ┌─────────┐      ┌────────────────┐
  ┌──────────────┐      │ Struggle│──▶   │ Participatory  │
  │ Entitlements │      └─────────┘      │  Governance    │
  └──────────────┘                       └────────────────┘
                              ↓
                            State
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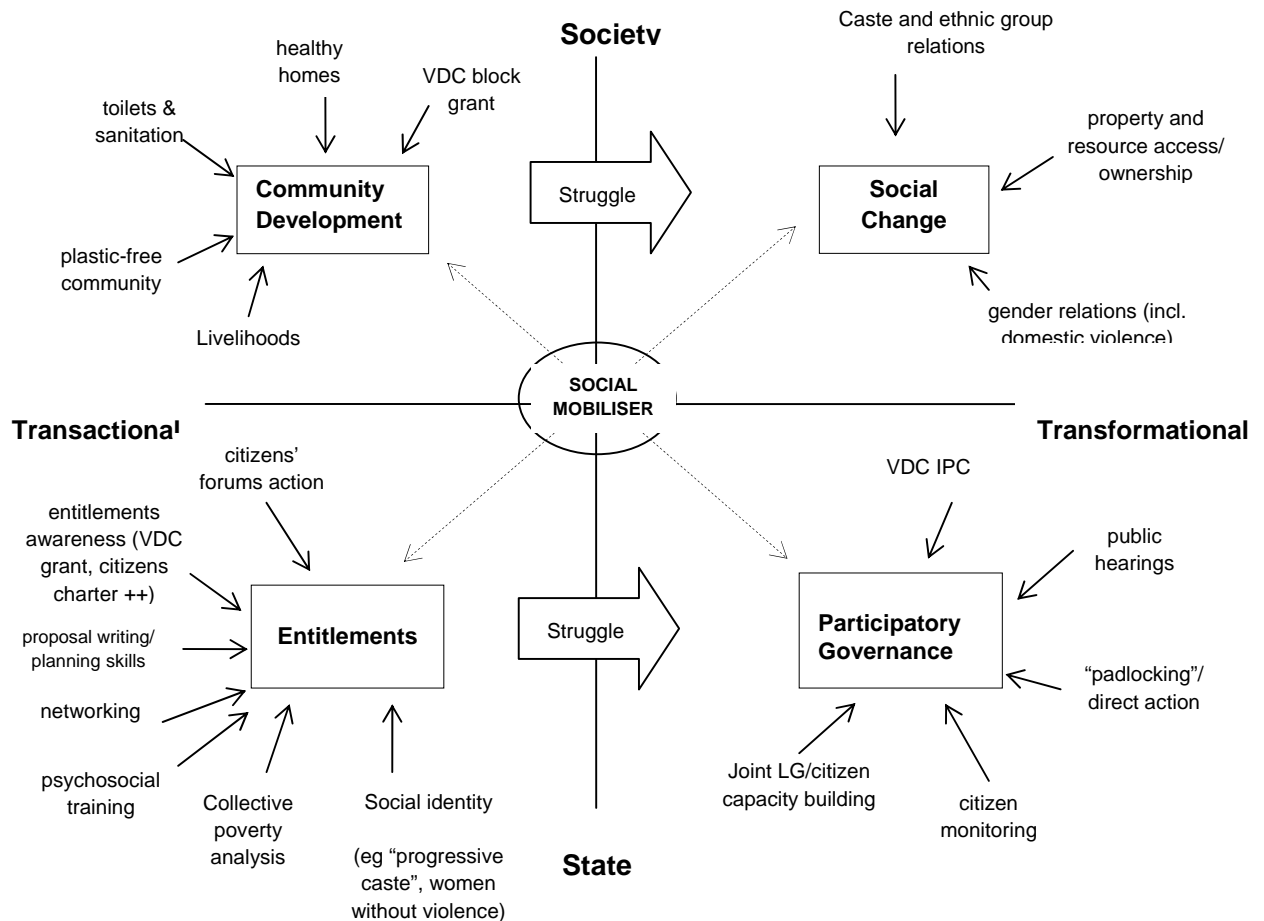
Source: Holland et al (2012, 186)

We applied this integrated model to the particular case of a social mobilisation project in Nepal to look in some depth at how accountability relations can change and impact on socially-inclusive service delivery (see Figure 2).

The project links **community development** to **claiming entitlements** as mutually supportive activities. While community development activities risk reinforcing group members' position at the lowest level of a socially unjust hierarchy nonetheless they generated a sense of achievement and confidence in the *powers of the group.* The process quickly moves on to encompass discussions and activities to build agency around entitlements for the most excluded. These include receiving and seeking out information from the state and development agents about what is available; making claims on allocations for small projects, access to free or subsidised resources; and calling service providers to account for the quality of their service and financial probity.

