

Paradigm Shift in Engaging Civil Society for Development Initiatives: The Indian Experience¹

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Abstract:

The role of civil society has been well propositioned for good governance by researchers and development actors over the years. However, the positive correlation between the civil society and the development interventions has been questioned in the context of local communities, indigenous groups and their rights to local resources in many parts of the world. Africa has a stake in such a review whereby the rights of local communities are built into the development programmes. This paper presents an illustrative model case study from India focusing on the experience of forest protection committees in tribal-majority regions of the country. The issue deals with the “direct conflict of interests” between tribal communities and the development interventions over access to the same natural resources. It presents a case for “neoliberal” reforms that geared towards public expenditure to priority areas targeting grassroots communities.

Key Words: Civil society, development, indigenous communities, natural resources

Civil society participation has been repeatedly highlighted as a pre-condition for good governance by researchers, intergovernmental organizations and forums. In fact a broad spectrum of development interventions across the world has further stressed the need for greater civil society participation. However, in the absence of synergic capacity building of both state institutions as well as civil society actors, it is found that, at least in the case of India, an empowered civil society is not reciprocated automatically by the state vis-à-vis their expectations (Roy, 2008). The governance paradigms in the recent decades have emphasised the need for a closer cooperation between state and citizens, civil society and government agencies leading to focusing on re-aligning institutional structures and decision making processes with the people’s expectations. As defined by Swilling (1997) the definition of governance includes howpower structures and civil society inter-relateto produce a civic public realm. Civil society has emerged as a “thirdsector” in the new development discourse (Cohen and Arato, 1992).

Against this backdrop, where good governance and civil society participation occupies the central space in de elopement discourse today, it is important to review the results from a country context and see whether any model of participation emerges from such an agenda.

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Roy (2008) enumerates the three most crucial factors for the advancement of the civil society agenda: “(1) constricted financial portfolios of donors, such as USAID; (2) minimalist perspective of the state by multilateral agencies such as the World Bank; and (3) concern in the west, especially the United States, about declining social capital, leading organizations such as the Ford Foundation to support activities that build engagement among people.”

In India, the world’s largest democracy, the civil society–good governance experience emerged from the local forest protection committees in tribal-majority regions (Chopra, 2002; D’ Silva & Pai, 2003). In the face of a direct conflict of interests between tribal communities and the government that permits private corporations to exploit forest produce, while restricting access of those communities from accessing the same resources and often displacing them from their natural habitat. The social and political scenario of the country that is divided among social status (“castes”), it is extremely difficult, therefore, to devise a model wherein all such interventions with popular participation can fit in. Civil society, therefore, reflects in its response, reaction and interaction with the government actors the economic and social categorization that prevails in a given context.

The neoliberal reforms that ushered in post 1990s with the present Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh as the Finance Minister in the government at that time brought in an era of greater public participation in governance through decentralization of power to village councils (*Gram Sabha*). With the mandatory reservation of at least half of the seats in local government bodies for women in brought in a gender equality dimension to the development intervention. Civil society organization working on the social audit requirements of the government projects at the village level brought in a new trend to monitor and evaluate people’s expectations as reflected in the implementation of these projects. In all a desired level of cooperation between state and civil society emerged as an indicator of success in government’s development agenda. This element of accountability between decision makers, implementers and end beneficiaries became a necessary corollary for good governance.

Another aspect of the popular participation in development that emerged from the new directions in development programmes in India is the consolidation of disadvantaged, poor and socially neglected communities (such as Other Backward Castes or OBCs) through their realignment with new political power equations.² Such political organization and participation in government both at the provincial and central level added an additional dimension to popular participation in governance. Communities and social groups, so far relegated to a marginal role with larger political systems not only started to exert greater power in influencing policy direction at all levels but also enforced implementation of development programmes that fulfils their specific interests. With the multi-party democracy in place and coalition governments running the country for almost two decades now, poor and marginalized people have learnt to leverage the opportunity to cooperate

²Post 1990s, India has seen the emergence a number of political parties (like Bahujan Samaj Party or Samajwadi Party) in the states representing the castes and communities that became either provincial power like in the largest state of Uttar Pradesh. These parties are increasingly having an influential role in the central government that is invariably run by a coalition of such parties though led by of the larger parties (like Indian National Congress or Bharatiya Janta Party).

with successive governments, other important stakeholders, and service-providers to garner more benefits from the government programmes.

Governance and Delivery Mechanism

Governance in rural India, as indicated above is built within the local government bodies known as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) validated by laws passed during the 1990s. Gram Sabhas (assemblies of all adult members of a village) have been recognized as the basic unit of governance in rural areas and the Gram Panchayat the basic administrative tier. The Gram Panchayat (village council) is presided over by the Gram Pradhan (Village Council President). PRIs seek to enable local communities to have a greater say in local development planning, implementation, and monitoring, including nutrition and health issues. At the same time, they seek to ensure social justice by providing for at least 33% reservation for women, and proportional representation for *dalit* (socially 'lower' and 'untouchable' castes). However, the system is not free from various shortcomings that vary from province to province in different degrees. Many of the institutional arrangements that are prerequisite for decentralization are not in place in many parts of the country. Some provinces have been rather slow in devolving functions and where it has done so, it has not matched these with commensurate functions and functionaries. Gram Panchayats have been overwhelmed by centrally sponsored schemes with declining "Own Tax Revenues" Gram Panchayats. Moreover, Gram Panchayats continue to develop ingenious ways to keep women out of the public life of the village, for instance, by encouraging their husbands or other male members of their households to represent them.

Indian districts are divided into community development blocks. In these blocks the provincial Government operates the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Program to meet the nutritional and health needs of pregnant and lactating women and children, as well as pre-school needs of children below six years of age. For nearly three decades, the ICDS has been the instrument of the Indian state to provide for its most vulnerable sections. In particular, its coordination with the Health Department is crucial. The *anganwadi* (pre-school) center, "manned" by a female service-provider is the physical space in the village where ICDS reaches out to the community, and thus one of the arenas where civil society interfaces with governance. The service-provider's role has gradually expanded, to facilitate women's groups, to provide information to these and other existing groups about the government's welfare schemes and to help them benefit from these. In some provinces, the Government implements the ICDS in partnership with NGOs in blocks.

Key Aspects of Civil Society Roles and Governance

(a) Non-governmental organizations

A number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work in rural Allahabad. The main approaches deployed by them are: (1) locality development, where people are mobilized to improve certain living conditions, but without changing the structural and institutional status quo and (2) social action, where people are mobilized with the explicit objective of altering the status quo. While most NGOs prefer to adopt a locality development approach, some

have deployed a social action approach. As in most of Asia, both types of NGOs have facilitated community organizations (Farrington, Lewis, Satis, & Miclat-Teves, 1992) in the form of women's health groups, albeit toward different ends.

Women's groups are facilitated by deploying both the "locality development" and the "social action" approaches. The technical and managerial capacities of these groups are provided by the designated NGOs deploying the "locality development" approach through joint implementation of a community-based nutrition and reproductive health program. Each of these approaches is well recognized by the district and provincial Government for their past experience in social development practice. While the broad contours and bottomline deliverables are decided through an agreement between the NGO and the provincial Government, local NGOs are free to evolve the strategies they think as being most relevant.

(b) Women's health groups

The partner-NGOs have facilitated a large number of women's health groups (WHG) in a number of villages. These groups comprise between 15 and 20 women, of reproductive age (15–45 years). They are (preferably married) women who are interested in voluntarily associating in groups with the purpose of discussing issues related to nutrition and reproductive health, disseminating relevant information about behaviors and organizing local campaigns. They focus on encouraging positive health behaviors among adolescent girls and young mothers. Based on the classification of groups by Thorp, Stewart, and Heyer (2005), we may describe these as "claims" groups, which are distinct from "efficiency" groups formed to overcome market inefficiencies. These groups are designed to support community volunteers in organizing monthly nutrition and health days (NHDs), during which supplementary ration is provided to pregnant and lactating women to last her for one month. In addition, health checkup by the Health Department's service-provider, and structured nutrition and health counseling by volunteers and ICDS service-providers are also organized.

According to development practitioners, it has been easier to facilitate groups in communities that faced historical difficulties that have also strengthened their ability to organize for self-management, to resist external aggression and to protest discrimination by "upper"-caste settlers. Drawing on their networks with indigenous people (as in Uttar Pradesh), they have conventionally built up strong community organizations. Frameworks of trust and reciprocity are relatively strong, and have enabled practitioners to layer their institution-building processes.