The project in Nepal has shown that it is relatively straightforward to support disadvantaged groups to claim basic entitlements from the state and development projects through limited forms of **participatory governance** as long as the mobilisation work is of high quality. Mobilisation included debates and strategies for engaging effectively with government service providers and with Village Development Committee secretaries to fulfil their development grant commitments under Nepal's Local Government and Community Development Programme.

Figure 2: Applying the accountability model to a social mobilisation project in Khotang District, Nepal

Source: Holland et al (2012, 188)

Beyond participatory governance, the project in Nepal was only beginning to tackle the deep-set institutions that prevented transformative **social change.** Through project support, excluded women and men become empowered to make polite but insistent demands for the services and budgets to which they are entitled, with a shift in the balance of power in their favour beginning to take place. Yet it is probable that their understandings of the options will remain defined by their own self-image as people with the fewest rights and the greatest dependency.To gain influence over more than just a minimum entitlement, their status as undervalued and disrespected members of the community will have to change. Within the project, the REFLECT approach uses Freirean critical consciousness raising within groups towards this end.

Conclusions: Supporting participatory governance for institutional change

When tackling the governance of socially inclusive service delivery, the empirical evidence from recent case study reviews supports a broad-based theory of change which integrates the supply and demand side of the governance equation, underpinned by a social mobilisation approach to institutional change. In the case of the social mobilisation project in Nepal, effective social mobilisation includes networking and institutional thickening amongst excluded groups of women and low caste/ethnic minorities as well identifying windows of opportunities to connect with elite interests and incentives. The participatory governance action illustrated in the bottom right quadrant of Figure 2 points to collaborative forms of reflection and action in addition to 'demand-side' oversight and advocacy. An additional link from micro to macro governance is critical, however, to avoiding a 'ghetto-ising' of purposeful change into localised governance arrangements, characterised in the Nepal case by discretionary power over a reserved proportion of the devolved development grant.

Kabeer (1999), in discussing women's empowerment, cites Bordieu's (1977) notion of *doxa*, meaning those aspects of tradition and culture that have become so habitual as to be "naturalised". These traditions are rooted in deeply entrenched cultural institutions:

> "The passage from 'doxa' to discourse, a more critical consciousness, only becomes possible when *competing* ways of 'being and doing' become available as material and cultural possibilities, so that 'common sense' propositions of culture begin to lose their 'naturalised' character, revealing the underlying arbitrariness of the given social order" (Kabeer 1999: 441).

Achieving empowering transformation in social relations of class, caste, ethnicity and gender in local communities and beyond requires a struggle from discourse to institutional change in which a critical mass of people agree to "change the rules" that govern their relations and which determine the allocation of property rights, entitlements and setting of wage levels.

Finally, the case study demonstrates the value of developing and testing of a theory of change to tackling social accountability. Indeed, an important lesson for international agencies supporting social accountability in service delivery is to adopt theory-driven approaches to learning and practice. This enables agencies, grappling with the politics and governance of service delivery, to become critically reflective and to embrace complexity (see for example Box 1 for an example of recent theory of change reflections within a DFID-funded governance programme in Vietnam).

Box 1. The Vietnam Empowerment and Accountability Programme (VEAP): An evidence-based programme theory of change

There is compelling evidence that in the challenging political contexts of Vietnam and comparable states, multi-stakeholder coalitions that include civil society actors have brought about significant progressive policy change. While political space for civic engagement in these contexts is limited, it can be identified and expanded through 'embedded advocacy' techniques of working *within* a system by understanding and managing its interests, incentives and power structures. Coalition advocacy can also be supported in a policy context where rising inequalities are seen as a cause of concern amongst Vietnamese leaders.

While at the local level in Vietnam, 'horizontally' positioned civil society groups have flourished in both urban and rural contexts, these horizontal networks remain marginalized from 'vertical' networks of

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policy influence and are restricted largely to service delivery activities. Furthermore, connections among different forms of civil society groups – and even between similar groups working on the same issues – are often weak or non-existent. The VEAP Programme aims to foster new or expanded coalitions of interest that bring together mixes of influential civil society (professional, urban and intellectual) elites and voiceless (geographically and socially excluded) interest groups. In this way the Programme recognises both the positive role (in terms of challenging power relations and inequality) of inclusive forms of civic engagement as well as the importance of engaging the interest and influence of elites in reaching political settlements.

Source: Oxfam and OPM (2013, 3)

Theory-driven reflective practice can release development professionals from a path- dependent and technocratic straightjacket and allow them to connect with 'adaptive pluralism' to what is local, complex, diverse, dynamic, uncontrollable and unpredictable (Chambers 2010; Uphoff 1996). For donors in the business of 'purposeful change' in governance arrangements, guided by an ideological commitment to deepening deliberative democracy, there are clear operational implications around operating with theory-led approaches that flexibly integrate demand and supply in participatory governance without losing sight of the broader operational commitment to transforming social institutions.

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