(c) Key civil society actions

At least four key civil society actions were clearly discernible in India: (1) organization of women; (2) negotiations with service-providers; (3) planning for local development; and (4) assertion by women of the need for better nutrition and health care for them. Each of these actions led to at least one key governance outcome respectively: (1) communities' organization led to greater sense of inclusiveness at least among women's

groups;(2) negotiations led to improved service-delivery;(3) participation in development plans led to members being able to influence local development issues; and (4) assertion by women led to them assuming leadership roles within the village polity—thereby enhancing the political spaces available to them. We classified these into four factors: (1) the organizational capacity; (2) the negotiational capacity 3) locality development approach; and (4) participation in political space.

In India more grassroots community groups have shown demonstrated organizational roles than groups through regular and structured sharing and especially the women have developed methods (like regular would-be mothers' group meeting) to support one another, to share their personal and socio-economic issues and to find relevant solutions to the problems they face. Undoubtedly, more they organize regular "meetings", more clearly they are informed by community development agenda. The groups also tend to allocate responsibilities among members more clearly and these ensured participation of all eligible poor so that they are not excluded on account of their ascribed characteristics. They articulated a clear and shared understanding of their groups' objectives.

Past studies and data on negotiational capacity of civil society groups in India at the village level indicates that corresponding negotiational outcomes in any development program are better demonstrated in villages where community-level change agents existed along with community-based resource maps. Civil society groups organized monthly "convergence" forums, where service-providers of both the Health and ICDS departments would dispense services. More group members claim access to service-providers during an emergency where such convergence platforms exist. Indeed, functionaries of Health and ICDS Departments present themselves more regularly in villages where such forums function regularly. Women's groups have now started to negotiate with service-providers on various aspects of service delivery. They were taking a lead in organizing monthly NHD at the anganwadicenter, a weekly occasion in each village where all public service-providers were mandated by a district administration directive to be present and dispense their services.

In the 'locality development' domain, the civil society groups demonstrated agenda-setting roles leading to demonstrated outcomes in locality development planning. The groups expressed a clearly articulated and shared vision of what role they envisaged for their locality development. In many villages community group members and the larger community have been involved in social resource mapping to that end. Many of them have also initiated an internal lending program that would help members in need. However, many of these groups have not yet been able to leverage support from other stakeholders, to realize their developmental decisions. The groups discussed local development issues in their meetings and represented these at local government meetings (Gram Sabha). Similarly, some groups have also liaised with local government bodies and some of them are later consulted by these bodies while framing village development plans.

The community women groups have demonstrated political space roles in the light of the prevailing optimism on civil society–governance outcomes. Through the joint initiatives of women's groups and NGO project staff, village-level advisory committees (VLACs) have been formed in seven Gram Panchayats, each of which happened to be presided over by a representative of the socially backward community (Scheduled Castes). This is expected to

provide a platform where representatives of women's health groups and other community-based groups would interface with key village-level stakeholders. The VLAC was convened by the Gram Pradhan (Village Council President). A typical VLAC comprised service-providers, local teachers, and doctors; representatives of community-based organizations including women's health groups; project grassroots volunteers such as animators and change agents; local hamlet representatives to the Gram Panchayat; any other member of a sub-Committee constituted by the Gram Panchayat; as well as other key stakeholders such as school teachers, religious leaders, and other interested and relevant persons. VLACs are thus a coalition of village stakeholders, although the inclusion of several non-elected professionals, providers, and volunteers resulted in a disproportionate representation of "upper castes." Where VLACs had been formed, it appeared that key village-level stakeholders were able to "synergise" their efforts, with one another and with duty-bearers on health issues. They presented applications made by women's groups to fill up the vacancies of service-providers, and to ensure universal coverage.

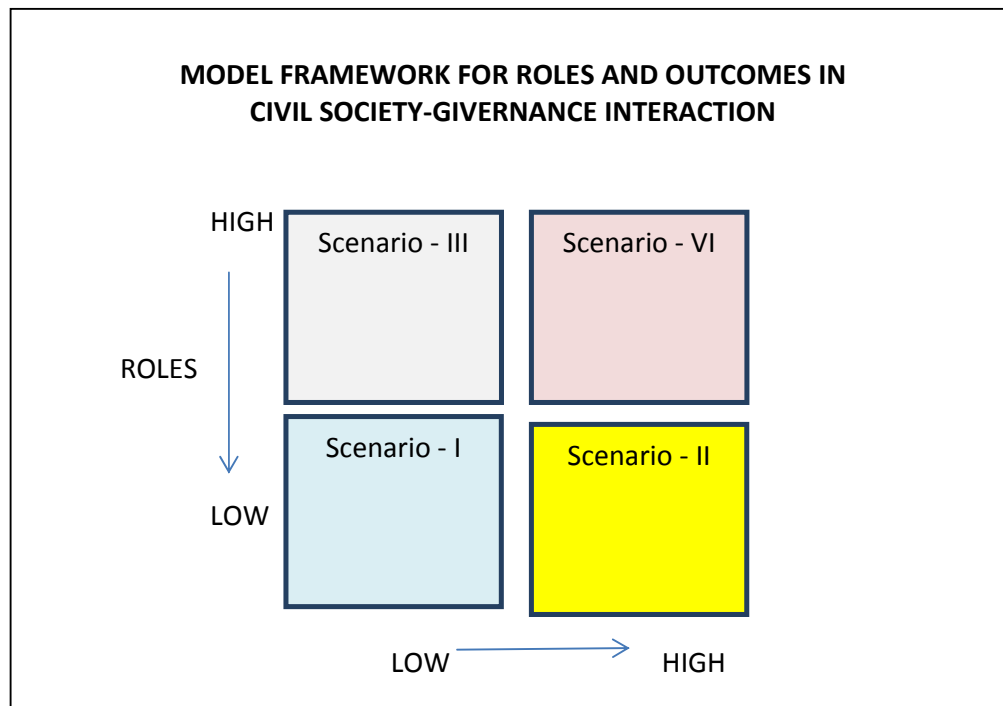
The community groups provided an opportunity for their members to assert themselves within the household. Members of women groups reported that they were beaten less frequently and less severely now than before joining the groups. Seven groups were able to negotiate with other household members so that they could be assured rest during pregnancy. In the public sphere, many groups contested controversial decisions taken by the local government institutions relating to inclusion of names eligible for welfare and food security schemes. This has happened in one case where members of women groups have refused to work at the prevailing labor market rates, which are often as little as half the entitlement for agricultural labor, and nearly three-fourth the entitlement for industrial labor. Many members of these women groups regularly participate in political rallies organized by the local political parties demanding enforcement of daily wage entitlements, land redistribution guidelines and right to employment. Members who claimed to have voted in the last Assembly elections and are emphatic about voting in the future.

Finally, the opportunity provided by WHGs for women to assert themselves in public and private spheres has empowered them personally, politically, economically, and culturally by providing them access to such resources, and also enabling them to resist and reject relationships of subordination and oppression. There have undoubtedly been some achievements where their contest for revising flawed lists of eligible poor has been successful. Members from some groups had successfully contested elections to Panchayats and were currently holding positions of authority with which they could address local issues. In some cases, women received land *pattas* (legal title deeds over land) as a consequence of on-going State Government land redistribution operations.

Development, Governance, and Civil Society: The Emerging Picture from India

While comparing the interface of civil society roles with governance outcomes, past research (Roy, 2008) reveals four distinct scenarios: locality developmental aspects reveal the "high role—high outcome scenario"; organizational and locality developmental aspects reveal the "low role - low outcome scenario"; negotiational aspects also reveal the "high role—high outcome scenario," while negotiation aspects reveal the "low role - low outcome

scenario.” Women groups perform higher negotiation roles and demonstrate improvements in service-delivery. Service-providers, who are drawn from the ranks of the social elite, fulfill their share of the deal: they dispense services at mandated forums, provide information about welfare schemes and regularly interface with women’s groups. Such interface enables women’s groups to cross the public–private divide. Government leaders have been actively promoting such alliances. Their belonging to the economically elite sections as well as their embeddedness in the local context reduces the antipathy of their co-caste persons toward such an alliance. Here, synergies appear to be the function of a “caste compact” aimed at blunting the political–economic superiority of the agricultural castes.



The way governance-civil society synergy operates is problematic. The synergies that appeared to have positively impacted service-delivery are based on social affiliations that in turn influence political competition and alliances. Although such alliances have been emerging across the country since the last decade, and reflect unconventional social engineering tactics aimed at containing the political and economic prowess of dominant agricultural castes, they are predicated on the maintenance of a harmonious relationship between social elite and poor communities. Such a relationship is often a function of the degree of compromise that the communities are willing to make.

These emerging relationships are complex and are exemplified by the formation of VLACs. We also noted that better educated persons belonging to “upper” castes tend to predominate these bodies. Members often “get the job done” due to their contacts and networks in the bureaucracy. They have by-passed elected Gram Panchayats, which in several cases are presided over by representatives belonging to *dalit* castes, on grounds of

inefficiency and ineffectiveness. Such actions undermine the legitimacy of Gram Panchayats, and reveal an ill-concealed bias against the principles of positive discrimination and capacities of Scheduled Caste members. Conceptually, these alliances provide the platform for poor communities to contest the state's attempts at abdicating its responsibilities and hold duty-bearers accountable. But one wonders whether such synergies bear fruit only where the poor seek out and forge networks with the "upper" castes on the terms of the latter. The rather pessimistic observation is that where groups have been historically alienated from the state, continue to be exploited and repressed, and are trying to assert their entitlements and rights, their ability to favorably influence public policy is weak.

Based on these, we may be in a position to propose a "model" of a "synergy-accountability-mobilization" framework. Perhaps further research will reveal its specific components. For the moment, we are content with providing some pointers, which may be useful to practitioners, and which can be taken up by academics and policy-makers in Africa.

It is important to note the overall national context in which this framework has been developed and to that end, statements on assumptions and aspirations are absolutely must: the given framework has been developed in view of a national context where political and civil rights are more secure than economic, social, and cultural ones. The merits of mainstreaming this roles-outcomes analysis ought not to blind us to the associated risks. Indeed, in explicitly espousing "politics," development agencies risk being labeled "partisan," thereby blunting the impact of their genuinely important work. For agencies working with international support, especially official aid, the line between "empowering" the poor and infringing on the sovereignty of the country-state threatens to blur. However, the most substantive risk lies in the fact that political analysis and political sector working at the grassroots provokes vested interests, without sufficiently protecting the vulnerable communities.

Consequently, sporadic interventions may appear to show results only during the organization's presence, but fade away with the project's "phase-out." Thereafter, vulnerable communities are left to face the brunt of local elite, with often violent and tragic consequences. In extreme cases, staff security may be threatened during the project's intervention itself. Among the various solutions to this problem, three are key. The charges of infringing on national sovereignty may be repudiated by invoking the globalized discourse of human rights—undoubtedly contentious—which national leaders may have ratified. The same message has to be continually communicated to the local elite. Perhaps more sustainable and lasting results could be found if local elite (the "gatekeepers") are involved in project formulation and implementation since inception. Of course, program managers must walk the tightrope between involving local elite and allowing them to corner the project's resources. The project interventions need to deploy such tools that will enable them to identify and strengthen the equitable relations between elite and subordinate groups, and weaken the inequitable ones. Such tools exist for post-conflict situations, but need to be developed for apparently peacetime scenarios that in reality witness daily persecutions and struggles.

In countries like India and we may arguably include Africa as well, where constitutional commitments to securing entitlements of poor people, and recognizing them

as rights-holders are present, development agencies need to build, seek, promote, and support alliances and networks that can influence the state by using its own organizing principles. This would require internalizing a discourse where the state's responsibilities toward poor, vulnerable, and marginalized communities are emphasized, along with the potential conflict with local elite, whose actions strike at the very basis of the state's ideological moorings.

Lessons for Africa

Our analysis of Indian scenario holds the prevailing "civil society–good governance–development continuum" problematic. But, they do more than that. Several dimensions of the civil society–governance interface are unpacked. Thereafter, deploying a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, we confront skewed and distorted patterns of interaction between civil society and governance. In particular, the way the dimensions map onto the elements reveals the rather unformed and rudimentary civil society and governance processes, reflected in the constricted political spaces available to people. We find that the nature of Trans-Ganga's cross-caste political alliances, which span the public–private divide and which women's groups can tap into, while being conducive to improved service delivery, are responsible for such outcomes in this region. In some parts of India, years of vibrant community organization notwithstanding, the relative lack of engagement with government, and sharp conflicts with local elite, limit such possibilities. Clearly, the evidence points to the role of politics in determining governance outcomes. When the context is Uttar Pradesh, India's most politically influential State, this learning becomes highly significant.

Indeed, development programming urgently needs to mainstream political analysis and political sector work if it is to facilitate appropriate forms of civil society–good governance interface. Although duty-bearers are attempting to make rights-holders accountable, citizens are somewhat empowered to access providers, institutions, and resources, and communities are forging alliances that would enable them to span the public–private divide, there remains scope for development programs to facilitate the optimal synergies that would be qualitatively different from the prevailing subordinate–superordinate relationship between citizens and the state. Similarly, conceptions of empowerment that would encourage citizens to both demand ownership over productive resources and reject unequal relations need to be formulated.

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